

Encouragement,  
Guidance,  
Insights,  
and Lessons  
Learned  
for Native  
Language  
Activists  
Developing  
Their Own  
Tribal Language  
Programs



*Darrell R. Kipp  
Co-Founder of the Piegan Institute of  
the Blackfeet Nation in conversation  
with twelve visiting Native American  
Language Activists*

# Encouragement, Guidance, Insights, and Lessons Learned for Native Language Activists Developing Their Own Tribal Language Programs

Darrell R. Kipp

Co-Founder of the Piegan Institute of the Blackfeet Nation  
sat with twelve Native American Language Activists  
for most of the day on March 11, 2000 at the  
Piegan Institute's Cut-Bank Language Immersion School

*A conversation with twelve  
visiting Native American Language Activists  
providing guidance and an analysis of some of the essentials  
for developing immersion language programs.*

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# Summary



Keep in mind that the language is the key. There is nothing else. There is no other priority. There are no other issues. There is no reason to defend your motives, your actions, or your vision. You do not defend yourself, your own language fluency, or lack of fluency. You do it. Action is the key. Native children who are actively speaking the language are your only result.

So, in developing a program to revitalize the language: (1) never ask permission, never beg to save the language. Never; (2) never debate the issues. Never; (3) be very action oriented—just act; (4) show, don't tell; (5) use your language as your curriculum—botany, geography, political science, philosophy, history are all embedded in the language.



# My Background: How I Became Involved with the Blackfeet Language



I grew up in the community in the 1960s in a one-room school on the Blackfeet reservation. My father dropped me off and walked away (there was no orientation like today, and twenty kids). One friend was the toughest kid I knew, girl or boy. She would beat us up; I often kid her about it now. The one-room schools were a good place to learn. Ironically, they were closed down, and a less-effective districtwide system was implemented. But I remain an advocate of one-room schools and small classrooms—even though I was glad to graduate in one piece.

After leaving that school, I went to college at Eastern Montana College. I showed up with no dorm assignment, and there were no Indians there. We slept on the floor in the basement until they could get rooms organized for me and the other kids from the farms (who were also a bit clueless about the fact that we were supposed to have registered for rooms).

Finally, I got my roommate. He was an Italian from New Jersey who, I was told, was very afraid of me. (I got the feeling when he just looked at me, said nothing, and walked out. What, he should be afraid of me? I should have been afraid of him!) And after testing the waters, he and I grew to be very close and are still close today. In addition, I had not purchased a meal ticket since, again, I didn't know I had to; so throughout my time there, I worked in the kitchen ("kitchen dogs," we affectionately called ourselves).

I was given a test for English, but as an Indian, it was assumed that I would fail, and I was assigned to "bonehead English." Ironically, I eventually majored in English and got an MFA in writing from Goddard College, which later became Vermont College. After that, in the mid-1970s, I got drafted (June 28th I graduated and was out of college, and July 6th I went to the Army induction center). After serving in the Army, I went to Harvard. I got a master's degree at Harvard University in 1975, studying social change and institutional change. My career kept me very active; I lived in Boston and other places. I consulted with a lot of tribes in the country, and I traveled extensively. But in the 1980s, it was time to go home.

As Indian people, we are always drawn home.

"You Are the First Indians That Have Ever Come Here"

We were told as kids that only failures stayed on the reserve. That notion is reinforced even today by some of my professional colleagues. But in 1983–84, Dr. Dorothy Still Smoking and I (she and I have very similar backgrounds) asked ourselves, "What will we do on this reserve to make a change?" We wanted to develop our education, our experience, and our vision to create new opportunities. (Of course, in the process my own tribe fired me three times—primarily because funded programs would come to a close. It might also have been that I was perceived as a bit of an agitator, a little different.) We did a lot of work developing the community college but never found our real place there.

In 1984, I was teaching advanced writing techniques, and Dorothy was teaching advanced Native American studies. We organized a joint field trip to the Glenbow Museum up in Canada. The Glenbow Museum, it turns out, had volumes of papers, history, and documents on the Blackfeet Tribe. A little, old curator who was standing there kept saying over and over, “But who are you?” (to our incredible annoyance). We gently reminded him that we had sent a letter from the community college, that we had permission to visit. That wasn’t what he wanted. “Who are you?” he kept saying. Finally, when we stopped to have a dialogue with him, after a while, he responded, “You are the first Indians that have ever come here.”

Since 1910, researchers have done a thousand studies on us. One study even measured our noses. It was all there. A very special thing happened on that trip. A young girl had a stack of photos, and as she looked through them, she announced, “Look at this! There is a picture of me.” She had an elk tooth dress on. It really looked exactly like her, but in fact, it was her grandmother in 1890. It was a dumbfounding experience. Good things stay the same—yet we were the first in our tribe to know this or to see any of this.

We went into a frenzy. We asked for anything and everything on language. We asked for dictionaries. They pulled out a cart with fifty dictionaries on the tribe’s language, written by priests, by linguists, some hand-written dictionaries. The first day, all the kids wanted to go to the mall. By the last day, no one would leave. We spent the entire \$2,000 we had raised from the taco feed on copying charges. When we came back to the Canadian border, they asked, “What is all this?” We boldly (I was more brash in those days) stated that we were not paying anything in duties (we didn’t have the money). We had finally retrieved what was ours. The officials just backed off. What a success!

So we really started in 1984–85. We were knocked out. We finally understood, we finally realized that the real key factor is knowledge of yourself, of your tribe. This concept was new to us. We had been taught to study Egypt and France, and to learn Spanish. No one ever said, “Study yourself.” This was a big revelation. It was unique. It was five times more interesting than was anything we had studied before. Those original students formed our first study group, our first commitment.

### Don’t Set Up a Bilingual Program

Community colleges don’t cover immersion language programming or language like they should. In 1982, Dorothy wrote a proposal for a bilingual program grant. Which is fine, but you don’t want to get into bilingual programs.

We all speak English too well. Bilingual programs are designed to teach English, not your tribal language. We aren’t against English, but we want to add our own language and give it equal status. We don’t allow slang or shortcuts; we teach the heritage language forms. Our immersion school children speak high-standard, high-caliber Blackfeet. You can accomplish that through immersion only, not through bilingual education. Bilingual education typically teaches the language fifteen minutes a day. Kids who study with bilingual techniques will end up saying, “I can understand the language but can’t speak it.”

Teach the children to speak the language. There are no other rules.

You will never have enough of anything. But if we had to, we could teach in a tent. We don't have enough computers. No computers will save the language. No CD-ROM will do anything. Don't hire linguists. *They* can speak the language, but the kids won't, and in bilingual education, they still can't. Nothing against linguists, they can talk the language, but they don't *act* like us. They are not us; they are recorders. CD-ROMs don't learn language like children do. At the community college, the bilingual grant eventually died out. (They always do.) It might have become too successful; too many people wanted to take the language. It became an annoyance for the college. Increased registrations would have meant more work for the administration.

In 1987, we were into the language ourselves, when the college defunded us. I did not want to go back to teaching college English. We were dreaming in our language, we would hear our language in our dreams, and we became tuned in, back in touch with our language community. In 1987, when no one else would take the language program and when it was not even supported by the tribal council (in council-speak, "I'm with you, but the council won't go for it"), we took it upon ourselves.

# Rule 1: Never Ask Permission, Never Beg to Save the Language



Never beg to save the language. *Never beg.* Tell them you could use some help and explain to them clearly what is needed, but don't beg. We tell the council all the time (not that it helps much). They gave \$10,000 so they can have a basketball tournament for people shorter than six feet. They gave \$10,000 for a rodeo (give an Indian a hat and he becomes a cowboy). They gave \$30,000 for this and for that, but only last year did they finally give us \$5,000. One year, they gave us \$100.

Hey, what about \$10,000 for language? "Darrell, don't misunderstand me, I'm all for it, all for it, all for it. But we have a deficit, we have these other programs, but ... but ... but ..." This year though, they showed up for the school community dinner. "Here, Mr. Chair, you can talk first. By the way, where is the money?" The same thing will happen to you.

## We Are All Relearners

We are all relearners. We grew up in homes where grandmothers couldn't speak English. "Goll darn you," was all my grandmother could say, and when she did, you'd better watch it! My mother was a Catholic mission school kid, and my dad went to the third grade in government schools. When we researched, we understood why we didn't learn the language. We are good old grad students. We used all the academic skills that we possess to seek the reason we could not speak our language despite our home life. The truth we found is that they didn't teach us the language because they didn't want us to be abused like they were in school. We too have been using our educational skills for assimilation programming like everyone else. Now we use them in our own way, and now we understand some very profound truths.

Education, for Native Americans, was a journey to lead us away from who we really are. It's no wonder that *none* of us who had a college education knew our language. It's obvious that in order to get through the educational system, to make it to college, to get through college, to be recognized for our work, we had to leave many things behind. Language relearning is a journey back home. But this time you have the tools. I am sure that many people are suspicious of your motivations. In the morning, people would call us, "You white people from Boston and Concordia, you don't know any thing about us." Bemused, we would listen. Of course, we are all Blackfeet people. No one was born in a mansion on the hill. They would go away. Then in the afternoon, another bunch of people would come in and say, "Look at you, we sent you to Concordia and Harvard, and now here you are doing nothing but looking at the language. You are just a bunch of full bloods."

We are an oppressed people. We have been so colonized that we can now, easily, perpetuate it ourselves.

### Our Self-Definition—Never Use the Word *Culture*

When we lose the ability to define ourselves, to define us, then other people can define us. The priest defines the percentage of us who go to mass as Christians. The social worker or the statistician tells us that eight or nine of us in a group of ten are alcoholics. We are told that four or five are this, eight or nine are that. We take what other people tell us. In a single room, we can get fifteen different definitions of us.

Unless we free our minds, we cannot get a definition of our own. These Blackfeet children *will* define us. These are our children, our relatives; they are ultimately our definition.

Who we are comes from the language, not from the Indian culture. What is culture? That Indian culture could be construed as beat-up old pickup trucks, buckskin jackets, and powwows. Sure, in fact, that is contemporary Indian culture today—we are living it. We are not using the word *culture*. *Culture* is too vague, too consuming, and too volatile. Never use the word. It's meaningless. It's debatable, a loaded word. Use the word *language*. The culture comes from the language.

If you want to study culture, go to the museum. At Glenbow Museum, after they got to know us, they showed us their entire collection: buttons, Indian gloves (in a drawer), thousands, every glove from every tribe in the nation. What are you doing with these gloves? No wonder all Indians are wearing jersey gloves. Dresses, tons of women's dresses. These are dresses our women wore to special times; no wonder our sisters are wearing blue jeans. The museums have all the dresses.

They did everything to take the language. But when you bring it back, the little kids will make new dresses. The little kids will make new gloves and new shoes. And the next time they come to take away the dresses and the gloves, the kids will not give them up.

### You Save Your Strength

You do not ask permission to use your language, to work with it, to revitalize it. You do not ask permission. You don't go to the school board and ask for fifteen minutes to plead your case. You don't change the entire community. You save your strength; you find the ones who want it. You look for the young couples; you work with the people who want you to work with them. You hone your skills, talent, and time. And these are precious. Take care of yourselves.

You don't go to the tribal council and grovel, "Would it be OK if you gave us an old condemned BIA building to teach the language?" This is our language, and it deserves a beautiful place to be. An old condemned church? That's an irony, isn't it? All the old mission school buildings look like decayed buildings now. And, ironically, many are now alcohol treatment centers. Don't go near those places and other abandoned, broken-down places for your language programs. Bad vibes. Build new buildings and bless them in your language.

### Get Your Supporting Data

We did a survey based on empirical survey methodology. It was a random sample. We did it right. We hired college students trained in statistical analysis and trained them as interviewers.

