EXCELLENCE IN TRIBAL GOVERNANCE

AN HONORING NATIONS CASE STUDY

The Ojibwe Language Program:

Teaching Mille Lacs Band Youth the Ojibwe Language to Foster a Stronger Sense of Cultural Identity and Sovereignty

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THE CRISIS

As part of its effort to assimilate American Indians into mainstream society, the federal government launched an assault on Native languages. For example, in the 1890s the government built twenty-five off-reservation boarding schools to which many Indian children were forcibly removed and where they were prevented from speaking their Native languages.[2] The result of this decades-long policy was a devastating loss of Native languages.

Many tribes struggled to preserve their languages even as the number of fluent speakers dwindled. Among these tribes was the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. By the 1990s, Native language use among the Mille Lacs Band had clearly declined while estimates indicated that, by 1994, only ten percent of Mille Lacs Band members could speak the Ojibwe language fluently. The youngest Native speaker was thirty-seven years old.[3]

Mille Lacs leaders, educators, and citizens feared that the loss of the Ojibwe language would bring about the demise of tribal traditions and Ojibwe identity among their band members. To avert this crisis, the faculty of the Nay Ah Shing School, a school owned and operated by the Mille Lacs Band, formed an Elders Advisory Board comprised of five traditionalists for the

purpose of establishing an intensive Ojibwe language and culture program. Their hope was that this program would foster the Mille Lacs Band members' fluency and pride in using the Ojibwe language. They believed that restoring the Band's language would foster a long-term process of cultural renaissance and lay the foundation for stronger self-governance.

A History of the Ojibwe Language on the Mille Lacs Reservation

The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe has fought off the loss of its language ever since European contact transformed its economy. Although its traditional economy depended on the trading of surplus goods produced on tribally managed lands, the Mille Lacs Band of the Ojibwe realized that it couldn't survive without participating in the broader economy. As traditional economic pursuits gave way to non-traditional occupations that often required Band members to leave the reservation, the Mille Lacs began to learn English.[4] During World War II, Band members and their families found jobs in war-related industries in cities like Minneapolis and Duluth. They returned to the Mille Lacs reservation only seasonally to participate in fishing and harvesting of wild rice, or ricing, that had once been primary economic pursuits. With this transformation of their economy, many Mille Lacs Band members found that their use of the Ojibwe language became largely ceremonial.

Economic transformation was not the only cause of Ojibwe language loss among the Mille Lacs Band. The federal government's policy of forced assimilation severely disrupted the Band's reliance on the Ojibwe language. For long periods of time, the government actually forbade the teaching of the Ojibwe language while, in the late 1800s, it accelerated social disintegration and language loss by sending Mille Lacs children to federal boarding schools where they were forbidden to speak Ojibwe. Ojibwe elder and language instructor Elleraine Weous has recalled the destructive influence of the boarding school on her husband's fluency: "My husband's first language

was…Ojibwe, but he doesn't speak it anymore. He went to a boarding school, and you know how you hear about boarding schools beating the Ojibwe out of Indians? It is true. He doesn't understand our language anymore." Ojibwe children were required to attend boarding schools well into the twentieth century.[5]

Only a few hundred Ojibwe remained on the Mille Lacs reservation at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of such assimilationist policies, termination, and relocation – federal policies in effect from 1953 to 1968. Through its relocation program, the federal government encouraged and assisted Mille Lacs Band members to move to cities so that they would become integrated into mainstream society. In its attempt to terminate the Band's special relationship with the federal government, Congress stopped giving Mille Lacs businesses assistance and took away the Band's voice in federal and state government. Through the implementation of these policies, the Ojibwe language was increasingly marginalized as English became essential not only to economic success, but also to survival.[6]

Several Reasons for Ojibwe Language Preservation

In the 1990s, however, many Mille Lacs educators and administrators acted on their sense that the preservation of the Ojibwe language was essential to the Band's survival. They feared that if the Band failed to maintain the Ojibwe language, it would lose those elements of its culture—history, ceremonies, and traditions—that defined what it means to be Ojibwe. As a Band elder argued, "Language is more than a way of communicating; it is a way of passing on the wisdom, culture, and values of our ancestors. Without our language we are not Ojibwe people. We are only descendants of Ojibwe people." Band members were not alone in making this argument. Linguists and Native language scholars have suggested that language reinforces group identity and allows networks to develop, thus aiding in the process of community building.[7]

