

Cultivating an Awareness of Indigenous Peoples

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Children move their bodies to a song in Blackfeet "Head, shoulders, knees, and toes" - that's what the children of Blackfeet School in Montana, USA, were doing on the 5th of this month. When I visited Browning Elementary School in the Browning Public School District in Browning, Montana.

Approximately 2,200 students from kindergarten through high school are enrolled in schools on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, including this school. Approximately 95% of them are Blackfeet. The school district focuses on programs that teach the language, culture, and history of the Blackfeet. This is done in an effort to help indigenous people reclaim their identity and community.

According to Robert Hall, 35, who oversees the program, the Blackfeet language originally had no system for reading and writing. As a result, visuals are emphasized in language classes. In the lower elementary grades, students often perform an exercise in which the teacher says the name of an animal in Blackfeet and the children point to the animal on a screen.

The immersion program began in 2016. The children and students usually speak English, and few adults speak Blackfeet fluently. Hall said, "My expectation of the children is that they love themselves and love their community. I believe that by learning the language and the culture, they will learn both."

The students know what that means. Giovanni McCullough, 16, a student at Browning High School, said, "I am part of the Blackfeet and it is important for me to develop an identity so that I can continue to be part of the Blackfeet."

Terrance Lafrombois, 32, who lives in Browning, feels that his oldest son, 10, has grown spiritually. His son has learned the Blackfeet language and culture in school since kindergarten. "He has learned to care more about others than himself," Terrance says.

Lea Whitford, who travels to each school to guide the teachers on how to conduct their lessons said, "No one is left behind, and they help each other like a family. That is the cultural norm of the Blackfeet." She also says, "In the future, we would like to create a cultural facility where the community can gather and talk in the Blackfeet language."

One of the reasons that indigenous people have lost their language and culture is the assimilation education that the U.S. government mandated in the past.

According to indigenous people's groups, in the name of "civilization," at least 367 boarding schools were established in the U.S. from 1870 to 1960. Hundreds of thousands of indigenous children that were separated from their parents entered these schools, where they were forbidden to speak their own language or practice their culture. Abuse was rampant, and the

whereabouts of many of the children thought to have died at boarding schools are still unknown. The trauma of assimilation education affects generations to come. In indigenous communities, there have been reports of a cycle of violence and abuse.

In the Browning Public School District, education about Blackfeet culture and history will be mandatory, but language will be left to student and parent choice. Robert Hall says, "We have been forced to speak English in the past, but we don't enforce the Blackfeet language here. We want to respect personal trauma, family history, and ideas."

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