We did the survey door to door. We asked, Do they have language in the house, sweetgrass, a drum, and books on Blackfeet? Do they have pictures on the wall about Indians? Do they have pictures of their family displayed or pictures of Michael Jordan and John Wayne? We then selected people in age groups to get information. We tried to interview every person over the age of ninety, then eighty, then seventy, and now we are doing every person over sixty. We are compiling the data. Don't listen to hearsay or gossip. Learn the truth about your community, and use the data for your purposes.

We had the best news. An honor student from our tribe whom we allowed to test the kids in our preschools did testing for two years. Our kids score above all the standards. The WITS test, which measures language articulateness, is not a good indicator for how Indian communities use the English language and our Indian children don't typically do well on the test. But our kids scored above the national averages, even though the test was in English. We are building language acquisition skills. We allowed the children to build their skills and, guess what, they scored in the top percentile. We want, and we have developed, high-level language acquisition skills in our children.

We asked the fluent-speaking elders of our language: Did you remain happy people all your years? What was the price, what were the struggles that you endured to use your language? What were the prices you faced?

For the most part, the people responded that they had to stay self-employed. They had no access to the best jobs. But they also realized they were the happiest and most centered in the community.

Our staff has produced academic achievement. Laurie Falcon, one of our immersion teachers, produced her thesis, *Immersion School as a New Paradigm in Native Education*, from Vermont College. Dr. Dorothy Still Smoking, one of the founders, did her doctoral thesis on the interviews of the elders, and Billi Jo Kipp will get her doctoral degree in psychology with honors from the University of Montana next spring based on her work in our language schools.

We produce papers, scholarship, and high-quality investigative studies. We produce optimal learning in our students (our goal is 100 percent recall). We have produced films, videos, and articles. The film *Transitions: Death of a Mother Tongue* won a lot of awards. In 1997, we produced limited editions of *A Special Study of the Blackfoot Language: 1932-1997* for our schools, community, and patrons. Today, we use the book as the foundation of our language learning in our schools. Everyone—babies, parents, students, and staff—use the same book.

### Parents Did Not Teach the Language Out of Love

Here's a story: Parents did not teach the language because they loved us and they didn't want us to suffer, to be abused, or to have a tough life. Because our parents loved us and our grandparents loved us, they tried to protect us from the humiliation and suffering that they went through. If you truly love your parents and grandparents, you can reconcile that. Because we live in an enlightened age today, opportunities are available to us that simply were not available to our parents.

Some of you will live a life first as a little girl, then as a young lady, as a mother, and then as a grandmother or great-grandmother. Some of you will live a life as a little boy, a young man, a father, and a grandfather or a great-grandfather. If we all live the good life, we get to be all those things.

If mission, government, or public institutions took the language from your mother or your father, you can replace that at some point during your own journey through life. As a young girl, you can put that continuum back. You can grow to be a mom, a grandmother, and a great-grandmother. You can pass your relearned knowledge to your daughters and sons and encourage them to pass it to theirs. This is what we should be doing as responsible Indian people. That is reconciliation with our parents and grandparents and our ways. Quit blaming them. Quit blaming the past. Take it upon yourself to do courageous acts, and just do it. As our parents loved us and protected us by shielding us from the humiliation brought on our languages, from all the horror that they had suffered because they spoke the language, it is now your turn to reconcile what was done in the name of love. You can now demonstrate your love for them by protecting and shielding the language in a different way. You can begin to embrace it, to use it, to foster it, to renew it, to teach it to your daughters, to teach it to your sons.

#### Immersion School: How We Got Started

In 1994, we went to a bilingual conference. We didn't want to do bilingual education. We wanted to start an immersion program. But there were no resources. There was this bilingual conference, so we went. And when we were there, we saw these most beautiful people, good-looking people, all speaking their language, and we said, "Hey, they look like us. Let's go sit with them." So we did. They were Native Hawaiians, and they were down to less than a thousand native speakers. So, they started the language nests called *Punana Leo* in their language and taught their children their language. They were the first people we ever met who knew what we were seeking, and they shared everything they knew with us. Today, we are the best of friends and would not be where we are except for their friendship. They showed us how to get started. They were mentors, our support, and our guides. They even paid for us to go to Hawaii. And today, they have twenty-eight schools. Last year, they graduated their first class of Native Hawaiian kids who had been in immersion school since preschool. Those Native Hawaiians would sit for hours with us in their homes and schools. They would show us everything, and now we can share the secrets of successful immersion with others, like you today, for instance.

#### And the Biggest Secret Is, Don't Ask Permission

Don't ask permission. Go ahead and get started, don't wait even five minutes. Don't wait for a grant. Don't wait, even if you can't speak the language. Even if you have only ten words. Get started. Teach those ten words to someone who knows another ten words. In the beginning, I knew thirty words, then fifty, then sixty. One day I woke up and realized I was dreaming in Blackfeet.

Don't let the bias and the prejudice of others dictate your approach, your message, or your program. Examine the bias of every public school teacher and those steeped in their ways of teaching. Their

bias is that a dictionary of the English language, if complete, would be three feet deep and that the dictionary of the Blackfeet language would be less than an inch. This is false; in fact, it is probably just the opposite. Blackfeet and your tribal language are not secondary languages, are not inferior languages, and are not to be discounted. Don't let them tell you this.

In 1994, we took sixty-five of our tribal members to this big world retreat in Hawaii. We took many Blackfeet from Canada with us, and now they have many immersion schools on their reserves. We are all meat-eaters (we don't eat fish; it is taboo). We had some challenges when we were there. They very generously gave us all this fish, crab legs, squid, shrimp. We starved. We gave it to the Salish from the Columbia River basin and other fish-eaters who live near the water. We'd run to Henry's hamburgers every night to eat. It was a slight discomfort to us, but on the last day, all the children from their immersion schools, the parents, and grandparents got on stage and spoke in their language to us. One founder of *Punana Leo* named Koanao Karmana spoke to us and told us to go home and JUST DO IT, so we started our program as soon as we got home, and we engaged our community in the work.



# Rule 2: Don't Debate the Issues



Don't debate the issues. Don't let anyone debate you. Don't let them start in on you. Don't let them even start. They will say, "What good is your language in Duluth?" They will sucker you to defend your work. They want to de-energize you. They want to bring doubt into your mind. They want to raise hell with you.

This is about us. We don't need their permission. Tell them, "I am not going to debate you. Go play bingo, go gamble, go somewhere elsewhere. We don't allow any debate about the language." Never bring your language into any arguments. If someone argues about the language, move away from him or her and do not participate. Leave the language out of it. Never disgrace our language with debate. You can't do it. We will not allow you to do it. You will feel physically flogged if you do, and it will take time to recover. It will de-energize you.

They will come around to you. But debate them, and *you* will get doubts in your mind. You need all of your strength to do this work. You have to go to bed and go to sleep.

The language is powerful. It will handle many things for you if you trust it. With \$37 in the bank and payroll on Thursday, go to bed and sleep well. You cannot have doubts about your work. Go sleep like a rock.

# Rule 3: Be Very Action-Oriented; Just Act



You have to be very action-oriented. Just act. “But we don’t have land,” you might think. Then go buy land. *You buy the land—lock, stock, and barrel. You figure it out. Buy it, then figure out how to put the deal together to do it. But putting the school off trying to figure out how to get money is debating. Don’t debate.*

Everyone else is a horse trader, but we are not. We stand firm. Teaching the language is our only goal. We will give you anything you want for the land, for the cost of construction, for the supplies. You say, “You tell me what you want for what I need, and I will give it to you.” We will not argue. We are not bargaining. We are not entrepreneurs. What you have in hand is what you work with. We went up to a lady and asked how much for the land. She told us, and we told her we would come back the next day with the money. We did. We figured it out ourselves. We got the money and said, “Give us the deed,” and now it’s ours. Find your friends.

I have a friend who helped us contact Jane Fonda, who wrote a \$100,000 check to finish our school building on Moccasin Flat. Then representatives from a family foundation visited and gave money for this building here for the Lost Children School (the name comes from our Blackfeet stories). Within five years, we bought these plots of land that you see. The woman who owned this land worked in the post office. Believe me, it’s hard to find land. You see it everywhere, but it’s trust land. She owned this land in her name. She said, “This is all that I have. I have been saving. I bought this land through my savings deduction plan at work.” When I asked her to tell how much she wanted, she said, “Everyone just laughs when I tell them because they say it is too high a price.” Again we said, “We will bring the check.” She sold us the land on the spot. We did not debate her. She said, “I will do it because of my grandmother who spoke our language. I will sell it for the language school in honor of my grandmother.” And so, she gave up her land she had worked hard for in honor of her grandmother.

Last year, we went to the next-door neighbor when we saw that we had to expand. We told her that we needed to build on to the school. She was not interested in selling. She said, “No, my daughter lives there.” And we asked her how much she wanted, and she said \$100,000 (which is more than we had). So, we left her alone. But three months later, she called and said, “Here’s what I want” (it was far more reasonable—half that, \$50,000), and so we said OK. She then sold all the land, including her house, in honor of the language and her family. It will come to you.

Get an architect and say; “We want skylights. We want the walls open, and once a year on the equinox, we want the sun to come streaming through the door.” Build it so that the sun follows you around throughout the day. Use the language to design the building.

### Use the Language to Design the Building

People ask why there is no furniture in this spacious classroom. You see chairs and desks around, but they are stacked neatly or pushed against the wall. We learn through physical movement. We tell the children, “Go touch the door. Stand up. Sit down. Now turn around. Now jump.” We need room. Don’t let other people define your room, your needs, how you do things. Don’t model your program on a traditional public school classroom where the tables and desks and chairs restrict movement, restrict vitality, restrict ideas. Don’t debate. Your language will show you the way.

# Rule 4: Show, Don't Tell



Show, don't tell. Don't talk about what you will do. Do it and show it. This is what they are ultimately going to listen to—not your words, but to the abilities of the children.

When a baby talks our language, the older women say, “Ohhh, let me have that kid.” People will come to visit. Our pipe holders, our women will come and see the children talking in their language and say, “Ohhh, let us have that kid.” Concentrate on the children. You teach the children, and they will show your success, and the others will say, “Ohhh, let me have that kid.” Children who speak our language—everyone wants one.

## Put Status Back in the Language

You have to put status back in the language, so you have to do status checks. You need to pay 10 percent more than any school in the vicinity so that your teachers feel proud to be there. You are cultivating a professional status with a salary and all benefits. Create a status for the language.

Then, give them a chance to improve themselves. Let them write master's and doctoral theses. Tell everyone that this is an environment to study the language. Tell them, “We are writing books about ourselves. Finally, we are empowering the language.” The original children from that museum trip in 1984 were the ones who brought their children here. These students worked with us. They know us, support us. This is their vision, too.

If you bring one child here, you can bring brothers and sisters. Every two years you have new students.

However, once a child leaves, they cannot come back if their parents doubt the program's effectiveness. If they leave for good reason on a temporary basis, they can come back. I know that if parents lose faith in the program, it is because someone is debating them and bringing doubt into their minds. This is not a dropout program. This is not a remedial program. We are a private Blackfeet language immersion school. You give your child to our care. The responsibility for teaching the language is up to us as teachers. We have no administrators here. Dr. Still Smoking and I are volunteers. Until very recently, neither of us had ever worked here. We are not building a school for the administrators or for the staff or for the parents. It is the home of our language and the children who learn it. And the pride in our goal and the clarity of the goal help create the language status.

The top priority is the language. First, that's all this school exists for; it's only for the language and the children. The parents, the teachers, finally the administrators follow suit.

## Frank Weaselhead and the Sand Hills

We are a different organization than most. Our immersion schools look like schools, but in reality, they are a whole different thing with very different dynamics and a need for a very different structure.

