

A COMMUNITY GUIDE
FOR

**SILENT
SPEAKERS**

GIIMOOCH GAA-
BIZINDAWAAD:
RECLAIMING
ANISHINAABEMOWIN



GAAGIGE GANAWENDAMAANG
ANISHINAABEMOWIN



GAAGIGE GANAWENDAMAANG ANISHINAABEMOWIN

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Contact Information

Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin
Info@gaagige.com

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FOREWARD

Our Story

Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin is an Indigenous non-profit organization dedicated to reclaiming, revitalizing, teaching, and documenting Anishinaabemowin (Saulteaux/Ojibwe) - specifically as it is spoken here in Manitoba. Our mission is to create new, conversationally fluent speakers of Anishinaabemowin through immersion, help Silent Speakers reclaim their relationship with Anishinaabemowin, document & create resources in Manitoba dialects, and build capacity in the Manitoban language reclamation and revitalization community.

A Manitoba program for Silent Speakers was originally the idea of co-founder, Carol Beaulieu, who is herself a Silent Speaker and lifelong language reclaimer. During Carol's language reclamation she found that the available classes and programming focused on learners, but nothing was specific to the unique needs of Silent Speakers. She believed that with the right opportunities and environment, Silent Speakers could reclaim their oral proficiency.

Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad - Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin was created by co-founder, Kate Binesigichidaakwe McDonald in collaboration with her mentor speaker, Carol Beaulieu. Adaptations were inspired by the participants who joined the pilot program.



Co-founders Carol and Kate at Anshinaabemowin TEG

Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad

I believe Silent Speakers to be First Speakers of Anishinaabemowin. As a second speaker of Anishinaabemowin, I know that English greatly impacts my worldview and how I express myself, even when speaking Anishinaabemowin. I believe that we see the world through the lens of our first spoken language. In my work with Carol as my mentor speaker in a Mentor/Apprentice program, I saw that even when she spoke to me in English, the lens she saw the world through was Anishinaabe. This is a primary difference between a learner and a Silent Speaker.

Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad was created to help Silent Speakers reclaim their identities as First Speakers of Anishinaabemowin. They are not learners or second-speakers, and programming for them needs to reflect this. We need to respect their roles and knowledge as First Speakers of the language and support them in that reclamation work. To do this, they need to repair and heal their relationship with Anishinaabemowin. This means brave work, looking deeply at the wounds that have impacted their ability to voice the language. The women in this first pilot program of Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad proved that language reclamation is possible. They showed us the need they have to sit with other speakers like themselves as they go through the reclamation process. It was an honour to be a part of their journeys and we have created lifelong relationships from our work together.

In our final Sharing Circle at the end of the 4 month intensive, I asked the speakers what they wanted or needed going forward. One of the main wishes they had was for others to know about them. To know that Silent Speakers exist in every Anishinaabe community and that they have unique needs and a desire to come together as a larger speaking community. And that it is possible for them to reclaim their relationship with the language and their identities as First Speakers.

This resource is part of fulfilling their wish. We want others to benefit from the work that we did together. Silent Speakers are needed in their communities, in their families and in the larger language revitalization world. We need them to reclaim and pass on the language and in order to do this, they need our support, respect, and safe places to find their voices again.

We are committed to continuing this work. For myself, I am starting to pursue my PhD in an effort to respond to what these women tasked me with. Silent Speakers' voices and stories need to be heard and welcomed into the Anishinaabemowin Language Revitalization circle. Carol continues with her own language reclamation journey and her work with bringing Anishinaabemowin into community in ways that new speakers will be created. We have been honoured to share about our work recently at the A'tsimaani Conference (Blackfoot Confederacy), Anishinaabemowin Teg, and the 57th Algonquian Conference. All of these are ways we can honour the work of the participants in this program. We hope you will help to continue this work in your own communities and language work.

Mii'iwe,

Kate Binesigichidaakwe McDonald

Co-founder

Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin



Acknowledgements

Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin would like to thank everyone who worked with us on this important pilot program, those who volunteered their time to help us get this program off the ground, who shared their knowledge and expertise, and who supported us throughout the process.

We would especially like to say “aapiji miigwech” to the Silent Speakers of ***Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad - Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin***, for their bravery, love, humour and strength. Gigichi-inenimigoom.

And to the Silent Speakers out there in all of our communities, we hope you find your way back into the language circle as the First Speakers that you are.

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1. Project Overview

Introduction

Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad - Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin was created in response to a gap in Indigenous language revitalization efforts. The majority of existing programs focused on supporting second language learners or working with First Speakers to document language. There was limited work being done with *Silent Speakers* and an overall lack of understanding about their unique needs. Our pilot program sought to fill that gap.

Who is a Silent Speaker?

Silent Speakers are people whose first **spoken** language was Anishinaabemowin, but their relationship with the language was interrupted. These interruptions included Day or Residential School, trauma, mental health (anxiety/shame), time in foster care, moving away from community, The 60's Scoop, etc.

Silent Speakers often do not identify as **speakers** of Anishinaabemowin. After years of language shame, correction, lateral violence, trauma, and infrequent language use, they have lost their confidence in speaking their first language.

*"I was judging myself before.
I didn't give value to understanding the language.
I didn't value it or see the value in my
understanding if I couldn't just speak."
- Silent Speaker Participant*

Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad was an intensive 4 month program where participants and facilitators worked together to create a safe community where everyone's experiences and voices were welcomed and respected. Everyone committed to showing up for themselves, each other, and the language.

Our program was grounded in relationship. Rather than measuring success through language acquisition, we emphasized healing relationships with the language and oneself. Through structured activities, group reflections, ceremony, therapeutic supports, and opportunities to speak without judgement, participants worked to reclaim their relationships with Anishinaabemowin.

This guide is meant to share **Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin's** philosophy and approach, resources, and reflections that emerged through our pilot program. We hope that it will inspire you to start your own programs for the Silent Speakers in your community.



2. Who is a Silent Speaker?

Understanding Silent Speakers

Our definition of a *Silent Speaker* is someone whose first *spoken* language was Anishinaabemowin but whose relationship with the language was interrupted. These interruptions included Residential or Day School, foster care, moving away from community, The 60's Scoop, trauma, mental health (anxiety/shame), etc. A *Silent Speaker* has retained their understanding of Anishinaabemowin but has **lost their confidence in speaking it**.

Silent Speakers often feel that their language capabilities are lesser than their parents and grandparents. They *compare their language ability and sound to the generations before them* and don't see what they have as valuable to themselves, or to the language community today. They may say, "I just understand," as though understanding the language has no value. *They often don't see themselves as speakers anymore.*

Our definition of a Silent Speaker:

- ✓ First **Spoken** Language was Anishinaabemowin
- ✓ Relationship with the language was interrupted
- ✓ Has retained their understanding of Anishinaabemowin but has lost their confidence in speaking it

Most *Silent Speakers*, if not all, have experienced lateral violence and language bullying. They have been publicly corrected by other speakers, shamed for how they sound, criticized for dialect differences, and made to feel that speaking “imperfectly” was worse than not speaking at all. These experiences have led to self-doubt, anxiety, shame, and *silence*.

Recognizing *Silent Speakers* as **first speakers** shifts the conversation from language loss to language reclamation. This approach recognizes the strengths, knowledge, and lived experiences that *Silent Speakers* continue to carry and the essential role they can play in the future of Anishinaabemowin.

Unique Challenges for Silent Speakers:

- Feel their language capabilities are lesser than their parents & grandparents.
- Compare themselves to previous generations; don't see their value to the language community today.
- Experiences of lateral violence and language bullying have created & reinforced internal language blocks that have stopped them from speaking.



3. Why Silent Speakers Matter

Silent Speakers Are Essential to Language Revitalization

Unlike second-language learners, *Silent Speakers* learned Anishinaabemowin in the same way as other First Speakers - through listening, watching, and doing throughout their childhood. They developed their understanding of the world through the language. Although they may no longer speak confidently, they continue to carry the worldview, cultural teachings, humour, relationships, and ways of thinking that are embedded in Anishinaabemowin.