Native language experts also claim that the loss of Native languages can lead to low levels of self-confidence, identity crises, and poor interpersonal relationships as Native individuals attempt to live in two distinct cultures with only one language—a remarkably complex and stressful undertaking. Faculty at the Band's Nay Ah Shing School noted that the decline in Ojibwe language use actually correlated with a loss of Ojibwe traditions, the unraveling of the extended family, depression among Band members, high drop out rates among Ojibwe students, and an increasing amount of gang activity among youth.[8]

Former Mille Lacs Commissioner of Education William Hemming has argued that teaching Mille Lacs children Ojibwe would address a host of issues by allowing the Band to maintain its distinct Ojibwe identity and helping to create well-grounded Mille Lacs citizens with a common value system: "By teaching the language we are building a foundation for a lifetime of productive citizenship…Ojibwe values are inextricably linked to the language. These values, such as caring for the environment, healing the body and mind together, and treating all creation with respect, are taught most effectively when they are taught in Ojibwe." His argument is in accord with the work of Native language scholars who have suggested that language can actually function as a social resource by acting as a means of norm enforcement.[9]

Nay Ah Shing faculty believed that an Ojibwe Language Program would not only unite Ojibwe youth in a cultural system with common values, but also equip them for success in mainstream American society. Educational research confirms that bilingualism can act as an academic asset, not a handicap. The Navajo Nation's Rock Point Community School has demonstrated that, given proper instruction, students may learn English and other academic subjects—math, science, and so forth—while learning to read and write in their Native language. Nay Ah Shing faculty hoped that a language program would allow Mille Lacs youth to integrate the gifts of Ojibwe culture

into mainstream American culture and to surmount the socio-economic barriers that confronted them.[10]

The Creation of the Ojibwe Language Program

Taking Control of Ojibwe Education

Mille Lacs Band members made Ojibwe language instruction part of their children's formal education when they founded a reservation school in 1978. The Nay Ah Shing High School, a contract school, was formed to serve Ojibwe families who preferred a Band-controlled, on-reservation education for their students. It was designed in response to students' demands for an education that addressed their distinctive cultural identity. Prior to 1978, Mille Lacs Band students attended off-reservation, public schools, where they faced institutional racism and isolation. The majority of their non-Native classmates did not accept them while their teachers did little to encourage their participation in school activities. Ojibwe students received little, if any, Ojibwe language instruction. Not surprisingly, disproportionately high numbers of Ojibwe students dropped out or were expelled from these schools. In 1975, a group of Mille Lacs high school students who knew that these schools were not addressing their needs and had no reason to hope for change participated in a walk out to demonstrate their dissatisfaction. This walk out spurred Mille Lacs Band leaders to establish the Nay Ah Shing High School. Required by tribal law to graduate fluent Ojibwe speakers, the School was designed to provide Ojibwe students with the basic tools necessary to overcome the social and economic obstacles that confronted them without marginalizing them for holding onto their Native language and culture. [11]

Initially, Nay Ah Shing served as an alternative school for about fifty Ojibwe youth who had dropped out of or been expelled from off-reservation high schools. Nay Ah Shing focused on teaching these students English, basic mathematics, problem solving, and communication skills while offering tutoring and

counseling. The School's immediate goal was to give students solid instruction and the support services needed to keep them in school until they had earned a legitimate diploma.

Revisiting the Role of Language Instruction

In the 1990s, Nay Ah Shing faculty began to look beyond the School's initial focus on student retention and basic skills remediation to its obligation to graduate students who were fluent in the Ojibwe language. Faculty recognized that while in the late 1970s and early 1980s the Ojibwe language was still used in students' homes and at many community events, this was no longer true. M. Zhaawan Benjamin, the School's Ojibwe instructor who taught a few hours each week, could not ensure that the students would learn to speak the language fluently. Benjamin, Nay Ah Shing superintendent George Weber, and others began to wonder if the School should continue to focus strictly on providing basic skills remediation and support services or if it should expend more energy on preserving the Ojibwe language and culture that had, at the time of the School's founding, been an important part of students' home life.