Many of us who help found and develop these schools will never be fluent in our languages. But because of our work, these babies will become fluent.

There is this old man, Frank Weaselhead, who is a pipe holder, and he comes to visit us often. "Do you folks ever receive a compliment?" he asked us. "No, actually, we receive almost none from almost no one," we reply. "That's good," he says. "You don't need compliments. Your compliment will come. Years from now, we will all be gone to the Sand Hills." (The Sand Hills are now called the Porcupine Mountains, and it is the understanding of the Blackfeet people that after this life, we pass to the Shadow Land or the Sand Hills.) He said, "We will all be gone to the Sand Hills, and there will be these families here, with young kids, happy kids, and all will speak the language. Some day, someone will wonder how it was that when all other tribes will have their language lost, how did it come to be that they all could speak their language?"

"The people will think about this a while and say to each other, 'I don't know. Way back then, there were some people, and they built the schools, and they put our parents in these schools. That is how they kept our language alive.' And that will be your compliment."

However, when I first came back to the reserve, people wondered what to make of this. Yet more and more fluent speakers started coming to us. People holding ceremonies, and people within our culture (and I use that word only here) began to approach us. Other people also came, and they said, "You should be at this ceremony or that naming or that sweat lodge because you speak the language."

We have become members of the societies within our Blackfeet tribe. Many things transferred in our religion and our tribal ways come to us because of our knowledge of the language. My wife and our families have been initiated in societies. Our children in school belong to various pipes, others are Catholics, and we embrace all things here.

One day, members of the oldest women's society probably in this nation visited the children. They came here, and the two youngest children received the two oldest names in the tribe. They transferred to the young boys everything they could and conducted the ceremony all in language. This could have been happening thousands of years ago, and we are giving these babies their names. There is much to be said about immersion—more than what goes on in the schoolroom.

There is no place for cultural hitchhikers. The people who want to hitchhike on your culture want rites, and rights, but not the responsibility. Cultural vampires who want the best things in the language and won't study the language are fools. You have no time for them.

The best thing about immersion is that our kids are extremely healthy—healthy with choices. Try to show, encourage, and send the best of what we have. We have a lot of ceremonies in this school with one caveat: Everything must be in the language. All the people who come

into this school must respect the language enough to always be learning it.

This is a tough field. We are monolingual Americans, born and raised to be monolingual Americans. Americans don't like anything other than English. The English USA organization, an English-only movement, raised \$26 million solely for lobbying last year. English-as-official-language legislation is popping up in many states. Plenty of people would like the same thing in public schools and don't want these programs. The best immersion schools are private.

I've never had a boring moment in my life since I started this language revitalization work. And I have had a lot of rewards. A lot of nice things have happened

Shouldn't a Foundation Understand These Circumstances?

Money is difficult, primarily because as Native Americans, we are "invisible americans". Even President Clinton's task force on race relations did not include a Native American person. They do not know that we are still here.

By and large, most foundations do not fund in Montana. The foundation directory doesn't even list Montana. Montana has no foundations. Yet while foundations don't serve Montana, where did wealth come from? Typically for corporate foundations, it came from American consumers. For private foundations, it came from American timber, minerals, ore, and much of this wealth was from harvested from Native Americans. Some of these foundations that became rich because they were built on this accumulated wealth now have the audacity to say, "We don't serve you. We don't have the capacity." Out of the billions of dollars —billions for opera houses, museum wings, foundations, and such—how can major foundations state that they "have no more money for Native Americans"?

Out of the \$60 million that did go to Native Americans (out of billions and billions), only \$15 million went to reservations. Yet, of that, \$7 million went to pseudo-Indian organizations. One such organization siphoned off enormous amounts of money. There is not an Indian near it.

These parents of our students pay tuition for their children and are about as poor as they can get. They readily give \$10 or \$50 a month, and this fulfills their responsibilities. Shouldn't a foundation understand these circumstances?

Don't get intimidated by foundations. Expect to be brushed off. We want to say we were honest and forthcoming, that we didn't beg. We've been persistent but never begged. The fact that they don't understand the issue is really their problem. Get used to hundreds of rejection notices. I mean hundreds.

Kellogg has a good motto, "Helping people to help themselves." They gave us \$350,000 to train our teachers. Lannan Foundation is also in a special category all by themselves, and they gave funds, encouragement, and probably love and helped get us started. They are in the category with the Hawaiians, and without them, we would not be where we are today.

Once a foundation flew us halfway across the country, sat us down, and said they wanted to know about immersion. The meeting started at 10, and they gave us until 12 to tell who we were, what we wanted, what was our plan, what were our finances, etc. They were a bit provoked

if we would stray from the facts. I couldn't talk from my heart; they would think we were being dramatic. They didn't fund us.

But look at the reality. Presently, this community is and has been broke. This is the ninety-fifth poorest county in United States, according to the census records. Gee, with a few billion to give, don't you think the leading national foundations should give to the poorest counties? It seems like common sense. I have frequently talked a silver streak, and for what? For a "thank you for attending this session." We've had foundations roll in with a big busload of board members and lawyers and who knows who else. A big old Dolly Parton bus with a bathroom and a bar emerges. Foundation busloads take a full day; they tour our entire operation. "Tell us what you need," they say over their shoulders. No doubt we will probably never hear from them again. Or if we finally do, it will be the standard response: "We don't fund in your area."

The first time we were invited to present our program to foundation representatives in a large city in the Southwest, we were overwhelmed, even with the accommodations they put us in. They put us in villas. It's not like we always stay at Motel 6, but these places were incredible. I had about ten TVs in my place. There was a very exclusive atmosphere everywhere. The foundation headquarters, the dinner we were to present at—everything was elegant. Even the clothes we were expected to wear were elegant.

We were supposed to go to this dinner about 6 to make our presentation. And at 5:45, Dorothy called and said she couldn't go, she was physically sick. I was freaked out. I said, "Dorothy, my buddy, I don't care if you are physically sick. I don't care if you are vomiting. I am physically sick—don't leave me now, please! I have the same feelings. You have to get on the elevator, and we are just going to have to go through this together!" And we did.

I think back on it. There we were with the backgrounds we had. This was a big move. People were dealing with us like we were with the Santa Fe Orchestra. We had to decide right then and there that they could not intimidate us.

Do not be intimidated.

#### Every Immersion School Ultimately Needs an Endowment

We are now attempting to build a \$3 million endowment to support our operations. We went to local bank to set up a trust fund. We've had success, but it has been from nontraditional philanthropic sources.

So, be careful what you get yourself into. But on the other hand, who said this would be easy?

Every immersion school needs an endowment to keep it in place. There are a lot of powerful challenges to develop and maintain these schools. As a result, Dr. Still Smoking and I have finally decided to give up our jobs and other things, editorships, and we will do this now. She is the director of the Head Start program, but now, we will work full time in Piegan Institute, whether we get paid or not.

Our responsibility is to remind foundations that we are here. If they can give enormous amounts of money to support the culture of America as they define it—to the symphonies, opera, museums—

then they can fund us. They have ignored the Native Americans. They are ignoring the Native Americans. They will ignore the Native Americans. You will have a very tough road. Your own tribal councils won't want to give you money. We have discussed that. Ultimately, harbor the hope that there will possibly be a change.

But don't ever beg. Don't ever beg. One room, one teacher, ten kids, and you are off and running. You can handle that.

Teach kids the language. Bottom line.

Mr. Little Plume and a Strong Language Base

On our survey, all the people said Mr. Little Plume was the best Blackfeet speaker around. So, we went to talk to him, and he said he was taught in mission school that Indians shouldn't use the language. "They tell me that speaking the Blackfeet language is against the religion. I can't help you," he said. "OK," we said. So, we planned to go back a week later. We would ask again. In the Blackfeet way, you can say no three times; the fourth time you can't say no. Meanwhile, I wondered, why would the Creator say speaking Blackfeet is not good? The Creator gave us each these languages. The Creator would not say that you would need to use one language over another. So, we went back the second time, and again he said, "I don't speak the language any more. I'm a rancher." Well, on the third time, he got pretty nervous. He tried to hide from us. We followed him across the field. He knew what was happening. He asked, "Is this the third time?" He knew the next time he would have to do what we asked. We approached him the fourth time, chased him down, and he said, "I know what you are doing. I will go with you one week. That's all."

He never left at the end of the week. He stayed all those years, and he's now about sixty-eight, sixty-nine years old. He's a very fluent speaker and taught us well. We all sound just like him; we have the same voice.

When you start the program, when you set up the language, do it right. That sets the basis of how your children will speak.

Don't listen to the arguments about dialect. Don't get too worried. I always say, "Well, there's some validity to dialect, but don't get hung up on it." I am an English teacher. How do you say *hot* and *cold*? Some people say *hot* like this: *hut*. A hut is little wooden building. Have you spent a lot of time correcting people about how they say *hot* in English? We could argue over Blackfeet. We will never say it exactly the same: po-tay-to, po-tah-to, *makapi bakai* for potato. But then you confuse everyone with French Fries, spuds, hashbrowns, etc.

Accreditation

Step into the problem, step into the reality, regardless of what it will do for you. Remember, don't ask permission. If you are waiting for accreditation, and that wait is going to stall your program, then don't get accredited. But always strive to know all standards and to exceed all standards.



In knowing all the standards, that means federal, state and tribal standards. The feds will say they want thirty-six square feet per student, the state will say they want fifty square feet per student, and the tribe doesn't know and will call you back. You exceed all expectations. Do you follow state accreditation? Getting USDA food money is a nightmare. We were told that we were not weighing our bread, that we didn't check to be sure that each piece was exactly 1.2 ounces. We had a guy who showed up and initially stated that we didn't cover our garbage in the kitchen. (It happened that the cook was throwing something away when he was checking the kitchen.) They were measuring our ketchup. They increased the amount of our paperwork so much that we had to hire another person to fill it all out.

Well, we can play that game. Call the state and ask to be inspected. And call them again, and call them again. We made them inspect the kitchen. We made them gig us. We made them have to drive from Helena and show up with their state car. And then they said that they were not allowed to eat with us when we invited them to lunch. In this school, we take pride in our food, and as Indians, we believe in hospitality, but they don't know us. Finally, after very fastidious inspections, they said, we were fine, great. We passed with exemplary ratings. And they don't want to inspect us again for another ten years.

You win through strength. Why care about their mediocre and vague standards? Public school standards are usually so vague you can't read them. See your program through the prospective "life through the eyes of others." Anticipate what you think they will want to see, even the most petty of details. Flat out-do them. The tribe guys come in: let them always eat first before the inspections, and let them know you want a full inspection in an honest way. Go and pass everything. Invite them in and tell them to come back. Remember: show, don't tell. They walk in and say this is a great place. The first thing that people notice is that it's clean. It has to be clean so that our parents feel very safe. We have enormous waiting lists for kids here. In fact, it is hard when parents and close relatives want to put their children and grandchildren here and there is simply no room. (We really can't even let tribal council members try to get their grandchildren in here. There won't be room for three more years until eighth-graders get out. That's a tough call when trying to gain their support.)

Money, again

Browning is a tough place for most people. There's no Egg McMuffin,<sup>®</sup> no gourmet cheese shop, no Pizza Hut. This is an area that is economically redlined. If you put our zip code, 59417, on any application, it will be turned down by a zip search. Doctors, teachers who move in with a AAA credit rating, go to buy a new car, a new four-wheel-drive, a home, and their credit is no good. Norwest Bank doesn't give loans outside of its 120-mile radius. Browning is just outside of its 120-mile radius. These redlinings are on all reserves. That's why we have no stores here.