A *Silent Speaker* who reclaims their language is in a **unique** position to **understand both the First Speaker's view but also the learner's**. They know the work it takes to reclaim the language so they understand the difficulties faced by learners but **they also have the worldview that is embedded in every first speaker of Anishinaabemowin**. For this reason, **we believe Silent Speakers to be first speakers of Anishinaabemowin**.

Silent Speakers understand the challenges of language reclamation in ways that other first speakers may not. They know what it feels like to hesitate before speaking, to question their abilities, to experience language shame and lateral violence, and to compare themselves to others. These experiences have given them compassion, insight and a unique understanding of a learner's journey.

“People say that we (Silent Speakers) are the middle; we're the bridge between other First Speakers and learners.”
- Silent Speaker Participant

As Silent Speakers rebuild their confidence, they can become important mentors, language partners, and leaders. They can bridge generations because they carry the perspective of a first speaker, while understanding the experiences of those trying to learn their language as adults. Their knowledge, resilience, and lived experiences make them invaluable contributors to the future of Anishinaabemowin.

Recognizing Silent Speakers as First Speakers challenges common assumptions about language “ability”. Understanding Anishinaabemowin is not a small accomplishment. It represents years of lived experience, cultural knowledge, and relationships that continue to exist, even when speaking has become difficult. Reclaiming language often brings this knowledge back to the surface naturally, sometimes surprising the Silent Speaker with what they know and remember.

Supporting Silent Speakers is about more than restoring language use. It is about restoring relationships, with the language, with identity, and with community. When Silent Speakers reclaim their voices, they strengthen the foundation of language revitalization for everyone.

Silent Speakers Bring:

- ✓ An Anishinaabe worldview
- ✓ Receptive language & understanding
- ✓ Cultural memory
- ✓ Understanding of the learner’s journey
- ✓ Empathy and mentorship
- ✓ Hope for future generations

4. Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad



Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin A Community for Silent Speakers

Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad focused on building a **Silent Speaker community** rather than a traditional **language program**. Our goal was to create a safe space for Silent Speakers to reclaim & heal their relationship with Anishinaabemowin.

“We struggled with using the word “program” to describe what we did. “Program” sounds like something that has an ending, and this kind of work does not. We created a community for Silent Speakers, where they could continue to reclaim and heal their relationships with Anishinaabemowin - together.”
- Lead Facilitator

Language reclamation is a life-long journey. It is deeply personal. It brings up strong emotions, memories, and trauma. The therapist and facilitators of **Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad** worked to respond to the unique needs of Silent Speakers as they progressed, always keeping relationship, emotional safety, and healing at the center.

We built our community with six goals in mind:

- Silent Speakers will develop confidence and see themselves as speakers again (main goal).
- We will build an ongoing community for Silent Speakers.
- We will build a support network of other Language Reclaimers.
- Participants will identify the blocks that keep them from speaking.
- Participants will learn and use tools/strategies to work through those speaking blocks.
- Participants will work to repair and heal their relationship with Anishinaabemowin.

Throughout the experience, ceremony, laughter, creativity, patience, and self-compassion were essential components of our community. Together, they created the conditions for participants to begin their lifelong reconnection with Anishinaabemowin.

Relationship Before Fluency

Western Methodology focuses almost exclusively on fluency as a marker of success and growth. This type of hierarchical thinking is not Anishinaabe, nor is it helpful when we're dealing with trauma & identity. **Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad** did **not** measure success by "fluency." Instead, we measured success by relationships: with language, identity, and with each other.

In this way, each participant was successful *by their own assessment*. They all grew and reclaimed their relationship with their first spoken language. They came to see themselves as First Speakers again. Their comfort in speaking Anishinaabemowin grew. They took responsibility for their own language journey and relationship. It was an honour to watch them reclaim their identities as First Speakers of Anishinaabemowin.

Important Note:

"Fluency" is a difficult topic to bring into a circle of Silent Speakers. Their comfort in speaking Anishinaabemowin depends greatly on who is in the circle with them. They have frequently been targets of other First Speakers, who shame or negatively comment on how they're saying things. This shame has greatly contributed to their language block.

Niigaani Anishinaabemowin - The language leads the way

Throughout this process we were reminded that we need to *think Anishinaabe* when we approach the language and language reclamation. **Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad** did not follow a rigid curriculum, we asked the language, relationship, and our teachings to lead the way. The experiences and needs of the group guided each step of the journey. We started with our asemaa/tobacco, with ceremony, and let Anishinaabe teachings and beliefs lead.

Showing Up

Due to the smaller group size (which is an essential part of creating safety in a program like this), it was especially important for participants to show up on a regular basis. We made a commitment to support each other, which meant showing up, even if you didn't feel like it. We agreed as a group that everyone would be welcomed wherever they were at. Show up prickly, happy, angry, grieving, just show up. That showing up was a huge part of how the speakers rebuilt their relationship with Anishinaabemowin. Healing came from putting in the work, week after week, supporting each other along the way. It came from taking individual and collective responsibility for the language. And it worked.

Trust and Safety

Many Silent Speakers carry experiences of shame. Creating an emotionally safe environment where participants could speak without fear of judgment was essential. Trust was built through consistency, kindness, compassion, honesty, humour, commitment and safety. **As trust grew, confidence grew, and the language followed.**

Flexibility and Responsiveness

Facilitators responded to the Speakers, not the other way around.

Everything was grounded in what the participants needed and asked for. By listening carefully, being flexible, and adapting to the participants' needs, experiences, questions, and readiness, a safe and responsive community was built.

Healing Together

Healing and growth came from putting in the work, week after week, especially when it was hard. Not everyone was ready for the intensity of the work and that was okay. Each participant took what they needed (and were ready for) from **Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad**. Language reclamation is a journey and it's important to support Silent Speakers where they're at. Together we took individual and collective responsibility for our relationships with Anishinaabemowin.

Participants and facilitators supported one another and celebrated successes together. The speakers came to recognize that they were not alone in their experiences.

*“These women showed us that
language reclamation is possible.
It is brave and healing work”
- Lead Facilitator*

Our Community was Built On...

Asemaa (tobacco)

Relationship

Trust & Safety

Space

Time

Art

Laughter

Support & Connection

Showing up

Flexibility & Creativity

Investment & Commitment

Consistency

Kindness

Self-compassion

Identity

Healing



Silent Speaker Camp

Our Community in Practice

Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad was designed to be a four month intensive program that combined language activities, therapeutic support, and relationship building. The original model was designed to be mostly online with additional in-person gatherings. In practice this looked like:

Two Virtual Sessions Each Week

- Sessions were planned for 1.5 hours, but often went to 3.
- Session A was led by **Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin** Facilitators
 - Focused on Language Reclamation through discussion questions, language activities, and reflection.
- Session B was led by the Therapist
 - Focused on processing, expression, and connection.

Weekly Connection with Language Partners

- Participants were paired up for a week with a commitment to connect with their partner for 5-10 minutes a day.
- These could be zoom, text, phone call connections.
- Purpose: creating space for language in daily life and building relationship with participants.
- Encouraged to stick to the time frame to create small wins and not forcing yourself out of your comfort zone too fast.
- Encouraged to celebrate each other.

Calling your language partner is like exercise!

Doing a little bit regularly is much more beneficial
than the “weekend warrior.”

The more you make space for Anishinaabemowin
in your life, the easier it will flow.

Optional Virtual Weekend Connection

- Reclaiming language takes intense commitment, can elicit strong emotions, and requires courage. Having a space to connect with others to process where you are at, share wins, or use/listen to language is integral to success.
- Our Lead Facilitator offered a virtual space for our participants to connect outside of the regular weekly sessions.

Two In-Person Weekend Gatherings

- 3 days and 2 nights
- Programming from 8am-9pm (additional visiting after)
- These gatherings allowed for:
 - Building deeper relationships
 - Enhanced comfort and trust with participants
 - Allowed people to connect in a more personal way
 - Collective Art Therapy as opposed to individual projects
- In-person gatherings were attended by participants, the facilitators and the therapist. All costs were covered by our ILC grant.

1:1 connections with Lead Facilitator to process sessions/experiences as needed.