Even as they considered this possibility, Nay Ah Shing faculty and staff feared that developing an Ojibwe language program capable of graduating fluent Ojibwe speakers remained beyond the School's capacity. In 1993, the Mille Lacs Band government funded the construction of two new school buildings that included space for preschool, K-12, and childcare programs. With this expansion, existing Ojibwe instruction was extended to over one hundred preschool, elementary, and junior high students. The School assigned one language instructor to the preschool, another to grades K-5, and a third to grades 6-12. Although the Ojibwe Language Program actually began at this time, it did not exist on the scale that Nay Ah Shing faculty desired. They had already begun to design improved methods of language instruction that would require more instructors at each grade level, but Nay Ah Shing simply couldn't dedicate sufficient resources to implement these methods across its ex-

panded student population as it struggled to pay its regular staff, provide necessary teaching resources, and offer the social services demanded to meet students' non-academic needs. Nay Ah Shing continued to graduate students who were unable to speak Ojibwe fluently.

Gaining Financial Support for an Extended Ojibwe Language Program

While the Nay Ah Shing School lacked the necessary funds to improve its Ojibwe Language Program, the Mille Lacs Band's government was receiving large streams of revenue from its successful gaming operations. School staff looked to the tribal government for increased support for language program expansion. During a Nay Ah Shing High School graduation ceremony, Superintendent Weber spoke with the chief executive of the Band, Marge Anderson, and identified the resources that were critical to creating a language program capable of graduating fluent Ojibwe speakers. That evening Weber noted that although Band leaders talked about a language program as though it was important, the Band hadn't committed the finances to make it succeed as Mille Lacs Band law required. As Weber said to Anderson that evening, "Either we change the law, or we improve the current program."[12]

Anderson wanted to improve the Language Program. She believed in the law; she believed that the Ojibwe language needed to be revived and preserved so that the Mille Lacs Band members could pass on their traditions and maintain their Ojibwe identity. Her position met with a positive response in the tribal government. As she has explained, "This was not hard to sell to the tribal government. Government leaders saw value in such an investment and worked hard to get the Ojibwe language and culture curriculum developed into the schools." In 1997, the tribal government began granting half a million dollars each year into the Nay Ah Shing School for the implementation of an expanded and redesigned Ojibwe Language Program. This support was critical; without it the Ojibwe Language Pro-

gram would have been unable to pay its staff and elders.[13]

Establishing the Elders Advisory Board (EAB)

Having gained the financial support of the tribal government to design and implement an expanded Ojibwe Language Program, Nay Ah Shing faculty turned to other pressing problems. Early on, School faculty recognized that they required a board of experts to address culturally sensitive issues surrounding language instruction. Weber and Benjamin selected well-respected elders from each of the three reservation districts to sit on an Elders Advisory Board (EAB). From its inception, the EAB exercised several critical responsibilities. The EAB advised the Nay Ah Shing School Board on hiring decisions and on disciplining students in a culturally appropriate manner. The EAB also certified prospective Ojibwe language teachers. Most importantly, the EAB met the first Monday of every month and offered Ojibwe language teachers a forum in which they could address the cultural issues surrounding language instruction, thus minimizing internal conflict and ensuring that teachers' time was spent on improving instruction. As Benjamin said of the EAB's monthly meetings, "That is where the elders set them straight."[14]

The EAB not only provided cultural insights to Ojibwe language teachers, but also offered critical advice on instruction methods. Ojibwe was traditionally an oral language. For that reason, the EAB firmly believed that writing Ojibwe was not as important as speaking it. The Board encouraged the School to focus completely on the spoken language. They wanted youth to have the ability to participate in ceremonies rather than write the language. EAB members wanted students to hear dialogue. Following the Board's advice, the Language Program staff began to bring in elders and other fluent speakers who conversed with students and teachers at various times throughout the school week. These fluent speakers offered students necessary opportunities to hear Ojibwe.[15]