But you are looking at how you can become and remain a credible institution here or in a place like here. Well, we want nice buildings because this is our language. We need to set goals and examples. We need to charge \$100 a month for every parent, and each parent must pay a portion of that cost because it adds dignity to the parents. They are paying for kids to come. Some of our kids are being raised by a single great-grandma. On Social Security, no less. Would we say no to that? No, we raise money to pay the difference. We have several children whose parents are in prison. Some kids are raised by foster families. Would we say they have to pay?

We have kids who parents are schoolteachers, who have five or six kids. Most of our parents are firefighters who do work only during the fire seasons. Still, they pay a portion, and we work like crazy to find the match.

Most of our parents get their taxes back, and they will come in and pay bills. If families have three kids here, they pay more, and we are very open about trying to help them out. They know we will never stop a child from coming here because they don't have the money. They all know our tuition plans are set up to bring dignity to the language and to their families and to their children.

This is not a give-away program. We pay for it. Our parents can work off the tuition—sweep, fix the sidewalk—at \$10 an hour. This is not about money. It is about dignity, self-reliance, and building confidence in our hearts that we can survive.

We want to be able to say that this place would survive even if there were not a dollar tomorrow. No money tomorrow? We'd sell a million tacos. Here's the secret for your taco feed. Don't say this is the greatest Indian taco. You know that we use fry bread (hard as a rock—all the plastic knives and forks are busted). Sell the tacos, but then sell Tums and Roloids, and that's where you will rake it in. Sell them Tums at \$3 a roll, \$20 for Alka-Seltzer. That's where you rake it in.

# Nuts and Bolts of Immersion Programming



Be sure to look at how language interacts with life. Be sure to look at how your immersion school interacts with the lives of your children and their families.

## Immersion Planning

We have tons of broken-down stuff on this reserve, the results of half-baked plans and thoughtless initiatives, the ghosts of attempts to revitalize the economy. We have the Blackfeet pencil factory (which is just beginning to come back), the defunct livestock center, a racetrack that never had a race. We got \$10 million for a sawmill, which is now home to the pigeons (birds that are not even indigenous; we can't even eat them). People bought this all to stabilize our tribe, our economy, without realizing that language is the key. Many of these things were imposed on us; many were undigested ideas. No planning summarizes all these things. No planning, no context. The amazing thing is that language is the basis, and ironically, it is being overlooked as *the* most critical component.

We plan a lot. We have master plans, plans to plan, the plan-in-case-the-plan-doesn't-work plan. Initially, we made four copies of the master plan and put them away to check later. We plan, we monitor, we document, and we excel. And ultimately, the kids excel.

## Governance

We don't believe in participatory democracy around here. Historically, with projects and dreams, it doesn't work. For that reason, we have a board of directors with three members—the minimum needed to support a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization under the federal law.

That *Robert's Rules of Order* has ruined more Indian organizations than has almost anything else on earth. We don't use it. Before you know it, should you have committees and advisory councils, you will hear them say, "Let's elect a chair. Let's have an election of officers." Then we have a fight. Why vote for one person? Why bring competition into a cooperative organization? In the name of what? So you can have a chair? Before you know it, you have upset half of the council, and then the other half says, "Let's have a secretary and treasurer." Then there are problems with who wants to vote for him or her and then discussions for hours about why everyone can't get along.

## Staff and Volunteers

You can never train teachers enough. Train them the first Monday of the month all day, and train them every Wednesday afternoon. Train them constantly, and give them incentives. We went the other way with standards. We see them as the absolute minimums. We try to exceed in everything, and that includes staff support, staff training, and staff opportunities.

We have a lot of men volunteering for this program. Language is powerful. Big, burly Blackfeet guys up scouting for elk are like mush when their little boys speak Blackfeet in the woods. We had a situation where two dads took their sons hunting. The boys were a bit nervous. They knew that the elks are important, and the little boys were taught a love medicine song. The boys sprang a plan to sing the love medicine song to warn the elk that their dads were coming to shoot them. The boys were singing away in the back of the pickup truck and later when the dads were out looking for elk. The men heard these two boys singing and talking in Blackfeet. The men had tears in their eyes, especially when they finally figured it out that the boys were singing so elk would stay away. “My child knows this.” They are inspired, and they are really inclined to come here.

In public schools, these dads don’t want to go anywhere near there. The public schools have community PTA giveaways with money, drawings, and roast beef for all the Blackfeet meat-eaters. Typically, they will have five people show up. Then the schools decide that the parents don’t care. That public school scene is a bad place for us. There are no good experiences in those public schools. Here, we always run out of food at our gatherings. We have what families want.

I had a conversation with Art. “Art,” I said, “I would give anything to hire you. I can’t afford you.” Art is one of the most talented men in the community. In these conversations, here I thought he was employed as a highly paid teacher in the public school. I find out differently. For twenty years, he has worked for minimum wage. He has no benefits. He has no job security. He has no seniority. I could do better than that. I said, “Art, come to work for us right now, and we will give you a decent salary, and when you get your degree, you will be paid a teacher’s wage.” He walked out the office. I thought he would think about it for a while. He walked out of the office and up the street and resigned. He walked back about an hour later.

Diane spent all her life as a teacher’s aide. Five years ago, she went to college for the first time. She got her teaching degree at Montana State. I met her in a restaurant. I congratulated her. “If you want, you can help us. You are a fluent speaker in our language. You need to work at our school. If you go back to the public school, they will give you all the troublemakers. At least come down and talk to us.” She came down. The last thing her college professors said to her was, “You are an older student, you can’t start at an introductory wage. Don’t sell yourself short, don’t let them buy you out.” She gave the public schools an interview even though she wanted to work with us. She researched what they would give her as compensation. “We could really boost it,” I said, “We were classmates. I danced with you at the prom.” She thought about it and said, “I’m not going to take the public schools position.” They called her and said, “Whatever that immersion school gave you, we will give you \$1,000 more.” In the end, she decided to stay with us, and she’s taken on the development of the Lost Children School—the school for the older children.

### You Don’t Need Permission

The more involved you get with immersion schools, the more that statement “You don’t need permission” comes back. It has multiple meanings. I need to give permission only to myself. I grant myself peace. I personally have had access to a lot of things that others didn’t have. I would like to see these children enjoy life. Seventy-five percent of the children in this community drop out of school. The dynamics for this started back in 1896 and are affecting all of

the seventeen thousand Blackfeet members on our tribal roles. (Blood quantum—how much “Indian” according to the BIA, so we can out-Indian each other with our ID enrollment cards. Only three groups—dogs, horses, and Indians—have ID cards. We are always having to prove we are Indians.)

My wife is dean of students of middle schools here and so I have some understanding of individual good-willed attempts to support Blackfeet children. Still, a lot of things in public schools are conspicuous by their absence. Nothing in the public schools confirms our existence. Look at the conspicuous absence of music. Typically, they will give kids a tuba and alto sax and play experimental music. When the kids are in immersion school, they are healthy and relaxed. They love music in all forms, especially their own.

### In a Way, We Are Anarchists

In a way, we are anarchists. When I graduated from college after I got out of the Army, I was in a lost period of my life. A superintendent of schools came up to me when I moved back to the reserve and said, “Can you finish the year at the public school?” I became an English teacher for the freshmen class. But soon, what I experienced made me think about my days when I was a student in the same school.

My reaction (I was a man then and not a kid): One day, I saw a teacher dragging a kid down the hall, slamming him around. That affects me differently. I saw a young man being humiliated. At that moment, I needed to decide if, as a member of this tribe, I could condone him being humiliated like that. I’d see a young woman being mistreated. I’d have to constantly decide if I could condone that. I said to myself, “As a child, I was an inmate. Now you’ve hired me, and now I am a guard. But nothing has changed.” That was the only time I taught in a public school. We don’t condone that behavior around here. There are certain things that we can’t condone.

We see the impact; we are a functionally illiterate society. We can’t put an ad in the paper and find someone to do computer and graphic work. We don’t have the professional cadre to do that. But then, of course, we get blamed. We nurse people through the best we can. We ask the staff, “Can you learn to run the graphics system?” Move away to anywhere else in the country, and within a few minutes, you can produce fantastic stuff. Because in other parts of the country, they are trained. They are not trained here, so we have to make do. How can we change that? Do we blame the school? Do we waste energy debating them?

But it begs the question, what will we do after eighth grade? Do you take your kid who now speaks Blackfeet to public schools? When my wife takes me to a play on Christmas, I think about the Indian Health Service morbidity and mortality statistics. We are strong in data collection so we have a picture of this community. In fact, we knew that there was going to be a population boom; the birth rate is five times higher than in the rest of the state. We are not geniuses or rocket scientists. But the cumulative record of public schools not attending to data is clear: they do not pay attention to the community’s needs. Count ten adorable children on stage singing. Take seven and push them off the stage. Of all those children, only the remaining three will make it through the eighth grade. What happened to the other seven? “They went away.” Count one hundred babies, ninety-nine will “move away,” and one only will go to college.

Of seventeen thousand enrolled Blackfeet members, only seven hundred have college degrees, less than 1.6 percent.

“What do you Indians want?” we hear from all sources. “What’s the problem?” We are not complaining. We must not complain. We must not beg. We must not debate. We want simple parity.

We want parity for our children. If 35 percent of Caucasians go to college, shouldn’t we be doing just as well as them? Why is only 1.6 percent of the tribe a college graduate? That’s unreasonable enough to the point of being horrific.

So again, in a way, you are a pure-form anarchist. You don’t reform, you abandon bad systems.

You embrace the fifty kids you can get your hands on and stick with them all the way through. Of three thousand children in the schools, forty graduate. Of that, ten go to college and five finish. If we can graduate ten a year and get them through college, we have doubled the rate of the entire public school system. Imagine what would happen if you had a factory with 70 percent of the cars coming off the line with three wheels. Unless you are making trikes, you would be in trouble. Immersion schools address a lot of issues in small, concerted ways.

Native teachers are very frustrated in the public schools. They become guards with low pay, lower than the other teachers. And, their work load is usually higher. This is a poor community. They can’t be like Johnny Paycheck and tell their bosses to take the job and shove it. But we’ve begun to hear that many of the Blackfeet public school teachers and teachers’ aides would rather work in our schools.

### Ethno-Botany and Creative Opportunities

Last year, we got a grant from the Fund of the Four Directions—\$15,000—to start an ethno-botany course. It’s a fitting way to go. Recently, we had to cut down one tree in our yard to expand the school, and it created a little gaggle of environmental activists (the kids wrote “tree killer” on one guy’s car). We get plants from Glacier National Park nursery. Our kids go into the park year-round, and the teachers go in with them. Whatever they discover, they will work into a song and sing the song again and again: “We went to Chief Mountain and picked berries etc., etc., for days.” We will eventually get into pollen harvests and other activities with this grant started in the school yard.

We don’t believe in playgrounds. We have the kids run. My own son thought, “How pitiful to have no playground.” So he went to town and bought \$300 worth of Fooze balls and bats and other things. He was out there, and the first day, they tried to see how far they could kick the balls down the street.

The kids play in the brush. They come back with sticks. We typically have a stack of sticks on the porch. They invent twig horses, stack sticks, make cars, make airplanes, horses, and cows. People think that is strange, but think about what your people were. We are runners, pedestrians. Our people were outdoors all the time. If our kids would not be running, they’d be crying.

## No Snitching

This reminds me of the rules:

- No pouting allowed (that's not just the teachers)
- No whining
- No yelling
- No tattling
- No snitching

Not one of these provides problem-solving strategies. They create dependency strategies.

The nemesis of learning is to sit still. Healthy kids use their imaginations, solve problems, and create solutions. The kids need to run around, move around and touch, feel, and sense. Kids are supposed to have scabby elbows.

## Sacred Time—The People Will Be Glad to See You

A Blackfeet elder asked if I were going to a sacred dance. Gee, I'm a busy man, and I asked him why he thought I should go. He thought. I waited. I waited. I thought he would give me some great meaning. Finally, what he told me is, in fact, the true meaning of Indian ways. "You must come," he said, "because the people will be glad to see you. That is why you need to come."