- Having an “on call” or “go-to” person to connect with participants if things were getting difficult was critical. This often looked like holding space for processing emotions, providing reassurance, and encouraging participants to keep going.

*"I've started speaking more,
even just to myself when I'm driving."
- Silent Speaker Participant*

Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad - Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin was an intensive program. The participants and facilitators worked together to create a safe community where everyone's experiences and voices were welcomed and respected. They committed to showing up for themselves, each other, and Anishinaabemowin.

Meeting twice weekly was critical to the four month intensive. Participants needed support, encouragement, routine, and consistency. Over time, they built trust and connection.

Growth required commitment and happened over time. Each participant shaped our community through sharing their stories, their experiences, their wins and their struggles. Their experiences reshaped how we look at our work and how we will plan for future cohorts. Their contributions will now benefit other Silent Speakers in their language reclamation journeys.

What the Speakers Said

- Traditional language classes don't fit us.
- We just want to be able to talk, **no grammar learning**.
- Emotional connection of this program is **key**.
- It's important to have opportunities to **hear** the language, to listen **without pressure to speak**.
- We need to work in **small groups → Trust**.
- Building **trust and comfort** is important.
- We need support from **others who know what we're feeling** and dealing with

Aftercare

Due to the intense nature of the program, and the topics that were discussed, we couldn't just leave participants to continue on their own. We chose to **extend support beyond the original program**. This "Aftercare", or additional time and space, has given our community of Silent Speakers the opportunity to continue to connect and engage with each other, and Anishinaabemowin.

Our cohort met for an additional 6 months. The Four Month Intensive ran from May through August. We held additional three hour meetings weekly from September through October; bi-weekly November - January.

The focus of additional meetings included:

- General check-in, discussion, and support
- Visiting in Anishinaabemowin & opportunities to listen & ask language questions
- Open craft nights where we listened to recordings of speakers and discussed the language used

Participants asked for more opportunities to hear and use the language above and beyond these extensions. We created an online daily meet during lunch time. This became a place where anyone could drop-in to visit **bizhishig anishinaabemong**.

We suggest you have Silent Speakers take the lead on some of these extra sessions as they start to take more responsibility for repairing & healing their relationship with Anishinaabemowin.

We also suggest budgeting for additional time for participants to access the Therapist as needed on a one-to-one basis.

Build It In:

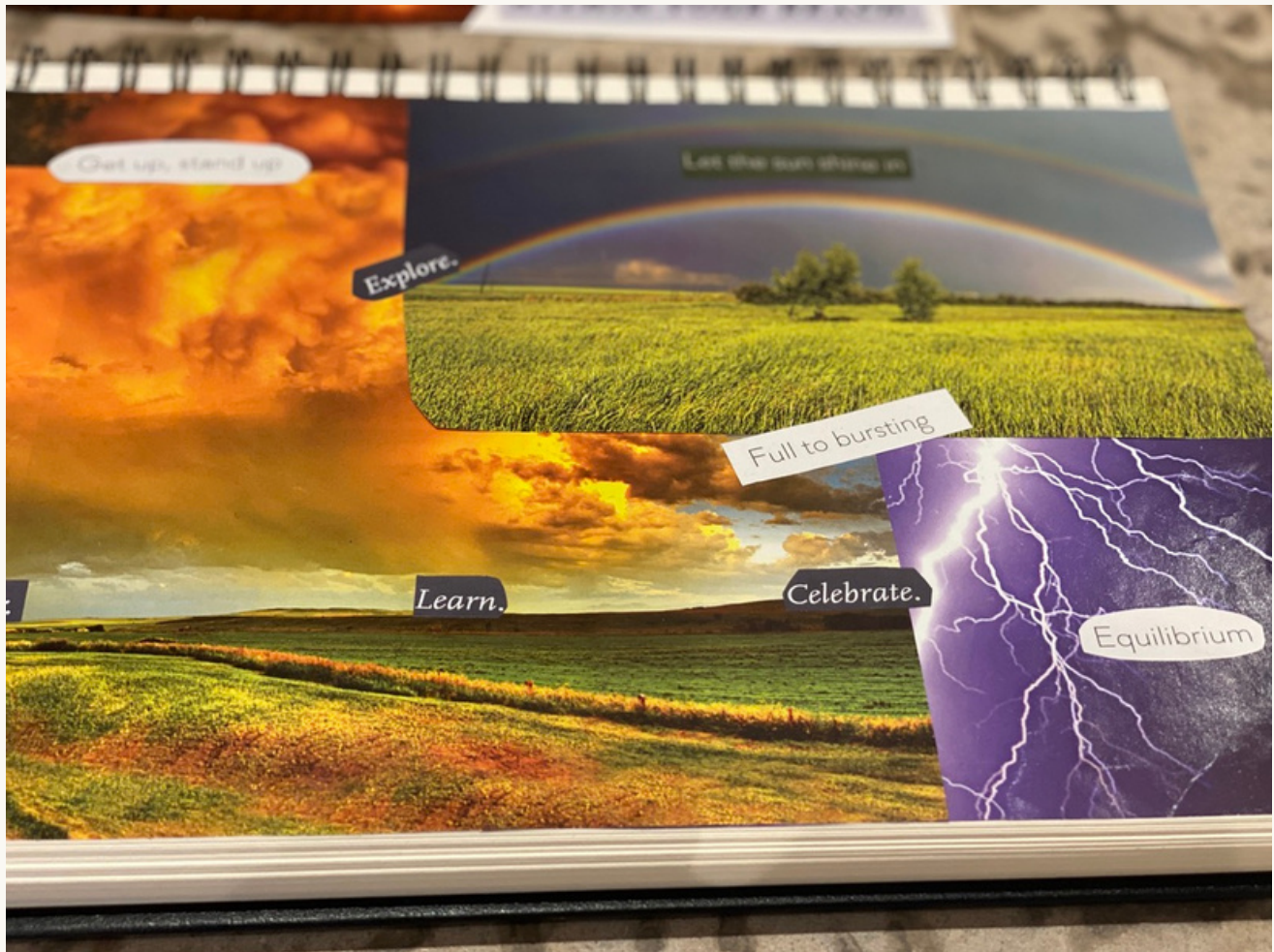
We learned that Silent Speaker Programs need wraparound supports in place.

We highly recommend having opportunities like this set up before your intensive program closes.

“This group is on track for how you’re doing things. It’s a smaller group, we really get to connect. I felt lonely in other groups, they were too large, we didn’t really get to interact.

We’ve taken the time to talk about other things that affect our language usage. The healing component of this group has been so good for me as a Silent Speaker.

Recognizing that loss of language, that loss of the spirit of the language and bringing in the ceremony to help us reclaim it”
- Silent Speaker Participant



Silent Speaker Camp

5. Planning Your Community



While each community will learn and adapt from our work, we recommend allowing **2-6 months** for planning, prior to the recruitment of participants. This timeline is adaptable depending on your existing knowledge, resources, and relationships with Silent Speakers.

The planning stage provides an opportunity to research, build relationship, recruit & develop your facilitation team, and ensure everything is in place **before you begin programming**.

During the Planning Stage

Our planning process included:

- A review of existing Silent Speaker research and programming.
- Consultation with Silent Speakers and community members.
- Recruitment of an Anishinaabe therapist, guest speakers, knowledge carriers.
- Researching discussion topics and reflection questions.
- Creating language activities and session plans.
- Scheduling online sessions and in-person gatherings.
- Identifying venues and confirming logistics.
- Developing recruitment and intake materials.

The planning process is more intensive than it may appear. We highly recommend having all of your planning in place before opening applications, including an outline of agendas, activities, and discussion topics. Examples of these are included in this resource.

Once programming starts, **you will need to be able to focus 100% on supporting your participants**. Having your plan already in place supports flexibility and adaption later, allowing your focus to remain on the speakers, rather than simultaneously creating programming.