When disputes over language instruction arose which the EAB could not settle, the Ojibwe Language Program staff looked beyond the Band for assistance. When the EAB could not settle a dialect dispute that arose among Ojibwe language teachers, the Nay Ah Shing School hired a professional language instructor. Although this instructor, Sylvia Norberg, could not speak Ojibwe, she was an expert in successful language instruction and had taught several languages. With Norberg's help, the Program staff reached the decision to teach the local Mille Lacs dialect and could again concentrate on providing students with a solid foundation in Ojibwe.[16]

Determining How to Teach Ojibwe

Although Nay Ah Shing language instructors had long relied on word lists and worksheets, experimentation revealed that conversation was the most effect language teaching tool. Making students memorize vocabulary and learn grammar without hearing how to link words together didn't enable them to speak the language. Ojibwe Language Program staff learned that when they spent class time speaking with students or encouraging students to speak to each other in Ojibwe, the students learned how to put sentences together. As Commissioner of Education Duane Dunckley explained, "If you want to make kids fluent, you have to teach them the conversational part of the language. If I ask you a question enough times, you are going to be able to respond the right way. The kids, they know some Indian words, but tying them together is what we need to teach them to do."[17] As conversation became the focus of the Language Program, Nay Ah Shing instructors used worksheets and word lists only to enhance and guide the conversation.

Once Program leaders understood that the students learned Ojibwe best by participating in conversation, they required language teachers to speak only Ojibwe during language classes. While most teachers understood the importance of immersing their students in the Ojibwe language, doing so wasn't easy. Students became disengaged when they were unable to com-

municate effectively. Feeling isolated themselves, instructors also frequently fell back into English. Recognizing that speaking English in the classroom would undermine the School's efforts to immerse its students in Ojibwe, Language Program leaders began to hire additional instructors so that every teacher would have a fluent conversation partner. This was to allow teachers to better follow the Ojibwe-only rule during class time while ensuring that every teacher had a problem-solving partner when students began to disengage. Finally, such partnerships offered students opportunities to hear Ojibwe conversation even when they weren't actively participating in it.

Having designed and begun the implementation of conversation-centered language instruction among their high school students, Nay Ah Shing faculty and staff turned increasing attention to preschool and K-4 students. In 1999, Nay Ah Shing principal Jody Crowe began studying research that suggested that children under the age of twelve learned second languages more readily than did older children. Knowing that the School had invested most of its resources at the high school level, Crowe presented this research to the Language Program staff and asked, "Where should we spend our money?" Language Program staff quickly decided to enhance their language instruction and preservation efforts among Nay Ah Shing preschool and elementary students. They began to search for fluent speakers for every preschool and K-4 classroom who would interact with the children in Ojibwe throughout the day in order to supplement instruction given during Ojibwe language classes. By July 2001, Nay Ah Shing had hired one fluent Ojibwe speaker for every two preschool and K-4 classrooms.[18]

As of August 2001, the tribally funded Ojibwe Language Program served approximately 375 students, from toddlers to teenagers, with the help of nine fluent Ojibwe speakers. All students in the Nay Ah Shing School, including its childcare facilities and Head Start classrooms, participated in the Program. In accordance with language acquisition research, the Lan-

guage Program intensively targeted its youngest students. A fluent Ojibwe speaker worked with the infants and toddlers for half of every day and with three to five year olds for four to eight hours a day. In addition, three to five year olds received Ojibwe language instruction for a minimum of one hour each day. While the teacher, the fluent Ojibwe speaker, and the children all used Ojibwe during that hour of instruction, the fluent Ojibwe speaker and the children with whom that individual interacted spoke Ojibwe throughout the day. Nay Ah Shing School's K-12 students attended thirty-five to forty-five minute daily Ojibwe language classes that were taught by at least two fluent Ojibwe speakers. These students, too, consistently heard and participated in conversations conducted only in Ojibwe.