Nowadays, we have no time to finish a conversation. Ask, "Wait, let's finish," and you will hear, "I gotta run up town, I gotta go here, I gotta go there... I'm busy doing whatever." You get to where you never finish things. (Of course, we all have no problem starting things. Many of us, and many a tribal council, can start things. Just nothing gets finished.)

We have two schedules. One schedule starts somewhere at 8 and punches off intervals throughout the day, some at 10, some at 4. The really bizarre schedules have intervals like 8:07 or 9:28. How ridiculous is that? "Your plane leaves at 10:49." Is it possible that a huge plane would leave at precisely 10:49? They should probably just say the plane will leave sometime around 11:00. When people are looking at their watches, usually it's not to tell time; they are calculating when they should go. We are booked solid, can't make our own funerals.

But it's the other schedule, the sacred schedule, that belongs to the tribe. If you don't observe your sacred schedule, you are an irresponsible person. The sacred schedule is pretty quiet. There are no big signs up saying, "Sweat lodge this evening" or "Indian spiritual event." Typically, there are no brochures and no proselytizing. I began to understand that our sacred schedule is more important than our regular schedule. You stay till it is done. The reason is that they are glad to see you, and that is why you are there.

One woman came to our immersion school to film "The Death of Your Religion." Well, a lot of our people would be surprised if someone said that the Blackfeet religion is gone. In a typical spring, you can go to seven pipe openings lasting all day, Okans for eight full days in the summer, Blacktails for three days in the fall. You can be there more than most can be at their church.

A long time ago, our people knew the relationship between space and time. These celebrations, these activities—this is like studying quantum physics. Within your languages, look at how time and space applies. Public schools are obsessed with time and space on a linear plane. How ridiculous to assume, much less be worried, that a kid should read at a first-grade or second-grade level by a certain month in a certain year. They are obsessed with that. We have to chase those people away. Anyway, a parent gets worried about these real-time expectations, and we ask why. Sacred and real schedules are a part of our experience here, but the real schedules only support the sacred schedules. They are not so important. We are not so frenzied.

A lot of our kids know how to behave, and they get it from the sacred schedules. So, what you want to do is to bring some of that atmosphere into your classroom. You want to cultivate ebb and flow, a rhythm in our buildings. We keep our sacred schedule because “they are glad to see you.” Teach that, and the children will always be glad to be here.

### New Words

Our kids are modern kids. They see and experience a lot, and they don't have Blackfeet words for their experiences. They dance to MTV. We Blackfeet don't have words for that. But then I think of when the Blackfeet saw the first horse. They didn't have words for that either. The Shoshones got big clubs, rode on the back of horses, and headed over to the Blackfeet. Our guys were pretty dumbfounded; they asked each other what the heck they were looking at. One Blackfeet guy said, “*ponoka*” (“they are elk”). The other guy said, “Naaaa, those are too big. Those are *imita*, a dog” (the sign language for dog in Blackfeet comes from travois that were pulled by dogs). Another guy looks and decided that they are too large to be dogs but that they weren't quite elks. So he combines *imita* for dog and *ponoka* for elk to get elk-dog, or *ponoka imita*. We use that word today. Of course, by that time, the Shoshones had arrived, and they bashed those Pieigans on the head.

Language evolves, and it is through children that we can make new words. If they don't know the word, they'll try to figure it out.

The kids at the school wanted to go to Pizza Hut over in the next town. (There is no Blackfeet word for pizza). One boy decided to use the Blackfeet word for rosehips *kina*. Rosehips, the bulbs on the rose bushes after the rose dies, become red, tangy, and look like tomatoes. He used the word *kina* and combined it with *napiyeeni*, for bread. In Blackfeet, anything on a roof is an *oyis*. So a church is a *natosi* (sun) *oyis* (house), a holy house. We don't say “doctor”; we say “medicine house worker,” or *asinokia* (the physical act of what the doctor does in the medicine house). So, the kids came up with *kinanapiyeenioyis*, rosehip bread-house. Pizza Hut, let's go!

The only way to save a language is to teach it to a child. We don't know the words that they will invent. We don't know the language of children. But we do know the language rules, the language standards, and the old language philosophies. We have to be very strict in teaching those things so that the children can be inventive in the traditional way.



## Don't Debate New Language Trends

When people talk about old language versus new language, it's debate. Don't debate the language. It will derail your energy. It is pointless.

In English, I heard them say "twenty-three skiddo." What is that? We don't use it, we don't have to preserve it. When really young, I heard Elvis (I'm an old Elvis fan) saying things like "he's a cool cat," "go, man, go," "she's a cool chick," "hep guy." Try today to say to a young boy, "He's a real hep cat." The kid will no doubt reply, "That was awesome." I don't use *awesome* in the same way the kids do. They don't use "rad" anymore. Ten years from now, they will be using something else. Language in its own way is extremely dynamic.

However, be sure to not change the structure of your language. There are words, phrases, and idioms that don't convert to English grammar. In Blackfeet, there is no gender. Many tribes have languages that just women speak, others that just men speak. Teach out of your language experience.

## Show Me Your Curriculum—Too Intimate a Question

Don't let people bulldoze you. "Can I see your curriculum?" is really kind of a personal question.

"No, I don't think so" is the proper response.

Your language is your curriculum. Our botany, our genesis, our geography—a language can speak without speakers. If you figure out what an elk and what a dog are, you can figure out what a horse is. People bugged us to death about curriculum. I don't want to *hear* the words *curriculum* or *culture*. They were driving us nuts. And for what? Typically in most schools, the curriculum is on the shelf. They don't use it.

Do you have proof that this works? Do you have any textbooks on your language? Do you have basal readers in your language? These are violent questions. These are cop-outs. They are forcing you to justify your experience in their terms. Know that as Native American scholars, our scholarship is never fully accepted. It will never be ranked next to Jack Forbes and other icons. These discussions are from an ugly retro world view that we do not have to support or dialogue about. All the things people write about your tribe and out of your tribe are retro, vicarious research. The only true, first-hand primary research is from you. You are the subject and the interviewee. You are looking out at the world.

"Let's study the Piegan," says the academician from the outside world. Actually to them, it's the dark side of the moon. They see one side of a flat paper. If we are in the picture looking out, then the response is cognitive. We won't be published as much. But we don't know if we want to seek validation through the so-called experts anyway. We are the experts, and if anyone will validate us, it is the children.

## How We Teach

We took a lot of field notes, and over the course of eight years, we have sixty lessons. Our goals in life are worked out through this book. Even the babies use this book. The teachers,

the parents use the same book. One book.

At the beginning of the year, we all start at chapter one. Now we are on chapter nine, and we have no rush, no scholar of the year. But we are stuck at chapter nine because we have first-, second-, third-, fourth-, and fifth-person tenses in our language. We can't discuss that in English, which has no fifth-person tense. Fifth-person tense is fading away, and only a few are using it. So, if it takes us all year, we will figure it out. We use a sound in the fourth-person singular that was complex, and we finally figured out the sound. About ten years from now, maybe five, we will make it to chapter sixty. But it will take us ten years. (It took eight years to write the book.) Then in ten years, the babies will tell us the answers. We cannot do chapters fifty to sixty. They are linguistic mumbo jumbo to us now.

This is an informational world. We find a wealth of information, of history. For example, the word for the hills is *Katoyisks*, which is Bloodclot Boy. Bloodclot Boy rid the world for the Blackfeet of the monsters. He threw the lizards to the ground. If a pipe holder, you are a *Namanska* (a word that means frog, but the true meaning is lost to the ages). When buffalo died, wolves died out. The word for them *mukyi* (month looking at you) died out too. The word for wolf in the 1920s, 1930s until recently was *Amonkapeesee* (big coyote). About five or ten years ago, they reintroduced the wolf here from Canada. We were able to take the original word, and we put it back into the curriculum. Now the children use the word *mukyi* for "wolf."

The Milky Way is said to be a "wolf tail," or *mukuyi ohsoko*. Knowing the importance of the word *wolf*, we look for other words with *wolf*.

The last wild buffalo in the U.S. disappeared sixty miles from us. These are sacred hills to all people. All through the hills you find evidence of thousands of teepee rings, where all the medicines, paints, colors were harvested and where the people and the buffalo stayed. In 1884, the last fifteen wild buffalo on earth were killed in that place. Today, you can go up in caves, rooms are painted red, and go on for ten miles on the Elk River and plains of Saskatchewan for miles. There are writings on the stone (*sinakits*). The Blackfeet know which are ours. But some are not ours. Perhaps an exploration of the language will eventually reveal who these visitors were.

The language begins to teach you, and it is what you rely on. You don't rely on research. You rely on the language that the linguist took from you.

### Cultural Hitchhikers and Vampires

How do you interact with the linguists? How do you regard someone who is a cultural vampire? What do you say to those who profess to understand your tribe, your nation? I have never encountered a situation where linguists may understand our language better than the Native speakers have. However, after giving information and access, frequently they have been known to refrain from even supplying a copy of their work. One linguist in particular was tracked to the University of California, where a copy of his work was finally procured. We got the thesis when he refused to give us one. He ate at the table with many of us, talked, shared, and robbed us.

It depends on the individual linguist about whether you want them to get involved with the immersion programs. I would caution you to ensure that they not be the primary resource or supplant anything that we should be doing for ourselves. I don't want us to sit back and become reliant upon them.

Case in point: When the IE Film Association wanted to send us people, we asked that they just send us the camera, show us how to run it, and show us how to film, so that we can do it ourselves. They did. Then they said, "We will send a lady from New York to edit." We said, "Teach us. Send Joe Fisher to Montana State film and show us how to edit and run all the machinery." On our film *Transitions*, when it was time for music, we learned how to do it, we sang ourselves. Hire someone to do a song? That's us, for this movie *is* us. After we completed it, we had a little film festival. We invited everyone with whom we made it, ordered one thousand copies of the film, and distributed copies to everyone we could.

You are not in this immersion business for the money, but when you teach the children to speak the language, you ultimately change minds.

### Changing Minds

When we started, most people thought that the language was worthless. We use the university-without-walls method of getting information out with little or no cost. We hosted seminars, and we went door to door. We are trying to get the language on television and radio. Still, we must convince a great number of people that we should revitalize language. However, we should avoid debate.

Only five of every hundred people who take a university language course will master the language. The ninety-five people who had an unsuccessful experience will become the school administrators who don't think that learning the language will work. These people, through their own failed experience in acquiring a second language, will decide that:

- Language is worthless.
- You can't really learn it.
- What's the point?

You cannot use the same rationale. The only way to get public educators to understand the need for language acquisition programs is to talk about high language skill acquisition, building, and achievement.

Educators, through their own frustration with college language requirements—that they had to take to get their credentials—begrudgingly feel language belongs in the past. It's an annoying elective or an irrelevant sidebar. Even though, again, most tribal languages can explain theories of quantum physics in ways that cannot easily be understood in English. Most tribal languages are replete with natural stories. The history supports the language structure and language paradigms. The languages are not simply backdrops for English. Some educators think that real languages would never have a verb tense in the fifth person. Because we can't conjugate a verb tense in fifth person in English, they feel that this is not a real concept.

# How Do You Even Begin to Teach Immersion Programming?



A question is posed: let's say immersion is our ticket and that we have identified a few initiatives. How does an unsupported Native language activist start, and what makes it happen? In the Lac Courte Orielles, Wisconsin, Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) community, only a fraction of speakers—about fifteen people over age seventy or so—are left. Activists have considered master-apprentice programs, teacher training programs, and have begun documentation on video and audiotapes of elders talking in their homes to revitalize the language. Yet the key seems to be to change the pervasive attitude about the need for language revitalization. Not many people seem to be all that gung-ho about this. Should they redirect their energies? Should they take two intermediate speakers and an elder and start with five students and just go for it?