Questions to Ask During Planning

- Who are the Silent Speakers in our community?
 - These are the fluent understanders that show up in every language class & gathering
- Do we have the capacity in our community to support the speakers through this program?
- Do we have 1-2 people who are familiar with language acquisition & language revitalization to facilitate the program?
- Do we have any Silent Speakers who have already reclaimed the language who can help mentor participants?
- Do we have an Anishinaabe therapist who can lead our group sessions?
- Do we have funding to not only run the program but to continue to support the speakers as they continue their language reclamation journeys?
- Do we have issues with lateral violence in our community surrounding language? Will our speakers feel safe to work with one another or do we need to partner with other communities to create a safe environment?
- How will we build capacity in our team members and support staff to ensure they can work independently, with minimal support, during the program intensive?

Suggested Planning Check List

- ☐ Research Silent Speakers and Language Reclamation
- ☐ Consult with Silent Speakers and Community Members
 - Survey your community
 - Hold talking circles (in-person or online)
 - Meet with elders and community members individually
- ☐ Recruit your facilitation team
- ☐ Recruit a therapist
- ☐ Develop overall structure and schedule
- ☐ Set dates for online and in-person sessions
- ☐ Explore potential in-person venues
- ☐ Outline a budget
- ☐ Prepare discussion questions, resources, and materials for meeting sessions
- ☐ Prepare recruitment and intake materials
- ☐ Ensure your facilitation team is ready to support participants before beginning



6. Building Your Team

Understanding Our Responsibilities

Lead Facilitator

A lead facilitator should not only understand the history of colonization and its impact on Indigenous languages, but should be comfortable and capable of leading discussions around this topic.

A background in language revitalization and reclamation is critical. This individual should have a strong understanding of Anishinaabe protocols and teachings. Success of a program hinges on this person's ability to be flexible, anticipate and adapt to participant needs, and create a safe and respectful environment for healing to happen.

Key roles of the Lead Facilitator:

- Develop the sequence of session agendas, including discussion topics, questions, and related readings, links etc.
- Collaborate with Therapist and Co-Facilitator or Elder to provide input on plans and activities
- Pull together additional resources for participants
 - Including audio files, readings, supplemental materials
- Lead participant sessions
- Serve as the go-to person when participants need help or support with anything
- Coordinate with the therapist, participants, and all other facilitators to ensure things run smoothly

Co-Facilitator (highly recommended)

Ideally you would have a community member that could support the Lead Facilitator as needed. They should be able to step-in should the Lead Facilitator be unavailable. If this is an Elder, they would take the lead on ceremonial protocols and teachings shared during the duration of the program.

Key Role:

- Provide feedback and support with session development.
- Help liase with participants outside of sessions for additional support (language and emotional processing).
- Provide live translation support for Silent Speaker participants or other team members who may not understand what is being shared.
- Support Lead Facilitator as needed.

Therapist

The Therapist plays an essential role in helping Silent Speakers process the emotional impacts of language loss, shame, grief, and trauma. The therapist should be trained in Trauma Therapy. They should understand the *language trauma* of the Anishinaabe community.

Ideally, the therapist would be conversational in Anishinaabemowin. Though not necessary, being conversational in Anishinaabemowin would be helpful for the therapist during times that Silent Speakers are sharing stories and reflections in the language. If not, then a staff member needs to be able to translate information in the chat (if meeting online). **The Silent Speakers should never have to translate what they're saying into English. Someone else must take on that role.*

Key Role:

- Develop and facilitate all therapeutic sessions.
- Occasionally attend non-therapeutic sessions for relationship building.
- Create a safe space for participants to share and process without “trauma dumping”.



7. Recruitment & Intake

Understanding Who the Program is For

A successful Silent Speaker community is built on relationship and trust. It is important that you are truly recruiting Silent Speakers, and not second language learners so be clear in your definitions and recruitment information. It is also critical that participants are able to commit to the time requirements, willing to navigate difficult emotions, and will actively engage in creating a supportive environment.

Recruitment

Our main mode of recruitment was using social media and sharing through organizations that we had established relationships with. Applications were processed through Google Forms.

We hosted an **Online Information night** for interested participants. This provided an opportunity for community to ask questions and also helped facilitators get a feel for what their group may look like, and needs they may not have anticipated.

We strongly recommend **hosting one to three information sessions, prior to selecting your cohort.**

Who Was This Designed For?

- First **spoken** language is Anishinaabemowin.
- Relationship with language has been interrupted.
- Interested in reclaiming relationship with language.
- Willing to contribute to building a supportive community.
- Able to meet all time commitments.
- Willing to sit with difficult emotions.

Cohort Selection

All applications were reviewed by an internal planning committee. Decisions were made based on information provided in applications. Participants were selected not only as individuals, but also based on how the committee felt they would work together.

Cohesion is important to the cohorts success. The group must feel like a *safe space* for all, participants and facilitators included. **Commitment** is also critical. Attending sessions regularly is the only way the group works.

We suggest including all program information, including definitions of Silent Speakers, and program commitments in your application. Below is an example of our outreach and application.

Example Outreach

Shared via Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin Social Media.

Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin
is offering a pilot program
Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin
a program for silent speakers

When?
May 5 to August 27
2025

Participants must live in Manitoba
or **have a connection to a Manitoban community.**

Program is in-person & online.
Must be able to attend all in-person sessions.

Questions? Contact us!
info@gaagige.ca

This is an intensive program for speakers who are serious about healing and reclaiming their relationship with Anishinaabemowin

For more information and to apply
<https://forms.gle/x8XGQhRBAW2sMk2L9>

Deadline for applications is April 21/25

Example Application Package



**GAAGIGE
GANAWENDAMAANG**
ANISHINAABEMOWIN

**Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad
Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin
Application Packet**

Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin is offering a pilot program for Silent Speakers. **Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin** is a 4 month program for Silent Speakers to work together to reclaim their first language - Anishinaabemowin/Ojibwe/Saulteaux. This pilot program was inspired by work being done by the First Peoples' Cultural Council in BC and the original program that the Sami people developed in Norway and Sweden. These programs have been highly successful in helping speakers reclaim their first languages - and we hope for the same results here in Manitoba.

What level of commitment are you prepared for? This is an intensive program for people who are serious about healing and reclaiming their *relationship* with the language. You will be expected to make Anishinaabemowin your primary focus for the duration of the program (May to August) and to support others by being present, actively participating, completing any assignments outside of class, and working together. **You will need to attend the majority of the online sessions as well as all of the in-person gatherings.** You will get out of the program what you put in!

To apply, please submit this form by April 21/25. You may be contacted to arrange a meeting via Zoom before the final decisions are made for this cohort. Spaces in the program are limited.

Questions can be directed to info@gaagige.ca.

ALL SURVEY INFORMATION WILL BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL

Who is a Silent Speaker?

Silent speakers are people whose **first language is Anishinaabemowin** but, for a variety of reasons, their relationship with the language was interrupted. These speakers may:

- have gone to residential or day schools
- have experienced trauma that now blocks them from speaking
- have grown up in the language but moved away from their communities
- live in a community that has a different dialect they don't feel comfortable speaking
- understand the language but are no longer able to speak it
- have anxiety about speaking unless in certain situations or with certain people
- not have anyone to speak with regularly and feel they are losing their ability to speak
- have been away from their language & speaking for so long that they feel they've lost their "fluency"

Often Silent Speakers feel that their language capabilities are lesser than their parents and grandparents. They *compare* their fluency and language ability to the generations before them, and don't see the **valuable role** they can play in Language Reclamation today.

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Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin Application Packet

Who can apply?

- You must identify as a silent speaker of Anishinaabemowin
- Your first language was Anishinaabemowin/Ojibwe/Saulteaux
- You are currently living in Manitoba (but you don't have to originally be from a Manitoban community)
- If you're currently living outside Manitoba you may still be considered if you are prepared to travel to Manitoba for ALL in-person sessions AND have a family connection to a Manitoban community

Is there a fee?

There is no cost to participate in the program. Participants are solely responsible for *any travel costs to and from in-person sessions/gatherings*. **Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin** would like to gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support of the Government of Canada in making this program possible.

What are the goals of the program?

Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin is about healing and reclaiming your relationship with the language. You will work toward developing the **confidence** you need to see yourself as a speaker of Anishinaabemowin. Participants will also **work together** to create their own language plans to help guide them forward long after the program finishes. Ultimately though, **the goal of the program is to help you move past the things that are blocking you from speaking**. You will be given different tools to help deal with the emotions that come up with language reclamation, develop a support group with your language peers, and learn about the important role you can play in the Anishinaabemowin language revitalization community.

