

Walking with Relatives: How the Liber Institute Is Learning from and with Indigenous Communities

By Jonathan Santos Silva

Abstract

The lack of economic opportunity on the Pine Ridge Reservation has made it difficult for people to find paths to social mobility. The isolated and rural nature of reservation communities creates specific barriers while the historic inequity baked into the design of schools presents others. Rather than accept things as is, new schools and organizations led by Indigenous leaders are looking to innovate and transform their communities.

Introduction

Throughout this article, I have tried my best to spell and translate Lakota words in ways that honor the language, history, and the warriors working to pass the language on to the next generation. Where organization names are given in Lakota, I have tried to spell them as the organizations do, recognizing that different speakers have preferred orthographies. With full recognition of my deficiencies as a non-speaker, I ask for grace and understanding from the elders and fluent speakers who may read this.

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, located in the southwest corner of South Dakota, is home to the Oglala Lakota. Oglala means “scatters his own” in Lakota. It is appropriately named as most residents live in small villages spread across the vast, largely unspoiled rural landscape. Rolling grass prairies feed buffalo and provide nourishment to cattle and horses. The Badlands, windblown into artistic formations of clay and stone, sit alongside mature and majestic pine and cedar trees. The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is a living, breathing representation of picturesque beauty.

When my wife and I first moved to Kyle, South Dakota, to teach at Little Wound High School, we knew we wanted to become part of the community. We saw a culture and a people that was not defined by income. The Oglala Lakota are guided by values like generosity, humility, wisdom, and perseverance. Honoring these traditional values requires a unique lens from outsiders offering support. It also requires innovation in countless ways to overcome distance, limited resources, and more than a century of government hostility toward Indigenous identity, history, and culture. Once viewed as impediments by colonizers, those cultural attributes are a daily source of strength, encouragement, and inspiration, not only for the Oglala Lakota, but others like my wife and me, who are fortunate enough to be welcomed into their schools, communities, and families.

Spanning 3,469 square miles, Pine Ridge is home to approximately 38,000 (mostly Oglala) residents. For comparison, Rhode Island covers roughly a third of that landscape (1,214 square miles) but is home to over one million people.¹ The annual per capita income for Indigenous people on the Pine Ridge Reservation is \$7,773, while the national average is \$27,599. Unemployment was 89% when last recorded in 2005. (This was the last year before the

Department of Labor stopped collecting data on Pine Ridge.) Today, 57% of residents live in poverty.²

The main employers on Pine Ridge are the education and medical systems. Without a college degree, the most common positions available are teaching assistant, janitor, and secretary. Each of these positions is vital to the system, and yet, as in most places, they are not compensated in a way that reflects that importance.

Without at least an associate's degree, the average young person raised on Pine Ridge has limited options for steady work. Even with a degree, if a person is not interested in education or the medical field, there are only two options: commute off the reservation, or move to find work. Unfortunately, the economy on the reservation is not large or diverse enough to allow many young people to pursue careers locally.

Some of this can be attributed to rural living, the rest to a series of broken treaties, broken promises, and renege agreements that have left support systems taxed and unable to serve the community.

A Painful History: Indigenous Boarding Schools

In 1860, the United States government opened the first boarding school for Indigenous children on the Yakima Reservation in Washington.³ The history of Indigenous education is the forceful separation of Indigenous children from their families, communities, and culture. The Carlisle Indian Industrial School superintendent summarized its purpose succinctly in 1892, "Kill the Indian. Save the man."

Established in 1872, Pennsylvania's Carlisle Indian Industrial School was long regarded as the model for the education of Indigenous children.⁴ Children were forced to live at school away from their parents and grandparents, without access to their home languages and culture.

Life in boarding schools could be brutal. Children were punished for acting in ways that were natural to them. Boys' long braids were cut off. Children caught speaking native languages were subject to having their mouths washed with soap. And assorted "violations" would earn consequences like kneeling on broomsticks in "prayer."

This abuse is not ancient history. Even today, elders on Pine Ridge share their stories of being raised away from their families in boarding schools like these. Activists and scholars are still discovering unmarked graves of students who went "missing" while under official supervision of government- and church-run schools.⁵

Healing Generational Trauma

Today, Indigenous educators and their non-Native accomplices are working to heal the generational trauma and establish schools that honor tradition. Back when I was a teacher, our school held school-wide "Monday Morning Meetings" that focused on affirmation through prayer, song, and discussions around traditional Lakota values. When I walk through the schools I serve today, I am increasingly likely to see classwork displayed that includes Lakota translations of important subject-specific vocabulary, responds to the writings of Indigenous authors, or examines historical events from an Indigenous perspective.