Yes.

After we started, we had to go to Canada to get teachers. We did not have local Blackfoot language teachers. You have to start with what you've got; it won't get better, even if you wait one more day. There are other things to consider with the children that are fundamental to learning the language. The first year will be spent on these efforts. A lot of the initial time is spent just getting them oriented to the immersion school systems of classroom management.

Full immersion is a full, rare, and exotic place to get. It doesn't happen till four or five years into your program. We aren't even close to full immersion here at this school. Even the Barrow, Alaska, program is having a very difficult time to get the kids to stop using English. English is a bully language. But you make the assumption that it will take a while to get to full immersion. So, you have plenty of time to just get ready. Sometimes small achievements can happen in six months, even in three months. However, the first year the Hawaiians started their immersion program, it lasted a year, and they had to close down and start again.

When you start your program, you will be saying, "Close the door." You will be saying the names of teachers over and over. You will be saying, "Give me the paper." Students will not be saying, "Give me the deep philosophy of life."

The first year you talk about paper and water and naps, about doors, chairs, sitting, standing, and about turning for at least about two jillion times. And still you might need to deny them water until they ask for it. They need to go to the bathroom. How do we say these words in your language? Look to the language. Do girls and boys ask differently? Be prepared to say constantly, "Line up and wash your hands," "Sit down and eat," "Now let us pray." Consider that you should include a blessing of some sort—they will bring it home. The kids add on to the prayer everyday. Even if they are saying, "Bless my dog" or "Bring me more candy" or "I need new shoes," don't try to steer their prayers, their wants, even too much of their language. Let them be creative. You are beginning to develop the classroom structure, the expectations, and the patterns.

You aren't doing brain surgery during the beginning years. But you are using Total Physical Response (TPR) all the way. Touch and teach with all senses: "Take off your shoes," "Take a nap." Demonstrate these things as you say them. If you are going to work with very young children, then start with five or six kids. We started with twenty-eight and should have shot ourselves in the head the next day. It's come back to haunt us. They went to preschool, working their way up through the school, this big bulge of kids. Set up your program to flow with five students the first year, five the next year, etc. When you start, use four-year-olds. The four-year-olds will be able to acquire the language. Then the next year, add the three-year-olds. The three-year-olds will learn the language more quickly. If you don't start with the four-year-olds, then the three-year-olds will try to dominate the four-year-olds, and you will have a mess on your hands. The four-year-olds will probably not speak as well as the three-year-olds in the long run. But you want them to hold their position. You want the four-year-olds to dominate the three-year-olds the next year and the next, and not the other way around!

Try to start with kids that are all the same age: start with six children, three boys, three girls. After the next year, at least five will be left. You add and add and add until you have about fifteen behind them.

However, the first crew is the crew that you have to deal with. A small entry group can allow you to deal with them as you work out your mistakes.

### Threshold Immersion

The first comprehension period or stage is the first phase of immersion process. This is followed by a silent period and then a pronunciation period. The natural maturity achieved through this process varies from word to word and from child to child. In the beginning, you can teach someone to comprehend the language, but they won't be able to speak it.

Current language teaching emphasizes that speaking the language should be attained immediately. This is wrong, and this is the primary difference between learning language through immersion and using word lists. Teaching for immediate pronunciation creates a high level of stress in the learner.

By using comprehension first through physical movement, silence, and then speaking in an orderly fashion, you reduce stress on the learner and actually increase their learning. They begin to understand expectations, and they begin to develop a discovery process, and that internalized process will enable them to learn more language outside of the immersion environment.

### Stage I: Comprehension

Comprehension of the language is accomplished through repetition. The repetition has a physical effect on children. It actually fosters the development of synapses, or nerve connections in the brain. Only after these synapses are established and the language is fully understood can speech occur. Thus, after comprehension comes a silent period and finally dialogue.

Early comprehension is accomplished through constant repetition of an established pattern.

We ask the children to stand up, sit, turn, sit, stand up, sit, and turn sit, etc., etc., etc., until they can comprehend it in their head. This is reinforced twenty times or more.

After it appears that comprehension has been achieved, then you add directives to walk, stop, walk, stop, sit, stand up, and walk. Then you build upon that. Ask the children to walk, sit in the chair, stand up, walk to the door, walk to the chair, etc., etc., etc. You keep extending the small language base.

Eventually, you ask the children to walk to the door, walk to the window, walk to the table. You use the game of Simon Says. You say, "Touch your nose, don't touch your nose, touch your hair, don't touch your hair, touch your fingernail, touch your wrist, touch your shoe." Internalizing this language takes a long time.

The child will be using English and saying, "I am tired. I want water. When is lunch?" You don't have to worry about these things, because you are concentrating on getting language heard and heard and heard.

You are rewiring the kid. When learning English, you were constantly asking the baby to look at mom, look at auntie, look at uncle, and saying, "You are soooo cute." Kids are creating thousands of synapses in their brain a day. It's important in a room with young children to have a language tape in a tape recorder and let it play constantly. Play tapes of people talking, singing in the language, drumming in the language. You are establishing the sounds and the rhythms of the language at this very elementary level. However, be precise. You are setting the ground rules, the inflections, so they can nail the sounds and the words. Make sure the floods of sounds are as accurate as you can make them.

What's happening is that the ear in the young children is developing the synapse response range for the sounds and pitches of the language. It has been reported that if you learn a language before pubescence, you learn without accent; after that, you learn with accent because synapses stop being produced at pubescence. If sound is not present, your ear never develops the synapses required to recognize the sound. For example, Japanese people who do not have exposure to the sound of an "r" and an "l" find it extremely difficult to produce those sounds.

Kids raised around their grandparents and who are not yet fluent speakers often say that they can identify the sounds they hear that are not English sounds. You are saturating the room with the language, saturating the air with those tribal sounds. These sounds—randomly heard, or directed, or ambient, or intentional—are building the physical language acquisition capacities in the brain. You are getting language synapses developed in the frontal lobe of the brain. Ultimately, when the kids speak, they are not translating; they are simultaneously encoding and decoding and sending it back out. It becomes natural. If we wait too long, second language development moves from the frontal lobe to another part of the brain. We have a micro-dash delay and have to translate through English to Blackfeet to English and on out. As language-acquiring adults, we have missed the window that the children still have to make it simultaneous work.

## Stage 2: The Silent Stage

Stage 2 can be seen when baby is walking around with a fifteen-pound diaper. He starts to come to dad, and dad says, “Noooo, go to your mother.” The kid manages to turn around and heads on over to mom. We know he understands, and we begin to reward his comprehension. We flood him with commands: “Junior, get water,” and “Junior, bring the water to auntie,” “Junior, get my purse and bring it to me,” “Junior, take your cars and put them away or we won’t go to the ice cream store.”

## Stage 3: The Speaking Stage

Junior eventually says, “Nana giigi waa waaa.”

You hear that and your heart stops. You don’t respond with “Oh, you have mispronounced that horribly.” You rush up and squeeze the daylights out of him and smother him with affection. He’s off the comprehension stage, he’s through with the silence stage, and he’s entering the speaking stage.

At this point, you as an adult learning language using this system have the physical sensation that the word falls right down out of your head, rolls over your tongue, and falls to the floor. It’s a weird feeling for adults; it must be a weird feeling for kids. It might be uncomfortable. Still, kids need physical movement at this stage. Their bodies are alive with physical feelings of the sensations of these words and new nerve connections. Even when the kids are starting to speak, all the wiring is not in place. For adults, the wiring is never quite in place, and that’s just the way it is.

This is the stage when junior learns to say, “Tractor, tractor, tractor, tractor,” until you are ready to put him outside. He has hit the end of the silent period, and now he can physically manipulate the sound for the word. He is not merely mimicking, he is also beginning to understand, and everything tells him to continue to work until he gets it. The words suddenly become real, and they have a real meaning. So a baby would say, “Gigi wawa.” Now the child hears “water” and she is all excited and starts fine-tuning that internal automatic frequency control (AFC). “Give me some water.” “Give us some water.” You begin to hear clear words. Children are mimics; they will mimic the language.

First, you have to model everything, and that is why sign language works so well. We use Blackfeet signs and supplement them with American Sign Language. You engage the children with discrete physical movements that trigger their memories and that give them yet another device to use to remember the language.

“Put your hands up”—as you talk, you demonstrate. Supply a motion of a boy talking to a girl. Show in signs and language that the girl is getting a book or giving a book. Add the sign and word for “dog.” Imitate or use the sign for a cat, a bear, and a turtle. If some of them recognize the sign, you can actually see if they have internalized the meaning of the words. Eventually, *imita* (dog) falls from their brains into their mouths and out.

The children are processing all of this information, one word at a time. It takes at least a year for all of you to understand this method and for them to actually have enough words to use to even begin to try and get them to speak primarily in Blackfeet.

## Begin a Threshold Immersion Program

So now you have enough language to begin a threshold immersion program where you try to get them to do most of their talking in the language. You still spend your day giving commands: “Junior, go wash your hands.” “Go get the peanut butter and give it to your sister.” “Go take a nap.”

Bring in your fluent speakers, and the kids will start to tell you, “Give me a drink, I need water.” They are now in the speech or the pronunciation stage. They can’t have conversations. The language is still in blocks. “Go line up go to the bathroom,” “Go outside,” and “Go eat a peanut butter sandwich.” It is not yet fluid. But now you begin to switch tenses and persons. Instead of asking the boy to “give me the book,” take away the signs and just use the language. You can add, “Give the girl the book.”

Now when kids are starting to use language, they hang around you all the time. “I just want to be alone with your mother,” you protest. However, your child is hanging around you like glue because he is busy fine-tuning the language frequencies. He is not being nosy. He just wants to hear you talk. He is trying to guess about the meaning of what dad just said when he said he’s “going to fix the carburetor.” He wonders what “I miss you, babe” means. The child is learning to mimic talk but not necessarily form fluent speech.

If we speak broken English in front of the kids, the kids will pick it up. They will eventually speak broken English. If you speak broken Blackfeet, they will eventually speak broken Blackfeet.

OK, this is a statement that will make you *all* shudder, but sooner or later, you will all talk just like your mother or your dad. (“I *don’t* talk like my father, my mother”—I know you are saying this.) But it will happen. The children who are attending to you are mimicking your speech, and are trying to exactly match the words and the sounds that you make. Be careful that the sounds of the language that they hear are the sounds that you want them to produce.

“Do Dogs Wash Their Hands?”

So, during the second six months of this structured learning system, one day, instead of commanding “Go wash your hands,” you stop, and you pause, and you say, quite philosophically, “Do dogs wash their hands?” The kids think.

Here’s another way that we work with the language. Invent a nonsensical sentence. “The coyote says, ‘Give me the dog.’” Kids like to make up words and to rearrange sentences.

Natural grammar theory is an assumption that if any five humans are given ten nonsensical words, they will eventually ascribe an identity to each of the words. They will decide that some of the words are verbs and that some of the words are nouns. The brain has an inherent ability to structure words. We don’t teach kids grammar (we don’t typically say, “That’s a verb. Put the noun in front of it.”). The brain has a natural ability to organize grammar.

You ask, again quite philosophically, “Do dogs wash their hands?” So far, the kids have been capable of producing vocabulary but not of producing grammatical structure. The kids might respond, “Dogs no wash hands.” You’ve heard little kids say things like that: “What doing?” or “I no go.” These are the beginnings of sorting and linking words and the beginnings of their discovering the rules of grammar.