What can participants expect?

Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin is scheduled to run May 5/25 to August 27/25 and is a combination of online and in-person meetings. Online meetings will be through Zoom, up to 3x per week. These sessions are currently planned for one hour. The monthly one day in-person sessions are scheduled for Winnipeg MB, with **one 3 day overnight gathering an hour north of Winnipeg**.

The participants are responsible for their transportation to the August gathering, but food and accommodations are all provided. A detailed calendar will be provided upon acceptance to the program.

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Please Check all that apply.

- ☐ I am a silent speaker of Anishinaabemowin (any dialect)
- ☐ My first language was Anishinaabemowin/Ojibwe/Saulteaux
- ☐ I currently live in Manitoba
- ☐ I live outside of Manitoba but am prepared to travel (at my own cost) to participate in all in-person sessions
- ☐ I have a connection to a community in Manitoba

I understand there is no fee to participate in the program but that I must pay my own travel to all in-person sessions.

- Yes
- No

First Name

Last Name

Community

Mailing Address

Email Address

Phone Number

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For online Zoom sessions I am available: (check all that apply)

- ☐ Weekday mornings
- ☐ Weekday afternoons
- ☐ Weekday evenings
- ☐ Weekend mornings
- ☐ Weekend afternoons
- ☐ I understand if I am offered a spot in this program that i am committing to regular attendance, even if the time chosen is not my first choice.
- ☐ Other:

I can attend the three day in-person gathering August 25-27th. (2 nights / 3 days).

- Yes
- No

**I will make arrangements to attend the monthly day-long in-person sessions in Winnipeg.
(dates TBA)**

- Yes
- No
- Other

If you have stopped speaking the language, at what age did you stop?

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There are many kinds of silent speakers. Please check off the statements that best describe you:

- ☐ I am a residential school survivor who spoke Anishinaabemowin before attending school but no longer speak it.
- ☐ I grew up hearing Anishinaabemowin and understand it but do not speak it.
- ☐ I grew up with a fluent speaker in the home and understand Anishinaabemowin but do not speak it.
- ☐ I moved away from my community and do not feel comfortable speaking anymore.
- ☐ I speak a different dialect and don't feel comfortable speaking.
- ☐ I don't speak Anishinaabemowin because I no longer have anyone to speak with.
- ☐ I feel blocked when I go to speak the language.
- ☐ Other:

When People speak Anishinaabemowin, I can understand:

- Not at all or never
- Some or some of the time
- Half or half of the time
- All or most of the time
- Other:

If you know how to speak a few sentences in Anishinaabemowin, how often do you do it?

- Not at all or never
- Some or some of the time
- Half or half of the time
- All or most of the time
- Other:

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If you know how to have a whole conversation in Anishinaabemowin, how often do you do it?

- Not at all or never
- Some or some of the time
- Half or half of the time
- All or most of the time
- Other:

I am comfortable speaking my language with one close friend or family member.

- Not at all or never
- Some or some of the time
- Half or half of the time
- All or most of the time
- Other:

I am comfortable speaking my language in a small group.

- Not at all or never
- Some or some of the time
- Half or half of the time
- All or most of the time
- Other:

I am comfortable speaking my language in public settings.

- Not at all or never
- Some or some of the time
- Half or half of the time
- All or most of the time
- Other:

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I can still think in Anishinaabemowin, I just can't say what I want to anymore.

- Not at all or never
- Some or some of the time
- Half or half of the time
- All or most of the time
- Other:

I can write Anishinaabemowin using the double-vowel (Fiero) writing system.

- Yes
- No

I can read Anishinaabemowin written in the double-vowel (Fiero) writing system.

- Yes
- No

On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being low and 10 being high), how would you describe your comfort level speaking the language in any setting?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being low and 10 being high), how would you describe your comfort level speaking Anishinaabemowin at home/with your family

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being low and 10 being high), how would you describe your comfort level speaking Anishinaabemowin around other first speakers of Anishinaabemowin?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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Why do you want to reclaim your language?

Have you tried to reclaim your language before?

- Yes
- No

If you answered yes to the previous question, what stopped you?

What would you like to be able to DO in your language again? Where do you want to use Anishinaabemowin? *For example: Do you want to teach your children? Grandchildren? Be able to do daily activities/routines in the language? Speak to your partner or family? Participate in ceremonies? Etc.*

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Why do you want to be a part of this program?

Is there anything else you'd like to share about yourself?

Do you have any questions?

Is there anything else we haven't asked here that you'd like to tell us?

Example Intake Form



**GAAGIGE
GANAWENDAMAANG**
ANISHINAABEMOWIN

**Giimooj Gaa-bizindawaad
Anishinaabemowin Reclaiming
Anishinaabemowin**
A Community for Silent Speakers

Intake Form

I understand the program will run from May until August. I am committing to attending regularly.

YES / NO (please circle one)

I give permission for **Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin** to share my email address & phone number with the other participants of **Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin**. (These will be needed for you to communicate with your weekly language partner).

YES / NO (please circle one)

Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin is a pilot program. We will be creating a Resource Guide to the program when we finish, with the hope that other communities will want to replicate it. To best understand how the program was successful, and what we could do differently, we would like to interview all participants & facilitators at the end of the program. This can be done during a Zoom interview, anonymously through an online questionnaire, or through several other formats, depending on the wishes of the participants. Your feedback will help us to better understand what worked, what didn't work, and what silent speakers most need in their programming. I agree to give feedback after the program is finished.

YES / NO (please circle one)

Language Revitalization in part relies on securing funding for innovative programs that help learners and speakers reach, or maintain, conversational fluency. Overall, there has been very little research done to determine the success (or failure) of language programming, specifically with regard to Anishinaabemowin, and even less research done on the needs of Silent Speakers. We hope to write about **Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin** after the project concludes and present about it at future language conferences. Our hope is to encourage other communities to support their Silent Speakers and see what a great resource they can be for Language Revitalization. We will be discussing this with the group (participants as well as facilitators) at an upcoming session.

For our records, please fill out your contact information below.

Name	
Mailing	
Address Email	
Phone Number	

I would like to be added to the mailing list for Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin. **YES / NO (please circle one)**



8. Session Examples & Discussion Topics

Each week Facilitators of **Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad** guided participants through a reflective discussion on a different topic related to their language reclamation. In this chapter we will share some sample agendas that the facilitators created, as well as additional discussion topics and questions used throughout the intensive.

Some of these topics are more difficult than others. It is important to work with your Therapist to ensure they are available when you will be discussing topics that will trigger strong emotional responses and/or trauma.

Example Session 1: Language Partners

Purpose

To build relationships and help participants move forward with speaking by creating space for language in their daily lives.

Session Overview

Introduction to language partners

- Commitment - meet 5-10 minutes every day in whatever format that works best for you and your partner (Zoom, Google Meets, Facebook Messenger, phone, etc.). Meeting in a way where you can see each other will be helpful. If you forget how to say something or need to provide context you can use visuals and/or gestures instead of English.
- Meet every day to make it habit. You're making room for the language in your daily life and pushing yourself to move forward.
- Small bites of language are manageable and won't overwhelm you. You can maintain the language for 5 or 10 minutes. Don't always push past that. You want to set yourselves up to be successful.

- Language partners are about building relationships with each other. These are your supports as you go forward with language reclamation. This is about more than the 4 months of this program, it's about creating a lifelong supportive language community for yourselves.
- Everyone has a common goal of wanting to reclaim their language and begin speaking/being comfortable speaking. Celebrate each other. Cheer each other on.
- Laugh with each other. Practice kindness.

Guest Speaker: Mentor Apprentice

- Mentor Apprentice team will share about their experiences in the program.
- What helped them?
- What challenges did they face? How did they overcome them?
- What were their successes?
- They will share their experiences as a mentor and as a learner.