Moving Beyond Nay Ah Shing School

The Ojibwe Language Program extended beyond Nay Ah Shing School as Benjamin offered interactive television language classes to Band members attending non-tribal public high schools. Offered at the request of the public high schools, these classes offered Ojibwe students the opportunity to learn Ojibwe while interacting with Nay Ah Shing students and teachers. Benjamin found that her interactive television students became the best older learners because they had to be well prepared in order to participate in conversation with one another. Open to Ojibwe and non-Ojibwe students, these classes not only allowed Band members attending non-tribal schools to learn the Ojibwe language, but they also provided a space for Ojibwe and non-Ojibwe students to interact and breakdown stereotypes.[19]

Making Ojibwe a Living Language

The Ojibwe Language Program placed a strong emphasis on the relevance of Ojibwe to students' daily lives. Language Program instructors knew that their success would be measured by the extent to which students used the language beyond the classroom. To this end, instructors relied heavily on

conversation, individual interactions, hands-on activities, singing, and traditional and nontraditional games. The fact that each class was taught by two fluent Ojibwe speakers who interacted only in Ojibwe demonstrated that Ojibwe was a living language. Students' interactions with these fluent elder speakers turned student-teacher language instruction into conversations that could satisfy students' curiosity about Ojibwe cultural traditions and values. Students learned even more about Ojibwe cultural practices through their participation in hands-on activities such as ricing, sugar-bushing (making maple syrup), quilting, and powwowing.

The Ojibwe Language Program staff not only wanted to demonstrate that the Ojibwe language was a living language, but that it was a fun language to learn. The Nay Ah Shing Music Program allowed students to compose songs for themselves and the School choir, make music videos, and produce a songbook and tape. A few of the Music Program students went on to perform with artists such as Lightfoot and produce songs for the Native American Music Awards. The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe also published two comic books that taught the Ojibwe language while tackling important contemporary issues. For instance, *Dreams of Looking Up* discussed American Indian nations' sovereignty in comic book form. The Mille Lacs Band distributed the songbook, tape, and comic books to schools and libraries throughout the state free of charge. The Music Program and comic books demonstrated just how fun learning Ojibwe could be.

The Ojibwe Language Program's success in helping students learn a living language was apparent in August 2001. Every Nay Ah Shing fourth grader could give a short graduation speech in Ojibwe, while the Music Program had helped make it "cool" for older youth to speak to each other in Ojibwe. Former Mille Lacs Band Commissioner of Natural Resources, Don Wedll, noted that the Program's success had even moved beyond the classroom, "I have seen participants use Ojibwe with their in-

structors outside of school." The Ojibwe Language Program gave its students a sense of ownership over their education. It increased the pride that Mille Lacs Band members, young and old, felt in knowing their language and practicing their cultural traditions. As former Chief Executive Anderson noted in a 2001 interview, "Two years ago, I went to a concert given by the Nay Ah Shing School's choir. The little children sang in Ojibwe. They held their heads high as they sang. They did not look down as if in shame. That was the proudest day of my career."[20]

The Continuing Challenges

Maintaining and improving the Ojibwe Language Program was not easy. Although the Program experienced many successes, it still confronted serious challenges. Four challenges stood out. First, the Program struggled to ensure that Ojibwe language instruction would result in the preservation and enhancement of Mille Lacs cultural practices. Second, the Program needed to develop an effective language acquisition evaluation tool. Third, the Program had to deliver adequate teacher training and surmount the difficulty of frequent teacher turnover. Fourth, the Program had to expand beyond the classroom to involve the parents of its students in Ojibwe language acquisition in order to ensure its lasting success. A description of these challenges, as well as the Program's efforts to address them, follows.

Preserving Mille Lacs Culture through Language Instruction

While the Program clearly succeeded in expanding the Ojibwe vocabulary and conversational ability of Mille Lacs students, the faculty was concerned that language acquisition was not resulting in enhanced cultural understanding. In 2001, a handful of faculty members expressed their concern that the students were not learning the Ojibwe worldview and values. Elder speaker Jim Clark worried that the Program hadn't suc-

ceeded in "get[ting] these kids to think Ojibwe." Nay Ah Shing students, Clark said, still had "white thoughts": "They are still thinking the white way. Now we have to get them to think the Ojibwe way to make them truly fluent. If you don't push that thought into their brains, they're talking the language [Ojibwe] and they're thinking something else [American]." As Superintendent Weber explained, "One must be clear about the relationship between words and thought. Values and heritage lie in thought not words. Therefore, when developing your curriculum, you must remember to match it with the thought process you are trying to preserve." Program faculty who feared that students might only use Ojibwe to have the salt passed during dinner or to describe the color of their clothing while failing to grasp the more philosophical aspects of the language began to discuss ways in which to ensure the transfer of traditional Ojibwe knowledge as the Language Program intended.[21]