You might ask, “Do dogs eat at the table?” The child responds, “Dogs eat food.” Hey, this is not the right answer, but you notice that there is a leap in logic. The child is making connections between the eating and the food and the connection between the food and the table. (And, of course, you are rewarding this answer.) This initial attempt to formulate grammar must begin by age six or it will not happen. If you reload the brain-camera in kids by age six to allow them to construct various grammatical orders in various languages, then you have smart kids on your hands. You have kids who can pick up any language.

You take it a step further. You say to a boy, “Tell the girl, the boy said that dogs eat at the table.” The boy muses. He realizes that you are not asking *him* for his personal opinion. You are asking him to say what the boy said, and you are also asking him to explain that to the girl. Then you say, “Do you think that dogs eat at the table?” You are now asking him to give his personal views, after he conveys what the boy said to the girl, to this new boy. You are asking him to consider whether he has a different opinion than the boy does. You are weaving the grammatical constructs around. You are doing what’s called a centrifugal fugue.

You say to the girl, “Tell the boy that the teacher said that dogs eat at the table.” She now needs to put her response in different order. You have used the word *said*. She’s never used that word before. But she suspects that it is connected to all of this, and she will try to use it. “Yes,” she will reply to the boy, “the teacher said that dogs eat at the table.”

“What the boy and girl said is that the dogs eat at the table” (third-person plural verb tense). This is threshold immersion.

Threshold immersion incorporates imaginary talk—playground talk. “The dog said to the coyote, ‘Give me a book to read.’” Don’t just walk in and start talking like this. But the sooner you set the stage for playground talk, the better off you are. You have to constantly figure it out. People think teachers have an easy job. What in your language will allow you to say “Fold the paper over and make a square”? I don’t go around talking in Blackfeet about folding things over to make a square. A lot of things in the classroom cannot be literally translated. The key is to not even try. Maybe in your language you would say, “Put the door of the teepee against the side of the teepee,” or “Open the door on the lodge,” or “Put the two sides of the lodge together.” If you want to literally unfold the newspaper, you can’t say, “Unfold the newspaper.” Perhaps you can say, “Open the door on the lodge” and that would work fine.

### Your School Should Be Like Gramma’s House

You have to have a lot of support for the kids as they move into this area of structuring grammar. One of the true gifts to our program was Margaret Running Crane, and she spent a good three years with us and had a real gift of humor. However, Margaret never missed a funeral or a feed. She was constantly leaving us: “I gotta run over here,” “I gotta run over there,” “I gotta go to that dinner.”

We had to keep reminding ourselves that Margaret was not the teacher, she was the speaker. That’s all she did. That’s all your Margaret does.

Your native language resource person is not the teacher. She should not be asked to do any tasks other than what she would normally do in her own home. Margaret spent time with us

talking to the kids. Whatever she did was fine. All that time, she was talking to kids, engaging them. She would ask them what they were doing. She would sing to them, talk to them, talk to other people. She could talk to herself for that matter. She would fill the air with the language.

Your school should be like grandma's house. What she's doing now at the speaking or pronunciation stage is helping them learn how to use grammar. That's her major contribution. Margaret would love to teach, and then she would always say, "Gotta go to the feed" or "Gotta go to the funeral," and out she would go. Two years ago, she brought her boyfriend here for all the kids to meet. She introduced him by his Blackfeet name. Margaret, a year ago, said she was going to get married. She was part of our life, and we were a part of hers. Those people come into your life; they are a real, integral part of your life. They bring their lives to your school. And those kids, they just wanted to hang out with Margaret. They just wanted to hear her talk and tell stories and sing songs and tell them how special they were.

Be careful of the terminology here. You don't hire fluent elder speakers and give them jobs as housekeepers. You don't write job descriptions that include a lot of little maintenance tasks or even teacher's aide tasks. Be good to them, or they will be gone. Give them good salaries. That's how it works. If they are tired and want to go home and then go back to work, fine, let them do it. Keep these fluent speakers actively talking to the children.

### You Can Fire Yourself

When you hire someone and don't want him or her to work only to a specific job description, you have to be honest. You have to say, "We do all things here. We all have tradeoffs here. We all do our part." Then you say, "Here's what I will do. I will do the fundraising. I will make sure that we will raise the money to have good salaries. You will do everything that you can to ensure that the children speak the language."

You say, "Margaret is here now. You can't waste time, you can't waste the money. You can't say, 'I gotta leave early,' or 'I'm going to be late.' You can't say, 'I am upset with my colleague so I will not teach the language.' You can't say, 'I'm too tired so I can't teach today.' You can't do any of that here. There is too much invested." Hire only those people who are committed to having the children speak the language.

The Hawaiians said that there will come a time when a fluent native language speaker comes to help you and things will not work out. And you may have to fire that speaker. We say, "We will never fire you—but you can fire yourself. If you are belligerent, uncooperative, if you bombard us with your excuses for living a disorganized life, you will leave sooner or later on your own because you can't keep us here as part of your confusing existence." If their lives were too disorganized, if they were not cooperative, and if they were hostile—all those things have to be thrown out. You have to get everyone thinking along those lines.

That is why we talk to the staff for so long. We try to tell them we don't have a lot of energy; we have to parcel it out.

I can't say, "Why aren't you here on time?" "Why aren't you helping the children learn to speak the language?" I can't tell you, "Why you are doing these things with the lives of our children?"

I can say, “I will get you the money, and you will help the children learn to speak the language.” I can say, “If I find out you are here and are not doing the language lessons and you are sliding or you are slacking, then I am finding out that these kids cannot talk the way that they could be. I cannot allow your behavior to interfere with their learning.” If we engage in all these disorganized and destructive ways of being and the kids can’t speak the language, we have wasted money and time. We have denied ourselves a precious victory.

“Why did we not reach our goal? Why can the children not speak the language? Because you were too tired to finish your lesson so you decided to fight with someone?” You Native people realize that you are in a communal world and talking about these things is part of our real communal, tribal life. If someone is not doing his or her job, they jeopardize the whole project. I would say, “You jeopardize my life and yours and the lives of these children.”

We say, “We love you, and we will never argue with you. We are allowing you to leave because your frustrations run too great. We will see you on the street. We will always embrace you.”

Some people can’t handle this. They want a job description. “What should I do now, and now, and now, and now?” It took us five years, but the staff with us today is tight. I don’t think we will lose anyone. One question was “Why I am here?” One statement was, “I am not leaving.”

It will take you a while to sort out people, to develop philosophies, and to appreciate each other. When some of the staff came here, they had college degrees but they couldn’t speak the language. Even today, some of our best teachers are not fluent, but now they speak the language as much as they can. They try hard. They learn right along with the children. We ask them to get up and speak in the language, they will do it (even though they will sweat bullets). We are proud of their efforts and proud of their increasing proficiency in the language.

Building your program will take five to ten years. It won’t happen over a year. It will be a hard process. But it is a rewarding job—unlike the previous ones I had with reserve programs, and ones that you might have had yourselves. Dorothy and I have both been fired in our lifetime. We worked for the tribe in different programs. Someone was always after us, someone cussing us out, demanding to know what we were doing, and why, and how, and for how long. Usually with threats like “You will be fired.” It’s a hard way to live. We don’t want that kind of life. We don’t want that kind of life for our teachers. We don’t want that kind of life for our children.

The Creator did not put us on earth to be miserable. We say, “Don’t go too far. We won’t fight you. We will not fight over the language.”

In this program, there is crying. This is real close to us. If they are having a hard time, a good crying jag might be what’s needed. Or maybe sit and pray with each other. If we get in bad feelings with each other, we work to take care of them before a problem exists.

### Command Excellence

Our manuals don’t look like standard manuals. We ask our teachers, “Have you been practicing friendship? Are you accepting responsibility? Are you laying blame for various things on others?” We ask our staff to take this test once a week. We learn here to compliment each other and how to compliment the children.

When we started and our Canadian sisters came to live with us, we found apartments for them. We even located car transmissions and helped them get settled with their lives. We had to go beyond a standard manual. That's just the way it is. Jocelyn, Art, and the others will be followed by other trainees, and then we will start on our second five-year plan. But you can never just run the place just like a business.

However, you have to be businesslike.

Day one, hire a CPA firm that takes care of all the records. The cause of almost all organizational failure is bad bookkeeping. We have to stay on the IRS' good side. We have to have a AAA rating with the IRS. We can tell a foundation that wants to deal with us, "Here, here are our audited financials. Here are our evaluations. Here are our past 990 filings. Read these documents. They tell it all. We are nonmercenary with our language. We don't sell anything. We don't sell it because we need the trust of the community." The community can't hear that Darrell Kipp is making a million dollars off the language. No one is putting a nickel in your pocket. If someone walks in the front door, say, "You can say here, this tells every financial transaction. It's a 990 form, and it will illustrate that we are nonmercenary. No one is taking advantage of the language here."

We are each in a very volatile community. You read about indicting Indians or tribal chairs, and you read about sordid politics all the time. These politicians don't leave you alone. They will always be after you. I tell my neighbors to look out, that one day, buses will pull up and load us up and take us away. Big blue buses will come and take all of us to the insane asylum. We are all certifiably nuts. And the politicians do not want to see the type of stability and independence that we have, independent of them. They will want to control it. They will want to revert to snitching.

### Snitching, Squealing, and Becoming Dancing Bears

There's always a threat. We are a colonized people. We were taught to squeal on each other, to snitch. In the early days at the mission schools, the kids would run in from the playground and say things like "He's talking Indian out there." You'd come back from recess and find out that someone had said you were talking Indian, and you'd get the belt. You would be forced to kneel on brooms. You would be forced to clean the latrines. You would be publicly humiliated. You would be tortured. The squealer would be rewarded. The dynamic remains today. This is a dynamic of colonized people. The snitches still look for rewards.

In our schools, things are different. Public humiliation, public squealing, public gatekeeping, and mean encounters are never to be allowed. All our attempts to speak the language, conduct business in the language, organize in the language are a part of our attempts to change community dynamics.

Squealing has been rewarded. It has always been a weapon, a dynamic of oppression. It is one of the most harmful tools used to assimilate us. It manifests in many ways. It cannot be a dynamic in our schools. We cannot have squealing in our schools. We cannot allow this dynamic to infect our program. Never debate. No whining, no dependency behaviors, no oppressive behaviors, no squealing, no snitching.

Build the community among staff. Bring the families into your circle. We occasionally had trouble with parents who thought that their kids were in a public school. They try to come in and bulldoze us, like some jailhouse lawyer. They are used to having to go in the public schools thinking that they would have to mug someone to even be listened to. We have to ask them, “Why are you, as a parent, yelling? Why are you out of your mind?” Don’t use fear tactics with us. And even with the parents we must say, no whining, no dependency behaviors, no oppressive behaviors, no squealing, no snitching.

Keep the general atmosphere healthy; lay down your life for trust, for friendship, and for credibility.

Language reminds people of the torture inflicted in the past. Language is a touchy subject. It’s not something that many fluent Native people initially like to listen to—it produces post-traumatic stress. We remind them, with our very presence, of the horrors inflicted upon them in the mission schools and the government schools and the public schools. They are so afraid someone will snitch on us. They are afraid for us that we are using the language. They themselves will initially snitch on us before they will ultimately protect us. We start off in a sea of snitching behavior. We change these dynamics with our behavior and with the behavior of the children.

Yet, ultimately, those initial critics, those people who did nothing to help us, invite our kids to their events. They have Native American day at the college. So we go (we will eat). And they notice that our kids behave differently than their kids. They have begun to ask if our kids would lead the prayers. Our kids are asked to do the ceremonies at the diabetes conference, the Johnson O’Malley meeting; the tribal council has had the kids come in to lead prayer. Of course, they don’t chase these requests with grants to this program, but that is a different thing.

We don’t want the kids to become dancing bears. These people have to have a stake in your commitment. We don’t want them to relegate language to become a nice addition to their self-centered activities. Often they are using us and are not validating what we are doing. They are still snitching. But they are beginning to see, beginning to understand.

