

# **The Role of Language in the Preservation of a Culture**

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## **Introduction**

A major concern exists in tribal communities for the preservation of the native language and culture. For many generations, tribal people have relied on the traditional educational system to support their future. Through this educational process, the family role of transmitting tribal knowledge has been severely weakened as formal educational institutions do not transmit tribal knowledge, language, or cultural elements as part of their learning process. Since the public schools are not supporting the cultural and language needs of the tribe, the responsibility rests on community programs to provide alternative opportunities of tribal holistic learning for tribal ways.

This problem is especially acute on the Blackfeet Reservation. The Blackfeet Reservation is the largest in population of Montana's seven reservations and has been one of the most traditional in the practice of cultural beliefs and events. However, as with most tribal communities in the United States, the Blackfeet community has found that its language is in danger of being lost. The loss of the complete unique culture always accompanies the loss of the language.

On the Blackfeet Indian Reservation today, Western education is highly valued but seldom attained. At the same time the family role of transmitting tribal knowledge has been severely weakened. The formal educational institutions do not transmit Blackfeet knowledge of language, history, and cultural elements as part of their learning process. The Blackfeet people value their tribal language and traditional ways. Public schools are not supporting the cultural and language needs of the tribe. This responsibility rests on community programs to design, develop, and provide alternative opportunities of tribal holistic learning for tribal ways. The Blackfeet Community College is one of few institutions of learning where there has been a serious attempt to incorporate community and tribal ideals. The tribal college is still struggling with this attempt.

There is no documented evidence that the elders of the tribe have been included in giving input, ideas, and recommendations toward the transfer of tribal knowledge. On occasion, a group of elders has been interviewed to share their educational experience and viewpoints as they reflect back on their lives. Tribal knowledge consists of Blackfeet philosophy, religious concepts, traditions, customs, and language. Language and culture are inseparable; therefore, language needs to be the medium for learning and acquiring tribal knowledge. The problem of teaching the Blackfeet language in formal school settings is almost non-existent or acceptable.

The viewpoint of the elders is the link to tribal knowing. Educational institutions have neglected to teach Blackfeet cultural elements, and the views of the elders have not been incorporated into

these systems. Thus, this traditional knowing is excluded from the current educational system and is in danger of being lost to the tribe.

### **Purpose and Design**

The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of selected Blackfeet elders (a) concerning what constitutes the traditional Blackfeet knowledge base and (b) concerning how they believe this knowledge base should be passed on through the various formal and informal institutions that exist in the Blackfeet community. The design utilized the model of Rowland (1994) who chronicled support for the notion that education can transmit tribal culture for future generations by incorporating Cheyenne philosophy and beliefs into the present Cheyenne reservation educational system. Consequently, this research offers a way for minority groups to do participatory research to better understand the philosophical foundations which make their group unique.

Following the model of the Rowland study with the Northern Cheyenne, 20 elders were interviewed in this qualitative descriptive study. The interviews were conducted in Blackfeet in order to preserve the rich context of the language. By means of in-depth, personal interviews, the following research questions were addressed: (1) What are the Blackfeet concepts of wisdom and knowledge? (2) What are the characteristics of Blackfeet teachers and students? (3) How does a person learn the Blackfeet culture? (4) How does a person learn in the Blackfeet culture? (5) How are the Blackfeet ways passed on in the culture? (6) How important is the language in transmitting Blackfeet knowledge? and (7) What roles should various community institutions be playing in passing on the Blackfeet Way-of-Knowing?

### **Findings**

The elders of the community wanted to share their thoughts and knowledge with hopes of getting a message across to the community. The interviews were done in the Blackfeet language and translated back to English to give the elders every opportunity to feel comfortable in responding to a semi-structured interview process. A team approach to conducting the interview was used. The team included the researcher, a recorder to run the video camera, and a translator who was a speaker of the language. The researcher presented questions in English, and the translator repeated the questions in Blackfoot.

The data from the interviews grouped into the categories of Blackfeet life, family relationships, names, ceremonies, language, education, and transferring of knowledge. The perceptions of the elders as described through the Blackfoot language revealed overwhelming, comprehensive, and rich reflections on families, schooling, and community. The elders reflected on their experiences, mostly when they were young and with their parents. The elders shared the socializing of long visits, singing, and dancing. The Blackfoot language was the bond because everyone spoke only the language. Elders today probably faced and experienced the most change of any generation of people. The fast pace of living has caught up to the Blackfeet as a group of people in areas where language loss is very evident. The elders are worried about it. The spirituality in the families used to be strong. To be able to reflect back in time provides comfort to many elders because

they have carried forward their knowledge and want the next generations to take over. Storytelling among the people was a favorite form of visiting with each other.