For at least the last twenty years or so, communities have demanded that their languages be represented and taught within schools. As a result, native languages are being offered now as

electives. However, with limited staff, students are not always guaranteed access to their language within the school day. Therefore, the overarching goal is to develop programs that allow children the opportunity to hear their native language throughout the day, every day, and to become fluent speakers themselves.

While localizing the schools has added this essential value, it has resulted in fewer services and supports that are of critical importance but easier and less costly to provide in larger populations. My first year teaching, two of my students were deaf. The closest school for the deaf was hours away. With the history of family separations, it is understandable why many parents hesitate to send their children out of the community for schooling.” I began looking for ways to serve my students, though I had minimal experience with anyone in the deaf community. Even though my students owned hearing aids, they did not always want to wear them because it made them stand out. So, we rearranged our desks to provide them with the opportunity to participate more fully in classroom discussions. Instead of having desks in rows, we created a horseshoe so everyone could see the speaker. No one taught us that. As a class, we figured it out together.

In other cases, new teachers are supporting kids who are diagnosed with learning disabilities that may actually be manifestations of trauma. When kids are impacted by significant trauma, they exhibit defense mechanisms and protective behaviors that may look like learning disabilities. Resources are poured into special education services, much of which is needed, but we must also remember to attend to the mental health and healing piece. Supporting students with different abilities, identifying signs of trauma, and building accommodations into the classroom routine is a skill set that needs to be taught to and practiced by all teachers. One of the unexpected benefits of the protocols and services put in place during this COVID-19 pandemic has been the expansion of virtual access to mental health resources. Professionals can now interact with students, communicate with their families and teachers, and work together to meet student needs better. [Tiwahe Glu Kini Pi](#) (Lakota for “bringing the family back to life”), a program of Sinte Gleska University on the neighboring Rosebud Reservation, even experimented with virtual equine therapy. This support can be invaluable in rural communities, whether on the reservation or not.

Teaming up with parents and community programs is incredibly valuable in building successful education programs; the literature supporting the union is abundant. For schools on reservations, developing this symbiotic relationship requires additional consideration, communication, and design. The patterns of decision-making in school districts are often very top-down, bureaucratic processes. Some of that comes in the form of direction from state departments of education or a Bureau of Indian Education decision-maker who might be sitting in Washington DC or Albuquerque, New Mexico—far removed from the day-to-day obstacles and opportunities school-based staff members see or any reference point for community values, culture, or traditions. The disconnect is more often the rule than the exception, and it is always detrimental for students and their families.

Another challenge is the service areas for most schools. A simple goal, like increasing family involvement, can be hampered by distance alone. It is not unusual for students to live thirty miles from school, meaning that, to get to school on time, students are up before 6:00 AM. to catch the bus and ride over an hour to campus. In addition, an entire school day plus afterschool programs for homework support, tutoring, sports, and/or clubs often means parents

do not see their children until after 8:00 PM. This distance can also be a hurdle for families hoping to meet teachers or principals in person.

But there are solutions. At Oelrichs School, located just off the Pine Ridge Reservation, they began offering traveling family-teacher conferences in towns on the reservation where many of their learners live. At other schools, the introduction of technology into homes during virtual learning enabled widespread virtual family-teacher conferences for the first time. It may prove to be the way of the future.

140 Years of Mass-Produced Inequity

Systems thinking tells us to define a system by the outcomes it achieves, not the name it is given. We have to ask ourselves, “What is this system perfectly functioning to produce?” Here are the outcomes of our current “education” system:⁶

- White students are twice as likely as Native students to take at least one advanced placement course.
- Native students are more than twice as likely to be suspended.
- Native students score lower than nearly all demographic groups on national tests.
- 72% of Native students graduate, the lowest of any demographic group.
- In South Dakota, on-time graduation rates are at 54%, compared to 85% for non-Native youth.
- 49% of Indigenous South Dakotans live below the poverty line, compared to 9% of white South Dakotans.
- While Indigenous people make up only 9% of the state’s population, they represent 29% of those incarcerated in state prisons.

We can call it the “school” or “education” system, but if we look at the product it reliably produces, we find more inequity than education. The focus is not to attract pity but to increase awareness of the disparity Indigenous communities face and develop partnerships with people and organizations committed to disrupting a system that has been working to mass-produce inequity for over 140 years.