Developing an Effective Language Acquisition Evaluation Tool

In order to gauge the effectiveness of the Ojibwe Language Program, Nay Ah Shing educators designed and implemented a biannual language acquisition assessment. Designing a tool that allowed instructors to assess the students' mastery of Ojibwe was a difficult task. As Principal Crowe observed, "There aren't a lot of testing models based on an indigenous language system, which is…a conversation-focused system. So, to some extent, we have to invent a lot of things." Developing an assessment tool for an oral language was not the only challenge: Nay Ah Shing student transience prohibited developing a viable grade level standard, making a proficiency level standard important.[22] Having developed a tool, Nay Ah Shing faculty assessed student progress and identified areas of individual weakness at the beginning and end of every school year. The language assessment, conducted entirely in Ojibwe, allowed the instructor to evaluate how well the student used nouns and verbs, understood tenses, and demonstrated cultural un-

derstanding as that student viewed and explained pictures of sugar-bushing, ricing, or other activities. In addition to biannual assessments, Nay Ah Shing instructors required students to speak in public and used these events as further opportunities to assess student progress. Weber felt that the qualitative results showed that the Program was working: "There are kids coming back with retention of what went on last year, and we are able to build upon that." However, while these assessment tools provided qualitative data that allowed Nay Ah Shing staff to improve the Program and address the needs of individual students, they generated no statistical data to use in evaluating the overall success of the Ojibwe Language Program. As of 2001, no numerical measures of the Program's effectiveness existed.[23]

Training and Supporting Ojibwe Language Instructors

While finding fluent Ojibwe instructors to work in the Language Program was a daunting task, training and retaining those instructors was just as difficult. During the late 1990s the pool of fluent Ojibwe speakers dwindled significantly. Aging fluent speakers were passing away or had medical conditions that compromised their ability to work with children for long periods of time. When the School did hire fluent instructors, it felt the urgent need to move those individuals into the classroom quickly. These instructors, however, required training not only in Ojibwe-only means of instruction but also in classroom dynamics. The Language Program staff searched for ways to make the job of Ojibwe instruction less intimidating. Nay Ah Shing teaching veterans Benjamin and Norman Clark offered newly hired instructors insights on effective language instruction. The School also developed a relationship with the Cohort Master's Program administered by Saint Mary's College. Saint Mary's sent their professors to Nay Ah Shing to conduct classes and, in order to encourage staff members to take advantage of the Master's Program, the Mille Lacs Band government offered to pay half of the tuition for any instructor who wanted to enroll. Such efforts helped to build a professional teaching and

learning community. Four of the Ojibwe Language Program's instructors took courses offered by Saint Mary's.

Engaging Parents in Ojibwe Language Learning

Language Program faculty knew that parental involvement would be vital to reversing the trend of Ojibwe language loss. Former Commissioner Wedll was encouraged to hear Nay Ah Shing students speak Ojibwe outside the classroom, but understood that if the children couldn't speak to their parents in Ojibwe, they would "wonder why they are even learning it." Regrettably, many parents viewed the study of Ojibwe as a luxury. As Weber explained, "People have to think about survival first: earning enough money to feed themselves, taking care of their children, etc. Reaching a point where one can say, 'I'm going to set aside time each day to learn Ojibwe,' is almost a treat."[24] Language Program staff regularly discussed strategies for involving parents in the study of Ojibwe. Instructors sent class materials home with students in hopes of motivating parents to practice with their children and, in 2001, Benjamin initiated a Parent Committee. The Committee, consisting of ten biological parents, legal guardians, foster parents, and grandparents, met quarterly and took part in Program activities. As Committee members attended Program activities such as sugar-bushing, ricing, feasts, and parent nights, their interest in the Program grew. Nay Ah Shing faculty consistently worked to identify such strategies that encouraged parents' interest without requiring extensive resources.