The elders valued the extended family concept of living. Their discussions reflect that the relatives took care of them as children. Constant praying for the well being of family members was done daily. Again, the Blackfoot language was held in high regard by the elders. They were proud of the family members that know and speak the Blackfoot language.

Blackfeet names given to family members were carefully chosen. These names had significant meaning and power to an individual throughout his lifetime. Many of the elders shared how their names were obtained. Their families have also all been named. People's names guide them through their journey in life. It is very important that every individual have in their possession a Blackfeet name.

The elders hold knowledge sacred. This knowledge can only be obtained through the Blackfoot language. Ceremonial rites and rituals have been handed down by Creator Sun since the beginning of time and must continue to remain so. The elders only shared what they felt was appropriate and stressed the writing of information is not considered revealing of or disturbing to the sacredness. The time is coming when many ceremonial rites need to be transferred to new and younger people. Therefore, the urgency for reviving the teachings through the Blackfoot language is of utmost concern. Ceremonies must continue on to provide protection to the people.

The elders have high regards for the Blackfoot language. The elders feel the language must be taught to the children. The children are going to bring back what was lost in language retention. Even though punishment was used to get rid of the language in the elders and generations before them, it made everyone place a higher value on the language. The elders are willing and anxious to take on apprentices of the language. Failure to retain the language has weakened and is threatening the Blackfeet knowledge base.

The elders reflected on their educational experience in the formal school setting. Those times were not totally enjoyable for many of the elders while others knew that education was a means of survival. All formal education systems had one goal in mind when teaching Blackfeet children; that goal was to produce English speakers at any expense. The devaluing of the Blackfeet way of life by education affected many generations of people. The educational systems also dismantled the strong family structures of the Blackfeet people. The elders feel the people must have their ceremonies to provide support, their language to transmit culture, and the singing and dancing to promote to restore the Blackfeet lifestyles.

The relationship between children and families is very strong. The elders have come to a realization that the language needs to be restored again. It is through the children where hope lies. Some elders have advocated teaching children at infancy levels and breast feeding will provide the nurturing and support all children need. The path must be paved for transferring tribal knowledge, which means more language speakers are needed. One elder advocated for a reflection and action process of seeking tribal knowledge by using tribal people to conduct field-base research.

## Conclusions

Formal education has failed to include Blackfeet learning and teachings in its methodology. The elders talked about their concerns on education and their experiences when they attended school. The formal education provided hardships on children to learn. Their Blackfoot language was never accepted within the walls of the school and was not accepted on the premises or grounds. Nevertheless, the elders still tried hard in school to complete each year in good standing. If the Blackfoot language was spoken, harsh punishment was imposed on the children. The mental connection of speaking the language and punishment was soon realized.

The formal education process to which all Indian children and parents were subjected became a major influence on the lives of Blackfeet families. There was no way around it. This move toward formal schooling was a completely new and different approach to learning than how Blackfeet children were used to being taught at home.

Historically, the federal government has had a major influence on the Blackfeet people. Directly, this was by policies implemented. Indirectly, it was by vesting the same power to entities such as the churches and schools to carry out federal policies. Again, the two major goals of this policy were "educating" and "Christianizing." The Blackfeet people's historical experience has been the same as many other tribes in relation to education. The term generally accepted for this is "assimilation."

Support for the inclusion of Blackfeet knowledge in formal education is found in the works of Paulo Freire (1970) who says that learning should lead to "being able to name the world" around us. There are many factors that effect how one learns. These factors are influenced by the family, surroundings, and environment (world view). The Blackfeet had an extensive worldview starting with the creation of the world. Along with all the traditions, rituals, and ceremonies the native language was brought forth as the medium for which everything was transmitted. It is through the language of the Blackfeet that true realities are present. When people become disenfranchised, they lose the right to define their world. When having to use another set of definitions that are not their own, they are unable to articulate their truths about themselves. If definition of self comes from the outside one's culture, a true identity coming from the culture is lost. This is the key if the Blackfeet people want to utilize formal and informal learning methods.

Indian education has not served as a tool for restoring Blackfeet Knowledge. Many of the elders experienced most of the major federal policies affecting Indian people. Consequently, the elders are currently worried that many of these federal policies and especially those affecting education do not support the tribes in their efforts to restore tribal knowledge, transfer tribal knowledge to younger generations, or learn tribal knowledge by teaching the language in school settings. Their faith in the formal school setup is diminishing, and many of the elders are recommending community-based programs to teach Blackfeet knowledge. Some elders advocated for Blackfeet members to begin writing books on Blackfeet people so that these could be used in the schools. There are no books, curriculums, or resources directly related to the Blackfeet in the schools currently available.