What begins in schools extends far beyond. The school-to-prison pipeline is a national concern, but it is compounded in a system stacked against Indigenous students. Many have to overcome additional obstacles to meet their higher education goals. The closest college for the residents of Pine Ridge is Oglala Lakota College (OLC), a tribal college or university (TCU). OLC is a wonderful college that uses a decentralized campus (not unlike many community colleges) to provide access to the greatest number of people. Students have access to college-level courses without relocating from their home, family, and community, but it is not without its challenges. Similar to most small colleges, the mission is larger than the budget.

Courses rotate throughout the system of campuses to allow students around the reservation to access the same education. Maintaining full-time student status requires a full course load, even if courses for your program are not available nearby. This can extend the time commitment to earn a bachelor's degree while one waits for a course to be offered at the local college center. Students are doing it, and they are doing it well, but there is a great opportunity to increase access. The surge in distance learning in response to COVID-19 may be part of the answer.

Driving While Indigenous: The Ugliness of Discrimination

Even amidst the natural beauty displayed in the landscape and rich culture, the ugliness of racism and discrimination persists. As a Black man living in South Dakota, I have often said, “It’s easy to be Black in South Dakota because people don’t have enough time or energy to worry about you. The targets of racial animus are Indigenous people.” The Black-white racial paradigm that exists in much of the United States and can sometimes reduce non-Black people of color to a nebulous “other” is replaced in these parts by an Indigenous-white paradigm.

Last year, an Oglala Lakota national nonprofit leader was pulled over in an off-reservation South Dakota community with a large Indigenous population. He was dragged out of his brand-new vehicle while his children sat in the backseat. The officer gave no reason for the stop. As multiple squad cars reported to the scene and his children watched in tears, he demanded that the officers call their supervisor. The police chief arrived at the scene and immediately recognized the man. The chief had served with him on a panel earlier in the week discussing race, equity, and healing in the community. A highly regarded guest at the discussion panel on Monday, the leader was profiled, pulled over, and humiliated by Friday.

Encounters like this occur daily across the nation, but we rarely hear about them unless the results are fatal. News outlets flood us with stories magnified by violence and play on our fears of one another. The ideas and perspectives that fuel discrimination are rooted in the systems that are expected to serve, but were built for control.

So, we created The Liber Institute to work with communities to disrupt these patterns and countless other challenges facing Indigenous students and, hopefully, build something better.

Harnessing the Collective Power of People at The Liber Institute

Our approach and orientation come from our board members’ leadership (all four of whom identify as Indigenous parents and educators) and my own experience working with powerful Black, Indigenous, and other leaders of color. Before starting The Liber Institute, I received broad-based organizing training from the Industrial Areas Foundation. Their Iron Rule is “never do for others what they can do for themselves,” and that became one of The Liber Institute’s core values. At its most basic level, power is the ability to act—and we all have that power. Others may have more influence because of money or titles, but there is a third source of power from which we can draw: the collective power of people. This is about bringing people together, understanding the issues that matter to them, and walking alongside them as they do for themselves what is needed to build a healthy community.

I learned about Innovative Strategy from [Cambiar Education](#), which runs the Catalyst Fellowship for aspiring school systems leaders. Innovative strategy calls us to apply principles associated with “design thinking” and “human-centered design” to build empathy and understanding with the people most impacted by inequity. By crafting strategy and vision with people—and not for them—we ensure that strategy is reflective of their experiences and desires. These parallel paths of thinking inform the way we approach our work.

The Liber Institute’s mission is “to embolden and equip Indigenous students, educators, and families, to transform schools and the communities they serve.” We say “embolden” rather

than “empower” because of the understanding that power is, again, the ability to act. We cannot give people power because they already have it. Furthermore, as long as a person or organization frames a collaboration as “I am empowering you,” then they can disempower you. We want to ensure people recognize we can partner with them, but we cannot take away their power. When we say “equip,” it is all about capacity-building. Each community has a culture, history, and set of values that have been preserved even in the face of a multi-generational onslaught to demonize and dismantle what makes them unique. We “embolden and equip” by helping people believe that they do not need to wait on or depend upon anyone outside of the community to change or improve something. The leaders a community is looking for are located within that community.

Pilot One: Encouraging Leaders to Step in Their Power

Our first pilot occurred in partnership with TNTP’s Bridge Fellowship, which gave me a year of runway to launch The Liber Institute. TNTP’s investment in me as a leader allowed me to coach principals through change initiatives. Each principal led a school on a reservation or served in an urban district with at least 20% of students identifying as Native.