Show, don’t tell. Ten years ago, people would be violent in this community when you talked language. Today, the real violence is gone. So, today you can bring change, you can show them healthy kids that speak the language and are not ashamed.

Don’t let your kids become dancing bears.

### Three Kids Talking Blackfeet in a Grocery Store

This man was talking at the college, and he said a real strange thing. “I was at the grocery store. A little boy saw another little boy, and they started talking away in Indian. Wow,” he said, “I never saw that. Then there was a little girl, and she came over, and all three of them, they were all talking in Indian. I stood there for so long, I couldn’t bring myself to talk. ‘Listen,’ I said to my wife, ‘did you hear those kids? They were all talking Indian.’ My wife, she said, ‘Oh yeah, those must all be those kids at that Indian school.’”

He said, “That was the most special moment in my life.”

## The Biggest Regret

The biggest regret is that we can't partake of our own creation. We have to raise money and other things so we can't be with the Margarets of the world. We will never speak the way we wish we could. We are out front. Many a day we wish we were in here, learning the language. My biggest regret is that we can't partake.

But another reason people can't learn is we are too lazy, we don't give it enough time. The tape in the car, the dormant book on the nightstand waiting for osmosis to our brains, these methods don't work. Constantly, people come and request the books and tapes. Ninety-nine-point-nine percent get a book, take it home and wait for osmosis to happen. People call and say, "Can I have a tape?" You have to be careful about these disingenuous questions. They don't want your book. They want a transfusion, hopefully an instantaneous and nonpainful one. Know what? There is no such thing.

## You Will Go to the Sand Hills

You look and you see all this. You ask how many people will do this work. But you don't need a hundred or a thousand people right now, because a hundred or a thousand people will not stay with this work. You need a few committed people who will work and work and work. People say "Darrell, we need you here." (Of course, there are the others who say, "Darrell, get out of here.") You can't get out of this once you get in. Our language community won't let us resign. And what would we do if we resigned? We would be quitting our journey back to our own lives. We can't quit. We are lifers.

But sooner or later, we will all go to the Sand Hills, and we want someone who is as committed as we to replace us. So you begin the logistics plan, and you begin to develop the transitional management plan. You start bringing in the next group. We have hopes for the children. We hear them say, "We are coming back here to be teachers." What would be better than in ten, fifteen years, the kids take this school over and run it?

You are starting this vision, and down the road, someone will pick it up and take it farther. That will be your compliment.

When I first went to Harvard, I looked at the buildings. There were all these Indians on the buildings. Harvard was founded specifically to educate the Indians. They started with ten students. Harvard is the top university in the world. They have \$9 billion in their endowment alone. And they send a letter asking for \$1,000. I send them \$100. I send them the money because that experience told me one thing when I got there: in all the years I have been in school, it was there, for the first time, that I was encouraged to start studying myself.

Go out and start something on your own, get your own job, start to study yourself.

You have a great challenge ahead of you. Here at Piegan, we have had the privilege of working with thirty, forty, fifty tribes as they begin to revitalize their language. Some come here, stay with us, go home, and start their programs, like you folks who have come here now. We are all part of a native language immersion school movement, and it is less than five years old. It's very young; that's why it's so hard. We need to sit and visit. We need to visit each other and

to encourage ourselves. The Hawaiians let us stay with them long enough until we felt we were ready. They let us write to them, and they called us when they knew that times were bad. There are those moments when you think, “All I need to do is talk to someone. I got to make sure that I run this past someone.” Know that we’d be happy to be that someone.

If we fail, if we don’t make it, we will walk out of these buildings and leave them here. People will come by and say, “Why aren’t they using the buildings?” We will say, “This is where our language died.”

No matter what in any other place, you can use English. You are never hard-pressed in other places, because you don’t have to be; you can revert to English and get what you want. In immersion programs, you have to speak the language, or it’s not an immersion school.

Sooner or later, this will become the last spot on earth where our language is spoken.

Like the Condor in California

They spent \$26 million saving the condor in California. “We have to save them, but how?” So, they captured all of them, and they bought them into a sanctuary.

That’s what an immersion school is. It’s a sanctuary. The signs say, “**Don’t speak English.**” We have to strengthen our language. Like the condors. We’d have signs outside, “**No English here**” and still they would come in and speak English to our kids anyway. So, then we’d lock them out with a sign saying “No visitors.” Holy smokes, no visitors. Boy, did that attract them, including the priest down the street, coming to see what we were doing with these kids with that no visitors sign. We took it down.

Here’s the problem, we tell them. “We let you in the room, the last place where the language is spoken, and while you are a good person, you don’t observe the rules. You talk in English.” They dilute the room, and we are back in English. With ten English words, you set back all that we did for the entire morning. Instantly, the kids will switch to English.

An Answer to Homesickness

The notion that drives a lot of things along is that this is an answer to your own homesickness. You have wanted to come home, and this is home. A full immersion program is a long way down the road. You can’t get there instantly. Some of us can slip through this, through the side door, if we didn’t study the language. But, this is a journey, to immersion, and to home.

We who are organizing this don’t feel like we chose this. Through circumstances, I think we were *chosen* to do this.

Now, we can’t send money to our alma maters because we don’t make money any more doing this work. Money doesn’t rule our lives. Appointments don’t rule our lives. Status doesn’t rule our lives. This rules my life. All these things that they tell us about philosophy and Indian ways, we heard those things when we were cultural hitchhikers ourselves. But we’ve moved beyond that with this effort. We work specifically so that the children will speak the language.

We don't have to worry too much. The Hawaiian kids are twelve, thirteen years old. It's working for them, they are fluent speakers, and they are strong. Our kids will have much more strength than we did. I know they will. That is all you can offer the community. People come here and want to do profiles, but we are careful not to profile Dorothy or me. We don't believe in attributing all this to one person. Everyone has his or her responsibility, and the only thing that you can do is accomplish the tasks you have been given today.

None of this—as busy as I am, as much as it has taken on a daily basis—has interfered with my life. I still do all the things in my life that I want to do. In fact, it is because of this work that I actually am at peace. I actually am doing what I really want to do in my life.

So I will take this notion to mean that ensuring that the children speak the language enriches my life because I enjoy life more. Dr. Still Smoking and all the teachers, and the parents, and the architect, and Joe Fisher, and the boys building the building, and the kids, they are here. How many belong to this community, I don't really know. If we want something, we can get it. If we need something, it will come forth. We worry, like everyone. If push comes to shove, this place will survive. If we can keep the language, it means other kinds of survival—religious survival, philosophical survival, botanical survival. Maybe someday we can convince educators to teach the language in the schools.

Picking up our own language again is healing. Look, in English, we call each other derogatory terms we have been taught to suggest that we are close. These terms often separate us. For example, some of our children are too light skinned for our stereotype. So we teach the other children to humiliate them. We humiliate each other through English. Blackfeet has kinship terms. A man my age is a brother (*neducka*); an older man becomes my father (*ninna*); a younger man is my younger brother (*neskun*); a younger woman is my younger sister (*natakim*). We don't say “Hey, pal” in Blackfeet. When the kids learn these kinship terms and use them, they feel embraced. They say, “We are real people now.”

### Blue-Eyes

A blond, blue-eyed Blackfeet girl came to our school and said that at the school she was previously at, she was constantly teased. She came to this school to get away. In English, “blue eyes” is a derogatory term. She's been here a while. She's a good student. When it came time to get her name in Blackfeet, guess what she chose? She took the name *ozkuina-apiniaki* (Blue-eyes) in Blackfeet. Now, her eyes were a unique aspect of her. The same thing, with a language positive shift, and with a supportive environment, was now endearing. And she's proud of her name and of her unique eyes.

### Look at Prep Schools

We have described the toxic environment of most of the public schools on reserves. Why would you allow your children to go to these schools? What is the next step?

Do not be afraid to look at prep schools for the high school education of the children who finish the eighth grade. We know there are some opportunities out there for very good educational experiences for our children, and we shouldn't overlook them. We are screening



prep schools in Colorado, New Mexico, and out east. We will introduce ourselves and send the children to look at these environments this coming summer. We were introduced to an exclusive prep school that really wanted our kids and would support their continued education and Blackfeet language; we would be remiss if we did not look at them seriously. But prep school reminds everyone of the mission schools. It's hard to believe that these are not mission schools and that the kids would not be abused. Yet, this is a different day, different dynamics. If we didn't look at prep schools for them, and examine them, we would eliminate a possibility where our kids could probably do well.

However, this means we would stay with the kids. We would figure out how to support them when they were far away. Even when they go to college, we will stay with them. We will never really let go of these kids. We will steer them to colleges of choice. Ten, fifteen years from now, children here could have completed a successful prep or high school program, a college program, and come back to us with degrees. Degrees in just about everything. Perhaps at some point in the future, community members will want to donate money for a high school. But now, during these first stages of our development, we don't have that option. Dorothy and I were initially doing things on our own. We have just started hearing parents saying, "I want to donate land to the school. We could build a gym here." (Always they want to build a gym. In every Native community, gee, let's build a gym). We should begin to prepare to build the high school because by then, Darrell Kipp will prepare for the front porch. Maybe one day one of the finest prep schools will be right here.

Use the human spirit. Maybe we took liberties to go ahead and do it on our own, and, hopefully, we have been capable. I was taught that Cesar Chávez and their grape strike was the model and the spirit of community organizing. For us here, in this environment, it is not. We don't relinquish our leadership for participatory democracy. One of the guest speakers at a political organizers' seminar in 1970, an African American man dressed in a dashiki, said something that has stuck in my mind. What he said was, "The trouble with participatory democracy is that there are times to use it and times to not use it. If we all were in a boat going down and one knew the combination to a lock that keeps us there, why would we all try to work on the lock to come up? Why would we not let the one person who knows how to get out of the sinking ship lead us?"

Now parents feel like this is their place. They paid tuition; it's their responsibility. It took two years for parents to really buy into this. When we hired the first registrar, it took two years to get the mechanism in place. It took us a year to do manuals. They are meant to be flexible. Now in the fifth year, finishing the last building, we are starting to develop the endowment fund that will support the cost of operations for our three schools. That effort will take us quite a while.

As we transition through this, I have plans, and before I too go to the Sand Hills, I will go to the porch, and sit and be pleased. We almost have set the scenario up. We have parents committed. We have very talented people finishing their doctoral and master's theses. Others are finishing their baccalaureate degrees. Before long the students will be back here again to take over.

We didn't plan to take the older kids. But here and there, kids would force themselves into your program and your heart. About four or five of the students came in without coming in through the preschool.

One little girl kept coming around, and she would say, "Could you let me come to this school?" For three years, she was the oldest in the school. We were thinking that it was time for her to move on to the public school. Then she came one day and she had a government check. "I want to stay in this school. Here, I have my tuition." I looked at it; it was a Supplemental Security Income check from the death of her father. I told Rosella, "I guess you have a second-grade student." That girl is now in the sixth grade. What forced that girl to do that? There was no way we could turn her away. This must have been a strong calling in that girl's life. Who are we to decide that she cannot come here?

Another girl came. I had seen her at pipe doings and medicine lodges. She was playing around here, and she told me that she was going to go to school here. That night, her great grandmother called and said, "We don't have any money. Period. How can I possibly send her to your school?" "We will find a way," we said. "You do what you can." We accepted her great granddaughter. I called Dorothy and said, "I guess this will cost us each \$50 a month." That girl will never pay tuition. We will look for the people who will pay it on her behalf. We will help her great grandmother do what she can. And when we look for someone to help support this girl, we will say, "Guess what you are going to do? You will pay \$100 a month in child support."

This is your kid from now on.

This is our kid from now on.

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