Conclusion

Through centuries of dramatic economic and cultural change and decades of oppressive federal government policy, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe has fought to preserve the Ojibwe language and the cultural insights it communicated. In the 1990s, Nay Ah Shing faculty joined that fight through the creation of the Ojibwe Language Program. The Program stood as a strong statement of Mille Lacs Band sovereignty. Offering Mille Lacs

children the opportunity to learn the Ojibwe language, understand the values embedded in that language, and develop a sense of Ojibwe citizenship, it expressed Mille Lacs' leaders, educators, and citizens' determination to resist the pressures to assimilate into the American mainstream. Mille Lacs youth would have the opportunity to walk confidently in two worlds with two languages.

NOTES

[1] Janine Ja no's Bowen is a Seneca language instructor on the Seneca Nation of Indians' Allegany Indian Reservation in Salamanca, New York. In 2002, she was a special assistant to the Honoring Nations Program at the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. She holds an master in education degree from the Graduate School of Education, Harvard University and a master in public policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the editorial assistance of Christine Edwards Allred.

[2] Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, "Native America at the New Millennium" (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 70.

[3] The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe is not the only American Indian nation facing the extensive loss of its Native language. According to work conducted by M. Krauss, language loss has been especially acute in North America. Hundreds of Native languages have disappeared since 1492, some without a trace. While 1995 estimates show that 175 indigenous languages are still spoken in the US, 155 of these are classified as moribund. M. Krauss, "Endangered Languages: Current Issues and Future Prospects" (paper presented at Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H., Feb. 1995). The Mille Lacs Band is one of six members of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. The other members are the White Earth Band, Leech Lake Band, Grand Portage Band, Bois Forte Band, and Fond du Lac Band. The Mille

Lacs Reservation is in East Central Minnesota. Former Commissioner of Education William Hemming offered information pertaining to Ojibwe fluency rates among the Mille Lacs Band. William Hemming, interview by author, tape recording, Onamia, Minn., July 29,1999.

[4] For a brief history of the Mille Lacs' language and economic transitions, see "How Casinos have Changed Ojibwe Culture," [cited August 27, 2001]; available at http://www.Millelacsojibwe.org/culture7story.html.

[5] For a discussion of the government's policy of forced assimilation see W. Hagan, *Indian Police and Judges: Experiment in Acculturation and Control* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966). Policies of this period were intended to dissolve Indian communities, instill respect for individual property rights, and create functioning, English-speaking citizens. For Elleraine Weous's testimony see William Hemming, "Honoring Contributions in the Governance of American Indian Nations: Application, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe." (Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, Cambridge, 1999).

[6] "Termination," [cited August 28, 2001]; available at http://www.Millelacsojibwe.org/culture15story.html.

[7] Hemming, "Honoring Contributions."Mille Lacs educators and elders' ideas regarding the importance of Native languages are shared by many language scholars. Joshua Fishman argues that language functions as a symbol of collective identity in "Language and Ethnicity," (paper presented at a conference sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies, Seattle, 1976). V. Deloria and L. Clifford argue for the importance of Native languages in the communication of cultural heritage in *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 251. J. Hill and B. Mannheim similarly argue that language acts as a vehicle for the reproduction of cultural knowledge that works to bind a people together in "Language and

Worldview," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 381-406.

[8] Henze, R. C. and Vanett, L. "To walk in two worlds— or more? Challenging a common metaphor of Native education," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1993): 116-134. For a discussion of the role of language in generating and maintaining an individual's sense of self-assurance and success, see R. Scollon and S. Scollon, *Narrative, Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1981).

[9] Hemming, "Honoring Contributions." For a discussion of the way in which the use of the Apache language efficiently communicates expected behavioral attributes, see Keith Basso, *Western Apache Language and Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990).