One principal has students from diverse backgrounds: Indigenous, white, Black, and first-generation immigrants from a number of countries. His school’s vision was to meet different learning needs by adopting a learning management system to support a blended (technology-enabled) and personalized learning approach. In this vision, teachers would upload the curriculum once and then focus most of their planning time differentiating instruction for individual or small groups of students based on interest, passion, learning ability, and so on.

Unfortunately, that was not a district focus. He had some support, but the district was not terribly interested in leveraging technology in that way. As an unaffiliated volunteer, I was able to ask him questions and push him in the direction of his vision and provide resources along the way. More often than not, my job is to understand the world from others’ points of view and then ask questions as they arrive at their own approach. After all, they are leading the school, not me. They are the expert on their community, not me.

He led his team toward making it happen, and when COVID hit, computers were already one-to-one, and teachers were ready to serve their students. While other districts struggled with the transition, this school utilized the on-boarded curriculum and established processes to keep students engaged and learning. They had the vision. They had the desire. I just stood by the principal as he stepped into his power.

Another principal at a Middle School on the reservation had been leading an amazing transformation, and I initially thought she did not need outside assistance. I soon realized, however, that even when a person is doing good work, it helps to be part of a community. Being a leader is often lonely as a principal is one of the only positions in a school building with no counterpart.

Through coaching, I was able to work with this principal from an understanding position, but, more importantly, I was also able to utilize technology to connect her with a group of other innovative principals like her. This group bonded over the promising initiatives they were implementing. Connecting and talking through the process together was the support she needed.

Under her leadership, her staff developed a trauma-sensitive learning environment. They launched a recovery room and staffed the room full-time with mental health specialists. Those

advances in the school culture changed how the adults treated students, too. Interactions stopped being punitive and became restorative. The Liber Institute provided support and a group of other passionate professionals alongside her, but it was ultimately the principal's own experiences, culture, and values that led to change.

This initial pilot was special in that it provided principals with a brave space to think things through, benefit from other innovators' ideas, learn how to communicate a vision, build buy-in, and attract community involvement. No matter the people involved, the goal is to come together to propel us forward.

Pilot Two: More Culturally Responsive Classrooms

Another pilot we started was a culturally responsive teaching pilot called the First Step Fellowship. We started with 14 teachers from a rural district. Teachers from every campus in the district signed up to participate in three all-day professional development training sessions. When COVID hit, we went virtual. We took deep dives to get below the surface of what it means to be culturally responsive—that is, understanding the cultural and linguistic capital of the community you serve to unlock students' full abilities.

The goal was to show teachers they did not have to be an expert in Lakota language or a historian to teach in this community. When you begin to understand the values and culture of a community and build trusting relationships with students, you will start to create an environment where teachers look forward to learning from students and parents.

“The classics” have themes and topics that spark great discussion, and teachers can certainly do a fantastic job making this material relevant. That is one way to do it. Or you can identify the themes you want to hit and switch them out with books written by Indigenous authors that address subjects and experiences familiar to your students. You can also supplement with articles and documentaries that build bridges between content familiar and unfamiliar to students. Technology makes this possible. Instead of teaching a topic because it is in the assigned textbook, we can teach to produce breakthroughs, inspire learning, and increase self-efficacy. It is not just about helping students feel good about coming to school (which is important); it is also about helping kids see their potential and understand the relevance of what they are learning. When students see themselves reflected in their learning, it inspires connection, and connection is one of the best motivators.

Our purpose in creating the First Step Fellowship was to equip teachers with strategies to better understand their community. Teachers conducted empathy interviews with students to learn about their interests and develop a perspective to bring to class. The teachers learned how to conduct empathy interviews with elders and other family members—the students' first educators—who knew students well enough to identify strengths, areas of interest and curiosity, and ways to make learning relevant and engaging.

Pilot Three: The Power Of Teenage Innovators

Our third pilot was the Youth Change Agents work we did with Cambiar. We took what we learned from the first two pilots and launched Wayuthokeca (a Lakota word meaning “to change or transform”). This pilot leveraged what we had learned from innovative strategy and other design approaches to center the experiences and understanding of the young people we

served and welcoming them to be a part of the process—so that what we design is a true reflection of their needs and wants.

During the two-week summer intensive, we engaged young innovators (14-18 years old) from North Dakota, South Dakota, Oklahoma, and Washington in learning Cambiar’s CREATE Framework so that they could apply it to challenges facing schools in their communities.⁷ By giving the young people ownership over how our virtual learning space was conducted, they embraced the learning even as some of them had resisted virtual learning at school. In applying the CREATE Framework and being held accountable for the “heavy lifting of learning,” the youth change agents began to believe, “I belong in this learning environment. I can engage in rigorous tasks. I can do meaty work. I can tackle real-world challenges and hands-on learning because that’s what my people have always done.”

