

Meld k e'esto ge a'aliga

Gary Owens

The words in the title above translate, “Run, hide your children.” These words represent a time in American Indian history that occurred with my grandparents. Not too long ago, I might add. I refer to the time when government agents would come to the reservations and take our children away. We remember the stories, do we not? Children being hid in the woods, under houses, and in some instances in baskets and pottery jars. Education was the sole reason for this. The aim of the United States government was to take the “uncivilized” Indian and make him civilized. A major route through which this process of assimilation was accomplished was education in the government schools. There were other routes as well, including organized religion, treaties, confinement to specified land bases, and depletion of natural resources. All done to “kill the Indian and save the man.” Noble intentions, but at what price.

It is ironic that the American education system currently used on many reservations today that was created under the past policies of cultural assimilation by the federal government, the education system that provided indoctrination, is now becoming a major route in the restoration of the Native languages, languages so vital to the survival of Americans Indians. However, this new system can come under attack. Arizona voters passed Proposition 203 in 2000 allowing only English as the language of instruction in the public schools. What does this mean to the native language programs of the state? The new law is still being worked out in practice, but the Arizona attorney general stated that there will be no disruption of Native American language programs based upon the passage of this law.

The question that I brought to the 2001 Stabilizing Indigenous Languages conference is: “Can language learning breath outside the curriculum box?” Is it possible to take the indoctrination process (a process that can be argued as to whether it is valid to the Native way of instruction) and make it suitable for teaching the languages in the school? How about this question? By developing language curriculum and placing it amongst the subjects, such as math, reading, and social studies, does it become yet another subject that our children are not learning? I want you to think about that.

Here is the catch. There needs to be freedom to use the language *inside* the schools. ***Take it outside of that curriculum and set it free to run and scamper all over the place. Take it away from the lesson plans, the worksheets, and please...do not have the gall to test our children on what they know in regards to learning the language. Instead create a place where they can show you what they have learned.*** Create a language learning environment.

Wherever it is possible, in this institute of instruction where our children spend on an average 35 hours a week, create a place for the language to flourish. These are your children, and in some cases, these are your schools. Act like it. Use the language, and I don't mean that it has to go total immersion, use the language as a counterpart to English: how about dual-language instruction? Use

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it to take attendance, at lunchtime, in physical education. Use it for activities inside and outside the classroom. Where there is use of English, then use the Native language as well. We need to broaden our view of language learning. If there is a successful language program in the school, even with all of the indoctrination process going on, then it needs also to go home with the children as well. Expand your language learning to the community. Take that language learning environment and blanket the community. Go public with it. This will take effort. I will not kid you and paint a picture of people barely breaking a sweat and smiling all the time. Oh no!

This will take dedicated labor from committed people. Halfhearted attempts at this task? Don't bother, we don't have the time. To quote Lucille Watahomogie from the Hualapai Nation: "We are in trouble." We have had many different kinds of governmental programs piled upon us in the past two centuries and into the present. They have been used by strangers to our land, to define us an oppressed people. Add to this the fact that our involvement in the last century with government programs, universities, linguists, and anthropologists has been mostly based upon a different societal view of what we should be and who we are. And underneath it has been the lingering audacity that without them, without their help, we will fail

How dare they! **And**, to top it off, our own people have bought into this as well. We are not victims. We can and will no longer accept that role. We have done that for far too long. Thank goodness for our grandparents, great grandparents, and elders who refused and continue to refuse to accept the role of impoverished, illiterate people. The moment has come to focus our language revitalization and maintenance efforts in a much wider sense. Use the language in the communities; plan to use the language in the communities. Take it out for a walk when you go to the clinic or the store. Push your tribal councils for language use in tribal departments.

If you must have lessons in the schools, then send them home with the children so they can own it there. Use your imagination, draw from community resources. Again, we need to expand our language learning to all of the people in the communities, especially the children. And be aware that the catchy phrases and sound-bites that permeate the classroom may have come from a different societal view of life. Our language program was asked to translate a phrase "stepping stones to the future" for one of our kindergarten classes that was to be painted on their float in our community parade. The result sounded like we were going to use the children as rocks to step on and get to the future. How can you equate our little ones like that? We translated for them instead: "*Pi a:jik da a'aliga pi sha'i himdag*: Without the children, we have no future."

Remember that the education system is not the know-all, be-all, and end-all of language learning, revitalization, and maintenance. It's a tool. It **can** play an important part. However, if we just rely on schools, then after school, when the building is locked up, so is the language.

To quote Darryl Kipp, "***Just do it.***" And to quote my mother, Mrs. Christine Owens Sr., "***Never apologize or feel sorry for who you are.***"