[10] For a discussion of bilingual education, see P. Berman, "Meeting the Challenge of Language Diversity: An Evaluation of California Programs for Pupils with Limited Proficiency in English" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1992); T. Carter and M. Chatfield, "Effective Bilingual Schools: Implications for Policy and Practice," *American Journal of Education* 95, no. 1 (1986): 200-232; V. Collier, "How Long? A Synthesis of Research on Academic Achievement in a Second Langauge," *TESOL Quarterly* 23 (1989): 509-531; A. Holms and W. Holms, "Rock Point, a Navaho Way to go to School: A Valediction," *Annals AAPSS* 508 (1990): 170-184; J. Reyhner, "A Description of the Rock Point Community School Bilingual Education Program," in *Effective Language Education Practices and Native Language Survival*, ed. J. Reyhner. (Choctaw, OK: Native American Language Issues, 1990), 95-106; L.J. Watahomigie and T.L. McCarthy "Bilingual/Bicultural Education at Peach Springs: A Hualapai Way of Schooling," *Peabody Journal of Education* 69, no. 2 (1994), 26-42.

[11] For a discussion of contract schools, see US Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Education Programs, *Building Exemplary Schools for Tomorrow: 2001 Fingertip Facts*; available at http://www.oiep.bia.edu/. Contract schools are funded by the BIA and operated by tribes under contracts or grants. Public schools may gain access to federal funds to meet the needs of American Indian students through Johnson-O'Malley (JOM) and Title IX programs. JOM programs provide assistance to public schools to meet the unique needs of eligible American Indian students and are administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) through contracts with tribes, tribal organizations, public school districts, and State Departments of Education. Title IX provides for the culturally related academic needs of Indian students in grades K-12 enrolled in public, private, and BIA-funded schools and is administered by the US Department of Education.

[12] George Weber, interview by author, tape recording, Onamia, Minn., 11 November 2001.

[13] Marge Anderson, interview with author, tape recording, Onamia, Minn., 13 July 2001. For a discussion of tribes, including the Mille Lacs Ojibwe, who have used gaming monies to revive Native languages, see L. Hill, "Betting on Language," *Native Americas: Hemispheric Journal of Indigenous Issues*, summer 2001, 36-41.

[14] M. Zhaawan Benjamin, interview with author, tape recording, Onamia, Minn., 26 July 2001.

[15] For a discussion of the importance of oral based teaching methods in preserving Native languages, see R. E. Littlebear, preface to *Stabilizing Indigenous Languages*, [cited 30 April 2002]; available at http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/mispubs/stabilize/preface.html.

[16] Norberg also encouraged staff members to be creative in their teaching and push themselves to better understand the ways in which the human brain makes use of language. Ben-

jamin, interview.

[17] Duane Dunckley, interview with author, tape recording, Onamia, Minn., 25 July 2001.

[18] Research suggested that children under twelve years of age learn approximately twenty thousand words per year while children over twelve learn only three to four thousand words per year. Fiber systems that mediate language function and associative thinking grow more rapidly than surrounding regions of the brain before and during puberty, with growth attenuating shortly afterwards. In other words, a child's ability to learn new languages declines rapidly after twelve years. See P. M. Thompson et al., "Growth Pattern in the Developing Brain Detected by Using Continuum Mechanical Tensor Maps," *Nature*, 9 March 2000, 190-193; Jody Crowe, interview with author, tape recording, Onamia, Minn., 25 July 2001.

[19] The interactive television classes consisted of up to eight students from other schools. Participants were usually Band members attending off-reservation schools and students from other tribal schools. Benjamin, interview.

[20] Don Wedell, interview with author, tape recording, Onamia, Minn., 26 July 2001; Anderson, interview.

[21] Jim Clark, interview with author, tape recording, Onamia, Minn., 25 July 2001; Weber, interview.

[22] In 2001, Nay Ah Shing High School alone experienced a 25 percent transiency rate. Crowe, interview.

[23] Language assessment was not conducted in order to determine course grades. Instead, its primary purpose was to determine students' problem areas and monitor their progress. Weber, interview.

[24] Wedell, interview. Native language advocates who participated in a round table discussion facilitated by Joshua Fishman, Benjamin Barney, and Dan McLaughlin, echoed Mr. Wedll's

thoughts on the need for the establishment of increased times, spaces, and activities outside the classroom set aside strictly for Native language use. According to roundtable participants, such times and spaces are essential if indigenous languages are to become a part of the daily lives of citizens of Native nations. See G. Cantoni, ed., *Stabilizing Indigenous Languages* (Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University, 1996). Weber, interview.

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