With each new project, The Liber Institute refines our approach. Led by new team members Tamera Miyasato (Mdewakantowan Dakota) and Heather Dahlgren (Ihanktonwan Dakota), we are working on launching Lakota Waunspe Wacinyanpi Cangleska (which, in English, means “Rely on Lakota Education Circle”). Tamera and Heather’s focus is bringing school leaders into a supportive community where we can collaborate to ensure our schools’ curriculum, pedagogy, and culture reflect Lakota values.

Conclusion

The Liber Institute is far from the only organization doing this work. Native-led organizations like [Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation](#) (CDC) and [Rosebud Economic Development Corporation](#) (REDCO) are working to provide the infrastructure for innovation in Indigenous communities across South Dakota. In addition, the [South Dakota Education Equity Coalition](#) (an education advocacy organization comprised of Native-led organizations and co-conspirators, including The Liber Institute) is pushing to carve out space for newer grassroots schools, like [Anpo Wicahpi](#) (“the Morning Star”), [Wakanyeja Tokeyahci](#) (“Children First”), and Mni Wiconi Nakicizin Wounspe (“Defenders of the Water Education”) to grow. Furthermore, [4Rosebud](#) (an advocacy organization of parents and educators across the Rosebud Reservation) and the [Commission for Oceti Sakowin Accreditation](#) work with existing schools to become exemplary learning spaces. And organizations like the [National Indian Education Association](#) (NIEA), [NDN Collective](#), and [NACA-Inspired Schools Network](#) support similar work on a national scale.

There are real obstacles facing Indigenous communities. Racism, classism, broken treaties, broken promises, and renege agreements are real issues, piled on top of more common challenges that typically present themselves in rural communities. And yet, the people persist. Tatanka Iyotake (“Sitting Bull”), the Hunkpapa Lakota leader, once said, “Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children.” Not content to accept the government’s vision for reservations, Indigenous communities and innovative Native-led organizations are reclaiming their languages and traditional ways while interpreting for themselves what education should look like if it is made for them, by them. The Liber Institute humbly walks with and learns from them in hopes that we can see this in our lifetimes. *Mitakuye Owasin. We are all related.*

End Notes

¹ United States Census Bureau, “2017 Census,” accessed on June 22, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/data-profiles/2017/>.

² Re-Member, “Pine Ridge Indian Reservation,” accessed on June 22, 2021, <https://www.re-member.org/pine-ridge-reservation.aspx#:~:text=Per%20capita%20income%20for%20American,living%20on%20Pine%20Ridge%20Reservation.>

³ Northern Plains Reservation Aid, “History and Culture: Boarding Schools,” *Northern Plains Reservation Aid*, accessed on June 22, 2021, http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc_hist_boardingschools#:~:text=The%20boarding%20school%20experience%20for,in%20the%20state%20of%20Washington.)

⁴ Northern Plains Reservation Aid, “History and Culture.”

⁵ Jeff Gammage, “A Search for Native Children Who Died on 'Outings' in PA,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/indian-school-carlisle-native-quaker-cemetery-outing-20180502.html>.

⁶ Erica L. Green and Annie Waldman, “I Feel Invisible’: Native Students Languish in Public Schools,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/us/native-american-education.html>.

⁷ “CREATE is a framework and journey map for leaders who want to improve their communities by solving problems. We learned from the wisdom and diverse perspectives of over 300 successful change agents around the world and synthesized our learnings into the CREATE process.”; Cambiar Education, “Our Approach,” accessed June 22, 2021, <https://www.cambiareducation.org/our-approach>.

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About the Author

Jonathan Santos Silva has been a trouble-making, system-breaking leader in the education space for over 12 years. While he is most recently known for his work as Founder of [The Liber Institute](#) and as Chairman of [The Board of Ed](#) Podcast, Jonathan can also be credited with contributions to the Cambiar Catalyst Fellowship and South Dakota’s Native American Achievement Schools. In addition, Jonathan has been recognized for his work as a classroom teacher, founding school leader, and leadership coach, and is a sought-after speaker due to his engaging and uplifting style. He holds a B.S. in Business Administration from Northeastern University and an M.A. in Education Administration from the University of South Dakota and is the husband of one incredible woman, father of four beautiful children, and walker of two loyal rez dogs.