Tips & Tricks - Staying in the language

- Exploring: What if you don't understand what your language partner is saying? What if your language partner doesn't understand you? What if I don't know how to say something? What if I freeze? What if they freeze?
- How will we deal with these things **and** stay in the language?
- Discuss the importance of **staying in the language**.
- Demonstration of language "work-arounds" used in MAP programs.
- Can I skip it? Can I show it? Can I draw it? Describe it? How can I get the meaning across, even if it's not "grammatically correct?"
- Use self-regulation and soothing skills learned with the therapist. Stay present in your bodies. Use your tobacco ties. Ask for help. Smudge.
- "Maagizhaa waabang." Just move on from what you don't know or remember how to say yet. Maybe tomorrow it will come. Use that phrase as a cue, your partner will know what you mean.
- Speak to be understood. Just say it as you hear it inside of you. Your language partner will understand, they're not there to judge you. They want you to be able to speak. They are there supporting you. We will meet each other where we're at!

Group Discussion / Commitment Check-in

- How do you feel about the idea of language partners?
- How do you feel about speaking the language everyday?
- It's only 5-10 minutes a day, do you feel you can commit to that? If not, what do you think is, or will be, stopping you?
- Is there anything we can do to help support you?

Conversation Starters

- Aaniin waa-izhichigeyan waabang?
- Aaniin gaa-izhichigeyan bijiinaago?
- Aaniin ezhiwebak iwedi?
- Wiika na gi-gii-_____?
- Wiindamawishin...
- Dibaajimon aaniin gaa-izhiseg apii gaa-ikwesensian...

Example Session 2: One Month Community Check-in

Purpose

To strengthen community and create safety through a whole group check-in. *Facilitators and Therapist included.*

Group Sharing

Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to share. Don't pre-select an order. Let participants choose when they share. Help create a safe space for them to choose as part of reclaiming their voices as speakers.

Discussion Questions

General Check-in

- How are you making room for language in your daily life?
- How is the program working for you? Not working for you?
- How have things changed language-wise for you since the start of the program until now?
- Where are you getting blocked?
- What are you noticing now when you're around the language that you didn't notice before?
- How are you dealing with negative comments or language bullying since we started?
- How are we showing up for each other as a group?

Final Check-in

- Did anything come up for you while the others were sharing?
- Is there anything we need to deal with before we close?
- Is there anything you want to add to our next session or a topic/discussion you want to revisit?

Closing

Thank everyone for their courage in sharing and for supporting one another through this process. Restate the key takeaways from the session and highlight the shift from the first session to now.

Example Session 3: Dig Deep

Purpose

To encourage participants to reflect on their current relationships with Anishinaabemowin, how they are showing up, and to prepare for future conversations knowing they may be difficult.

Session Overview

Welcome and Opening

Over the next four months we're going to look at the different factors that have affected our relationships with Anishinaabemowin.

Whole Group Discussion

- How are we showing up? For the language? For each other? For ourselves?
- How are we making room for the language in our daily lives?

Breakout Partner Reflections

**have participants go to Breakout Rooms in pairs to reflect*

- When I think about the language, Anishinaabemowin, what is the first thing that comes to mind? What is the *first* feeling I have? Just name it, you don't have to go into detail yet if you don't want to.
- When I think about *speaking* Anishinaabemowin, what is the *first* thing that comes to mind? What is the *first* feeling I have?
- Reflect: What is your current relationship with the language? Do you have a good relationship with the language? If not, do you want to repair it?
- Reflect: Have you ever thought about the language in terms of relationship?

Discussion: Group Reflections

Bring all participants & facilitators together again to share what they discussed in their Breakout Rooms. Make note of anything that will need to be addressed in future sessions. If the therapist isn't in attendance, the Lead Facilitator will need to share their notes with them. The discussions from this session will connect to all future work the group does together.

Facilitator Note:

From this session, participants made the collective decision to come together to do Ceremony and honour Anishinaabemowin, the Spirit Keepers of Anishinaabemowin, and their Relatives. We met to make food offerings and tobacco ties to help us repair our relationships with Anishinaabemowin and to ask for help on this reclamation journey.

Example Session 4: Language & Identity

Purpose

To explore the connection between language and identity; to understand the impact colonial policies had on language. *We are looking back so that we can move forward.*

Facilitate with Care

You will need to have **established trust, safety and relationships within the group** *before* approaching this topic. This discussion will be a catalyst for the participants successful language reclamation.

This topic should span two sessions to allow for processing and discussion. The therapist should be present and the facilitators should be on-call for additional support to participants.

Important Note:

Many speakers have never considered that the language was an intentional target of colonization. It is critical that you focus on the connection between the intentional targeting of the language and the intended language loss that resulted. Speakers are carrying shame for not being able to speak.

This discussion is critical to helping them begin to lift that shame.

Session Overview

Welcome and Opening Discussion

Remind participants of the heavy topic for the session.

Our Elders have said that who we are as Anishinaabe people is in the language. The language is our identity. Our culture, language and identities cannot be separated - they are braided together like a braid of sweetgrass. So, what does that mean when we can't speak our language? How does that impact our identities as Anishinaabe people?

Colonization

Discussion of intentional policies and practices that targeted Indigenous Languages (linguicide).

Targeting of Indigenous Languages

- Elder Harry Bone Video. ([Click Here to View on Youtube](#))
 - Watch: “What Significance did Language Have During Treaty Negotiations”. If there is time watch “The Treaty Relationship” section.
- What significance did language have during treaty negotiations?
- What does reconciliation mean?

Review Key Quotes from Harry Bone:

“You have to use the English language to identify yourself, our original right is our language. The original rights of our peoples came through our languages.”

“Our original rights as a people came through our ceremonies, through our languages.”

“Language is the key. Try and bring the people back to our language because it’s who we are.”

“What does reconciliation mean? To us we need to reconcile with our creator, our ceremonies, our languages, the original part of our people, we have to go backwards to who we are. Everyone else has to reconcile their own history, the law, what Canada is based on. False assumptions and lies. They wanted to control us. They introduced concepts of superiority & inferiority. We didn’t have that. We are still here. We still have our rights. The right to language, oral history, ceremonies, everything that was originally given to us.”

“The government and Crown recognized how important our languages were and that’s why they wanted to take them away from us. If you have to use English instead of your own language, you have to use someone else’s language to identify who you are.”

Group Sharing / Video Reflection

- The predominant thinking back then was that Indigenous languages had no value. What does that mean to you today?
- If your language is seen as having no value, how has that impacted/influenced you?
- What are your own beliefs about Anishinaabemowin?
- Thinking about when the block first started for you in speaking your language, what were your beliefs about language and your identity as an Anishinaabe person at that time? Have those beliefs changed?
- What is your current relationship with Anishinaabemowin?

Colonization

- Has a history of targeting language, language suppression: this is proven to be the fastest way to assimilate people and is a method that has been used worldwide against Indigenous peoples
- It was a systemic process - government policies were designed to target language
- Residential Schools were built to assimilate
 - Indoctrination, punishments, abuse, shame, turning kids against each other (reporting on one another for language use), everything was designed to break the connection to the language
 - It was understood that the language was the key to breaking Kinship ties, communities, families, self-identity
- **If you don't speak your language today, it is not your fault.** Indigenous languages were an *intentional* target of colonization.
- The fact that you no longer comfortably speak your language today is a *direct and intentional result* of Canada's colonial policies.

Final Reflections

Ensure that you leave space for final reflections and remind participants of how they can access support if needed.

*“Reclaiming your language is an act of resistance,
healing, and an assertion of your identity and
rights as an Anishinaabe person.”
- Lead Facilitator*

Additional Discussion Topics

What Makes Anishinaabemowin Unique?

Our worldview as Anishinaabe is embedded in Anishinaabemowin, right into the grammar system itself. It is relational.

Unlike English, we refer to others through our relationship with them. The language is verb-based, highly descriptive, and can be both beautiful and funny. It is **not** a primitive language, it is highly complex and was in the Guinness Book of World Records because of this complexity.

It is important to understand our language from an Anishinaabe perspective, to push back against the misinformation and harm that was done through colonial systems.

Silent Speakers - Language Acquisition

Silent Speakers haven't really been studied very much. It's not known yet exactly how to reclaim your language/voice. I'm curious about how you understand the language.

