The sun beams down on a beautiful summer morning in the Pacific Northwest. A woman wearing a woven reed hat leads a gaggle of children out of a building and into a courtyard. As they gather, she speaks Lushootseed words. These words are as old as the bendy river that runs behind this early learning center. The woman gently encourages children in the indigenous language of the Salish Tribes, the Native Americans who lived from coastal Oregon up through northern British Columbia.

As she speaks short Lushootseed words and softly plays a small drum, the children begin arranging themselves into a circle. Some of the teachers hand out drums and, as a group, they begin to chant and walk and dance.

Peggy McCloud is the charismatic director of the Grandview Early Learning Center. Hair pulled back in a ponytail, she floats among her students in a soft skirt and moss-colored sweater. McCloud has been the director at Grandview for 10 years. When she assumed responsibility for the school, she was nervous about the task of managing a large child care center that served many children who experienced challenges in their personal lives.

As she reminisced about her first days on the job, McCloud noted, “I talked to my mentor and he said, ‘Peggy, you don’t have to do everything. Just get the children’s hands on the earth. That is your part. Get the children’s hands on the earth.’”

She took that advice as her mission and has helped grow a beautiful school with an enviable outdoor natural play space. “In our urban setting, we were able to create a space where children can experience nature like we did as kids,” Peggy explained. “We established our vision of a natural play area, and then we learned of Nature Explore. Several staff at Grandview Early Learning Center attended Nature Explore workshops and received training on how to implement the notion that, ‘what we can teach inside, we can teach outside.’”

Today, Grandview serves 125 children at the Tribe’s daycare and an additional 100 children through its subsidized childcare program.

As they set about to create an outdoor space rooted in the tribe’s heritage, McCloud and her colleagues hired an architecture firm to harness their vision for an outdoor classroom.

“It is our responsibility to place the children’s hands on the earth, then Mother Earth opens up all possibilities for our children.”

Isadore Tom, Jr. - Tulalip Tribal Member

Peggy McCloud is the director of the Grandview Early Learning Center for the Puyallup Tribe in Washington State.
They incorporated a wood carving area so that local carvers could visit and show the children how traditional carving is done. They included a gathering area, a water feature, and small open-air huts for project work. The tribal language was incorporated throughout; areas and objects around the school were labeled in Lushootseed. As McCloud noted, “Without our language, we have no culture.

“We have found our outdoor classroom achieves the closest thing to a cultural curriculum,” she continued. “There is no better way to learn about one’s self than to build connections with Mother Earth. The outdoor classroom and land-based curriculum are unique for staff and children both to learn the culture of the coastal Salish Tribes, using a holistic approach. It provides the basis to find new ways to obtain health and nourishment from the healing medicine of the land. Our extraordinary outcomes include building a relationship with the land, with nature, traditional ways, and learning the tribal language, which connects us to who we are and where we come from.”

Once she felt comfortable in her director role, and had established the center’s expansive outdoor classroom, McCloud continued to take up the challenge of heritage: she wanted to teach children their language in a place and culture in which the native language has nearly disappeared.

“We have lost a generation or two. We don’t have any First Language speakers anymore, but we still have elders that were part of a First Language family,” McCloud said. “They grew up with the language, but did not learn the Lushootseed language before English. At Grandview, we are growing new speakers now, but to teach it, we must speak it ourselves. We have several different methods for teaching language to adults that can help awaken our culture. And we cheer on anyone for whatever method they can use to learn.”

Deonnah McCloud, Grandview’s assistant director, chimed in, “When I teach adults the language, some feel sad or frustrated because it’s very challenging. Some of the phonetic sounds come from the back of the throat and are difficult to pronounce. Many people beat up on themselves, saying ‘It’s too hard,’ or ‘It can’t happen, or ‘I didn’t speak it in my family.’ I used to get migraines trying to stretch my mind to hear the words and remember them.

“What I tell people is that your voice is just a muscle that you haven’t used, but [the language] is in your memory. It is in there. Intergenerational colonization has washed it away, and it has been lost for a few generations. Reclaiming language won’t happen quickly. This is just the beginning. It’s going to take seven generations to bring back the language. If we work for it, a spark will come. Sometimes, when people begin speaking our language, they start crying. And I did too, at one point, because it feels like reconnecting.”

Peggy McCloud added, “The tribe has been making great strides in reviving
the language. We are seeing the miracle now. Many of our young people are coming alive. There is a groundswell of people interested and motivated to return. It is as if the ancestors are speaking through them. I am literally seeing the language come alive again. We have to use it and our kids have to hear it. The youth are coming back for identity and connection and belonging. Many of this upcoming generation, the language is flowing out of them.”

One challenge when introducing the Lushootseed language to children is helping them build fluency in a second language, even as the teachers and other adults in their lives are also learning the native language.

“We are not teachers of language. We are speakers,” Deonnah McCloud explained. “Teaching a language does not create fluent speakers. It uses square boxes to give language experiences—a Western education mindset. You can teach someone to count to 10, but vocabulary is not conversation.”

David Turnipseed is a new teacher focusing on creating systems for building language into the daily life of the center. He explained how to create an environment in which the language has value.

“For adults, you have to utilize all of these academic skills that an adult has,

Huckleberry Immersion

One example of building language, culture and connections to the natural world with children is painting with berries. When certain berries are ripe during the year, the children at Grandview paint with their juices. This fosters a connection deeper than simply eating berries; it teaches what time of year berries are ripe, launches discussions about what they taste like, and allows children to read and hear the Lushootseed word for huckleberry. They also examine the color, consistency and texture of the berries. This playful exploration allows for a multi-faceted connection and understanding.
they surprise me with words without me promoting them, and I think: YES!”

“The Lushootseed language has a spirit of its own,” Deonnah McCloud said. “It is calling its people and doing what it needs to do to grow. Language is a living being. You don’t have to try to control it or own it. As in life, you do your part to foster growth and you don’t need to understand everything.”

In other words, get the children’s hands in the earth. Give them access to their language and their culture. Everything else that needs to follow, will follow.