Blackfeet knowledge must come from and through the language as an accepted methodology. The elders clearly stated that language is the vehicle for transmitting the culture. As the elders reflect back in time, they are regretful that their parents did not see to it that the language was taught in all the grades of school. Many of the elders admit that not all their children were taught the language at home. This dilemma has caused a major concern as to who is going to teach the language.

The health of the language has to do with the number of speakers in a concentrated population and, most importantly, with how many children speakers there are. This is the most important indicator in assessing the future of a language. Then the question arises concerning if the language will survive and what kind of shape it is in because steps may need to be taken to assure its survival. Healthy languages are not only used by a majority of the population but are used for most or all situations requiring communication. Therefore, languages must be self-sufficient or capable of expressing anything that the people want to communicate.

Education can transmit Blackfeet knowledge only if the language is valued and respected. The elders certainly stressed the urgency for the language to be used more often. The elders who already value the language, want others to do the same. The elders have faced and dealt with many of the federal policies that have had a major impact on Indian people's lives. Therefore, they are aware of the tools and policies that can assist in transmitting knowledge. Elders feel educators can do almost anything. They expressed the need for books, curriculum, and language texts to be written by Blackfeet people and used by Blackfeet people. If any money is gained from this, it would benefit a Blackfeet person or author.

American Indian languages are remarkably well attuned to Indian ways of life and Indian value systems. English cannot be used to describe these concepts and thoughts. English is incapable of expressing these values because the connotations would not be the same. Indian languages handle descriptions and concepts easily, cleanly, and efficiently.

The family role of transmitting tribal knowledge has been severely weakened. The elders reflected on the damaging effect of education on the Blackfeet language. Harsh punishment was carried out when children in the schools spoke the language. The children came home from attending school speaking only English. English also became the children's primary language in the home as well. Many elders said that they taught some of their children the language but not all of them. Some of their children can only understand the language. Elders also realized as much as they spoke the language in the home, the family ties have already weakened where the language was not valued or important any more.

As parents, some elders also questioned what use the language would be to their educated children. However, in the next breath, they stated how important it is for the children to learn the language, especially the grandchildren of these elders. Many elders spoke only to their spouse in the language and spoke English to their children. The switching into English has weakened the family role in transmitting knowledge.

The most important area of the language is the kinship. Families spoke the language for many generations. Loved ones spoke to children in the language and taught them the language. As they

learned the language, they learned all the morals and teachings that go with it. Family groups and the community all spoke the language; therefore, it had high value and status. "All the endearments, all the nurturing, that is kinship is tied into a living organism of a community by people who know each other, and they know they belong together" (Fishman, 1996, p. 83).

The immersion school concept is an excellent approach for learning a language. The elders highly supported the immersion method of teaching the Blackfoot language which is being implemented on the Blackfeet Reservation. The elders have witnessed the capabilities of the children in mastering the language. Several of the children attending the immersion school are grandchildren of the elders. At least four of the elders reflected on their ability to communicate with these grandchildren in the Blackfoot language. A sense of pride and hope gleamed from the elders who shared this experience.

The immersion school concept of teaching Blackfeet language to preschool age children is highly acceptable to parents and elders in the community. This concept has been successfully used by many indigenous groups such as the native Hawaiians. On the Blackfeet Reservation, one school, Moccasin Flat Immersion School, has been in operation for four years. A second school, Cuts Wood Immersion School, opened in 1997. The schools operate under the auspices of Piegan Institute, a non-profit Indian-owned organization. The goal of the immersion schools is to produce 1,000 children speakers in the next 10 years. New state-of-the-art school buildings are built to serve as a model for other tribes to do the same. New comfortable buildings are conducive to positive learning. The one-room rural schools in the 1930's provided the most positive experience for the Blackfeet children. This concept was re-introduced in the immersion schools. However, this time the Blackfeet language was the medium for instruction rather than English.

While the role of the elder in relationship to Blackfeet knowledge has been embraced by community-based agencies, it has not been accepted or adequately utilized by formal educational institutions. The findings of the study reflect elder involvement and participation in the educational process has virtually been non-existent. The elders identified other elders who acquired knowledge in the Blackfeet Knowing. There was a strong sense of the elders wanting to be called upon by the people because of the urgency of time. It is time for key people on each reservation such as the elders to be looked upon as a means to begin a process of reviving tribal knowledge.

All the elders want their children to become educated and recognize that education is a crucial part of our lives today. At times education was compared to survival by the elders. Education entails being able to speak the language. The true knowledge of the Blackfeet people rests in the language. Elders want their children to speak the language.

## References

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