- Do you understand it in phrases? In words and piece them together?
- Can you break the language down into what specific words mean?
- Do you get the gist of what people are saying overall, or do you understand the details?
- What does the language sound like to you?
- When you speak in English, do you think Anishinaabe?
- Maybe not in Anishinaabemowin, but do you see the world through an English lens or an Anishinaabe lens?

How Do Second Speakers Learn?

English and Anishinaabemowin are completely different languages and nothing from English helps with Anishinaabemowin acquisition and speech. We know there is a big difference between how we acquire Anishinaabemowin and English. Some people use a grammar based system to teach and learn, but taking the language apart like that can remove the Anishinaabe worldview that's embedded in the language. Knowing more than one language is celebrated today, we understand now that multilingualism has so many positive benefits.

- What do you know about 2nd speakers? Do you know any?
- How is your experience of the language different/the same from them?
- Look at the strengths and beauty of Anishinaabemowin, what makes it unique?
- What makes it different from English?

Language Classes

Reflecting on previous language learning experiences, identifying what was helpful, and considering what was missing for Silent Speakers.

- Have you gone to language classes/programs before?
- What worked for you there?
- What didn't work?
- What did you feel was missing or wished was there?
- Did you feel you belonged?

Lateral Violence vs. Lateral Kindness

We need to learn how to deal with language bullying and understand/recognize it so that we don't make the mistake of doing this to others as we reclaim our language. A future goal for our Silent Speakers is for them to become mentors to language learners and we want them to contribute positively to other people's language journeys.

- How do you deal with negative comments? From other speakers and Elders?
- From your peers and/or family? How does lateral violence contribute to language bullying?

Language Elitism

The "language police." There can be conflict with some 2nd language learners who are proficient in writing and grammar and hold that up as the ideal. They may question or discount what a Silent Speaker says. Sometimes linguistics and western language understanding can be weaponized against Silent Speakers (arguments around being able to spell, understand verb types and grammar). This can further alienate and exclude the Silent Speaker from the speaking community.

- How do we deal with language elitism?
- How do we respond to negative comments and hierarchical thinking that doesn't fit the Anishinaabe worldview?
- What is actually important? (Speaking!)

You and Anishinaabemowin

Exploring personal relationship to language: strengths, areas of anxiety, and creating personal goals.

- What are some topics you feel comfortable talking about in Anishinaabemowin?
- What do you struggle with when speaking?
- Can you put sentences together?
- Do you need to use English?
 - When?
 - Is it because you're missing the language you need to say what you want?
 - Or because you feel blocked/anxious?
- What are some things you'd like to be able to discuss easily?
- Where do you want to use Anishinaabemowin?
- What are your goals for our time together?
- What are your goals 10 years from now?
- What do you want to be able to **do** in Anishinaabemowin?
- What supports do you need when/if you're feeling uncomfortable/anxious about speaking? (Think about what *you* need!)



Silent Speaker Camp



9. Creating Space for Healing

Teaching Tools to Work Through the Blocks

Holding space for healing is essential to participant success. Throughout the four-month intensive, participants were supported not only through discussion and language activities, but also through therapeutic approaches that acknowledged the emotional impacts of language loss, shame, grief, and trauma.

Our cohort partnered with Leanna Marshall, an Anishinaabe Social Worker with 20+ years of experience. She specializes in helping people process their traumatic experiences using a form of therapy called EMDR. She is also an art therapist, which is another effective way of processing trauma.

Below are Leanna's reflections and thoughts regarding her experience, approach, and therapeutic process while working with **Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad - Reclaiming Anishinaabemowin**.

Therapeutic Approach

I approach my work like I approach any other part of my life: through ceremony, through my relationship with the land, water, and ancestors. I believe in the power of people as a collective. As Indigenous people, we are sophisticated, intelligent, funny, kind, and connected to the land and to our ancestors in fascinating and beautiful ways. I use offerings of tobacco/semaa, food, and cloth to help guide me in the work that I do in the community. Designing sessions for **Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad** was no different: it came from spirit. It came from the land. And it came from Anishinaabemowin.

“As Indigenous people, we are sophisticated, intelligent, funny, kind, and connected to the land and to our ancestors in fascinating and beautiful ways.”

My role in this collective language journey was to facilitate a weekly 2-hour, online group session over the course of 4 months. The purpose of the group sessions was to create an intentional time and space where people could express and process their emotions connected to speaking the language. The effects of a systemic genocide throughout our lands have left people devastated by the loss of family, by the loss of land, by the loss of culture and identity, and the loss of our language, Anishinaabemowin. The loss of family is connected to the loss of identity, which is connected to feelings of not belonging, which is connected to language loss, which is connected to not feeling heard, seen, or valued. In other words, the collective trauma we have experienced has taken up so much space in our own bodies and minds and hearts that it affected people's ability to speak their language.

What I have learned from Silent Speakers is that when they describe their previous experiences with the language, there is pain, fear, loss, the feeling of being invisible, and feelings of unworthiness and not belonging. We wanted to ensure that people were given the time and space to talk, process and essentially heal from some of those emotional blocks that impacted their ability to speak their language. The participants spoke about shame, guilt, abuse, hurt, being bullied, feeling stupid, and being humiliated.

I believe wholeheartedly in the act of creating. The act of creating or making is a process that brings people together and the act of creating and making art saves lives. In Western terms, art is often limited to a painting that is framed on the wall and then judged whether it is aesthetically pleasing or not. Through an Indigenous lens, the act of creating is the act of living. Often, we create for functional purposes like to have tools to scrape hide, or bowls to store food, or to have clothes to wear. Sometimes we create simply to look good because we are all such beautiful people that we like to look our best and be proud of who we are! We also create for spiritual and ancestral connections.

“The act of creating or making is a process that brings people together and the act of creating and making art saves lives.”



Silent Speaker Camp

There are sacred sites all over Turtle Island that connect us to our Ancestors which shows the foresight, the creativity, and the spiritual communication of your own Ancestors! *Our relationship with our hands, with our breath, with our emotions, with our spirit, all serve the purpose of connecting us to a different part of ourselves.* **When someone has experienced stress and trauma over and over and over through many unimaginable ways, those emotions get stuck in our bodies.** It gets stuck in our throats. It can feel like we cannot use our voice. It can get stuck in our eyes. It can feel like we cannot see ourselves clearly or connect with our ability to release. It can get stuck in our hips and womb and create stiffness and mobility issues. It can get stuck in our hearts and lungs where it can feel like we cannot breathe fully or completely.

In the realm of this group, **arting** or creative action served to bring people back into themselves in ways that are much richer and deeper than the usual verbal processing or “talk therapy”. I encouraged the participants to use symbols and colours and reminded them that being creative isn’t about the final product, the teachings are from the act of doing.

Due to the level of trauma experienced within the group, it was essential that they learn ways to self-soothe and to ground themselves and activate the parasympathetic nervous system. I introduced them to somatic practices like the *Butterfly Hug* or a practice called *Silence-the-Alarm* which served to keep them in the present and to strengthen their connection to their bodies. We talked about how trauma is stored in our bodies, and how our brain has worked to protect us from feeling difficult emotions.

We also discussed how trauma distorts how we think about ourselves and others resulting in feeling inadequate or unlovable. I’ll be honest, working with Silent Speakers can be tough. They have decades of active and protective shields, so I had to approach this work with so much gentleness. I want to acknowledge the vulnerability of the women that are a part of Gaagige. This process took trust, respect, and openness.

It was essential that this space felt comfortable and that the participants felt some sense of emotional safety. One of the ways that this was created was by using a bird’s nest as a metaphor. The nest represents safety, caring, and nurturing. We built a community nest where I introduced found objects like rocks, stones, stuffies, medicines, water, etc. **The prompt was: What does a caring community look and feel like?** Each person chose an item, and they instructed me where to put it in the nest and they shared what was important to them in terms of what they needed from one another.

Creating became the place where people were invited to go inward and reflect on the question being posed to them. Because we only had about 2 hours together, we had to create parameters and a structure for the group sessions. *It was intentional that these sessions were **not** a place where people could verbally talk about their traumatic experiences or do a ‘trauma dump’. We had to build ways of containment while also having them share and release.*

Session Structure

Because we only had about 2 hours together, we had to create parameters and a structure for the group sessions.

Typical Meeting

- Check-in / Opening Remarks
- Presentation of Teaching Based Theme
- Art Prompt & Material Introduction
- Work Time
 - Art making took approximately 20-30min; participants were allowed more time if needed.
 - Some people would turn their cameras off as they worked, others left them on.
- Share out
 - Participants share what came to them through their art.
 - People were invited to simply listen to one another.
 - There was no commentary or judgements about the art itself.
- Reflection
 - End every class with each participant sharing a highlight or a takeaway.

“We’ve taken the time to talk about other things that affect our language usage. The healing component of this group has been so good for me as a Silent Speaker.”

- Silent Speaker Participant

Intentional Progression

The first part was focused on building trust and comfort in the group; introducing body awareness and self-soothing techniques; and teachings around emotions. Talking about emotions was vital because many of the participants expressed that they received messages that it wasn't safe to feel or express emotions in their families.

The next stage moved into reuniting them with the language.

The remainder of the sessions continued the theme of leaning into how we limit ourselves and how the language and culture can help us move through challenging times.

Closing Thoughts

For me the sharing and seeing the images that people created was the most powerful. They talked about feeling a deep sense of loss with the language and with members of their family. Yet at the same time, they were able to give themselves permission to feel and develop a deeper and more loving relationship with the language.

It was important to accept the participants where they were at and know that there were some days that they showed up with their protective armour and kept it on the entire session; however **they still showed up and they still participated**. That being said, throughout the process, I could see that protective layer starting to thin out. We did everything in relationship and there was a reciprocal exchange that happened.

There is a beautiful trust and honouring within this group. Now when I see and hear the ladies, I see them speak with confidence, with pride, with curiosity. They are showing up for themselves. They are showing up for their love of the language and for what it means to them. We love one another and we are so proud of one another and that nurturing nest that we created together continues to be a resting place as each of the ladies sound their voices.

Miigwech.

Leanna Marshall

“I’ll be honest, working with Silent Speakers can be tough. They have decades of active and protective shields, so I had to approach this work with so much gentleness. I want to acknowledge the vulnerability of the women... This process took trust, respect, and openness.”
- Therapist

Example Arting Session 1:

Comfort on Land & in Our Bodies

Purpose

To continue to integrate the group; identify individual and group goals as it relates to their language journey

Check-in

Each person will check in with a personal item.

Activity

To connect the women to the land by doing a mini-walking meditation. Participants will create an outline of their feet - right & left.

- Left foot represents: what is keeping you stuck in the past?
- Right foot represents: where are you going?
- A pocket: what is going to keep you going?

Community:

What does it feel like to walk together on this journey?

Materials:

Paper, pen, whatever material that they have around.

Sharing

People shared their fears of judgement, others expressed the loss of connection with their families as reasons why they get stuck or even their own anxiety. People also shared that it was important for them to be responsible for their own language journey and to keep trying. They also acknowledged the importance of the group and receiving strength from hearing other people's stories and experiences. It made them feel less alone.

Example Arting Session 2: Nayendam (feels settled)

Purpose

To re-group, to get settled back into our bodies as a group

Check-in

What is something that made you smile today?

Activity

Smudge Teaching (adapted from Linda Maniowabi)

Smudge meditation with the medicines (or imagined):

What are you inviting in? What are you releasing.

Hands

- Release: What are you physically releasing?
- Invitation: What type of touch are you inviting in?

Eyes

- Release: What can fade into the background? What is blinding you? What are you focused on?
- Invitation: Where do you seek clarity from?

Head

- Release: What thoughts are consuming you?
- Invitation: What are some gentle thoughts that you can invite in.

Mouth

- Release: What words do I need to release?
- Invitation: How can I speak more truthfully or gently?

Ears

- Release: What do I need to hear?
- Invitation: What do I need to hear today?

Womb

- Release: What pain can I release?
- Invitation: How can I embrace life more fully?

Example Arting Session 3: (Paper) Medallions

Purpose

Participants will identify symbols that are meaningful and enhance resilience and are a positive protective factor for themselves.

Teaching:

Medallions are worn as a symbol of identity, protection, and pride.

Activity

Cutting out a circle using cardstock, cardboard, etc.

Cut two holes and feed string/yarn through the holes.

Draw an image that represents the essence of you.

What are words in Anishnaabemowin that can describe you?

Closing:

Wear your medallion as a source of pride.

Example Arting Session 4: (Kwezens & Gizhkaandag)

Purpose

To Connect with their inner l'il girl.

Teaching:

Cedar is medicine that is used for protection and to help release feelings of grief and loss.

Activity

Materials: cedar water, cloth

Draw cedar around your page.

Paint using the cedar water.

Visualization: connecting with l'il girl. Notice how old she is. Notice how she's feeling.

Connect with her. Introduce yourself to her. Go to a place where she feels safe. What does she need? Listen to her.

Draw out symbols, images, words of what the l'il girl needs at *this* moment.

Sharing

People shared that when they connected with that little part of themselves it was usually a part that was 5 years old. They shared that the little girl need help and others remembered how brave and strong they were. Other people struggled connecting with that part of themselves. It made them feel sad. Others talked about how their little girl felt forgotten and they used this exercise to reconcile and forgive. Others talked about the need for the little part of themselves just to feel loved and to have the ability to choose.

Closing

Wipe yourself with cedar water. Smudge.



10. Silent Speakers Speak

Statements of Hope and Reflection

The purpose of this program was for the participants to *reconnect* and *reclaim* their relationship with Anishinaabemowin, while also **empowering them to sound their voices**.

This cohort showed incredible resiliency and bravery in sharing their personal stories and reflections throughout the sessions. We are incredibly grateful for the work that they did as individuals, and as a community, and for the impact their stories had on *all* of us. Below are impact statements from participants.

*I've started speaking more,
even just to myself when I'm driving.*

*When I'm listening to other speakers it helps me remember
words and how my grandparents sounded.*

*I was judging myself before. I didn't give value to
understanding the language, I didn't value it or see the value
in my understanding if I couldn't just speak.*

*People say that we (Silent Speakers) are the middle, we're the
bridge between other First Speakers and learners.*

*I really want to speak my language before I leave this earth,
it's the one thing I really wish I could do.*

*Even when I go to the Speakers and ask them questions, ask
them to help me in Ojibwe, they start speaking in English.
English overtakes everything.*

*This group is on track for how you're doing things. It's a
smaller group, we really get to connect. I felt lonely in other
groups, they were too large, we didn't really get to interact.
We've taken the time to talk about other things that affect
our language usage. The healing component of this group has
been so good for me as a Silent Speaker. Recognizing that loss
of language, that loss of the spirit of the language and
bringing in the ceremony to help us reclaim it.*

*I had to lower my expectations of myself. I have to realize I'm
not going to be speaking fully in 4 months, it's not going to
magically come out of me. But that's okay, it's made me
realize it is possible if I **keep at it**.*

I still feel shy. I still sometimes feel like I can't do it, but I feel okay too. You guys encourage me, I haven't felt that way in other places. I'm very proud of our group. I'm feeling good about it.

I was taking classes with other people from down south and I guess they speak differently there, but I didn't know that. I kept second guessing myself, thinking my way of saying it was wrong.

I heard from Elders, if you stop speaking your language you won't be Anishinaabe anymore. My grandparents said that.

That negativity happens all the time.

In classes there's always a real quick decision to say somebody is wrong. I don't know why people need to do that.

It hurts. It's not productive.

Maybe yeah, it sounds wrong to you but it could be a variation. We should be supporting each other in speaking.

We don't have time to waste.

I'm honouring the spirit of the language now.

I always talk about this program,

Giimooch Gaa-bizindawaad *and what it's doing for me.*

I was always worrying that I'd say things wrong and I questioned my abilities.

I've surprised myself with what I know and can say now.





Additional Resources

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For more information please contact:
Gaagige Ganawendamaang Anishinaabemowin
info@gaagige.ca
www.gaagige.ca



GAAGIGE GANAWENDAMAANG
ANISHINAABEMOWIN