

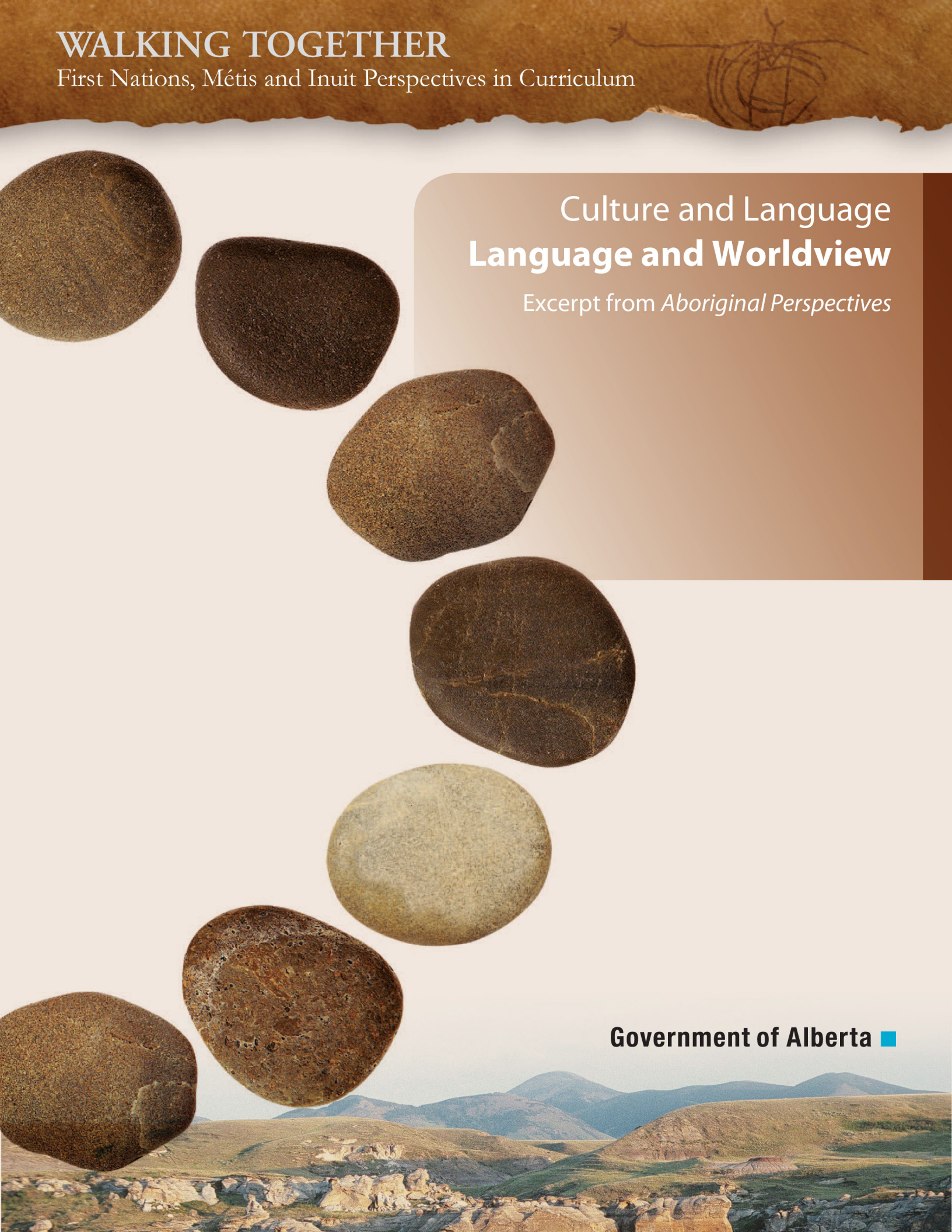
WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Culture and Language Language and Worldview

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Government of Alberta ■





LANGUAGE AND WORLDVIEW

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

LANGUAGE AND WORLDVIEW

Language and culture are intertwined and cannot be separated. Learning an Aboriginal language means absorbing the very foundation of an Aboriginal identity — the web of relationships that bind the self, community, and natural world. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, in consultation with Elders, reported that “thinking and dreaming in a language means that the speaker has internalized the principles for organizing the world that underpins that language.” These “principles for organizing the world” are another way of describing worldview. To internalize a worldview is to literally see the world from that view.

A language is rich and varied in its expression of the key cultural experiences of its speakers. For example, there are many words used by the Woodland Cree for *moose*. The prominence of moose in the language is related to the significance of the animal to the traditional Woodland Cree livelihood.

Indigenous peoples from Hawaii would likely have few words, if any, for moose in their language. Yet they might have a large vocabulary to describe the behaviour of the tides or particular fish.

Whatever is most important to a culture is described most precisely in its language. For example, Nehiyawewin, the Cree language, has many terms to describe relatives. See the chart on page 82 for examples.

Aboriginal languages reflect a cultural belief in connection and interdependence. Words eliminate boundaries and emphasize change, transition, and transformation. Nothing is static. Even an object such as a rock can be both physical and spiritual at the same time. Aboriginal languages reflect this dynamic view of the world with many verbs. Verbs are words of motion, action, change, and transition.

In contrast, the English language reflects a worldview that draws separations between things — black and white; saint and sinner; animate and inanimate. As a language, it tends to emphasize nouns over verbs. Objects are living or not living; stories are fact or fiction. A shared language unites people with a sense of shared understanding. As one Elder states, “Talking Cree . . . you have the feeling of your culture, your own feelings, values . . . you know them better.” Language provides a path to understanding that is more difficult to find in another language. One Dene Suliné verb, for example, can contain as much information as one English sentence.

This excerpt on language and worldview ©Nelson Education Ltd. *Aboriginal Perspectives*, Toronto, ON, 2004, pp. 81–84.



ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES TODAY

Today about 26 per cent of the Aboriginal population — about 206 000 people out of 800 000 people — claim an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue. The most individuals by far speak Cree, Inuktitut, and Ojibway. Linguists are confident that these three languages will survive in the future.

However, Statistics Canada consider 95 per cent of Aboriginal languages to be endangered, which means they are spoken by enough people that survival is a possibility, but only if community interest is present and education programs are available. All languages depend on people to speak them and keep them alive. In cultures based on an oral tradition, languages contain the cultures themselves, so loss of language could mean loss of culture. In 1996, 120 people spoke Ktunaxa, one of the most endangered languages in Canada. Fewer than 6 per cent of Métis adults speak Michif; fewer than 5 per cent of Métis children speak any Aboriginal language.

One reason for the different rates of language retention is the number of people in each culture. There are almost 80 000 Cree speakers spread across the country — Cree speakers are the most numerous group of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

Another factor is geography. In general, the more isolated a region was from European society's impact, the less its people adopted French or English. For example, Inuktitut speakers still tend to live in their traditional territories. The Arctic has historically attracted few settlers and outside influences arrive slowly. This has helped Inuktitut survive as a vibrant language.

In comparison, the Ktunaxa people, a small nation, traditionally lived in southeastern British Columbia. Their territory was easily accessible to other nations and was directly in the path of westbound traders and explorers. Communication in other languages had always been an essential part of their culture, even before European contact. The Ktunaxa culture has therefore been greatly affected by interactions with other cultures and languages.

There are exceptions to these generalizations. Even some isolated communities are losing their traditional languages, especially today. Global communication technologies mean that few communities are completely removed from the reach of satellite transmissions from mainstream media.

Over the last fifty years, government policies that have resulted in the separation of families, as well as the lack of support for Aboriginal languages, have greatly reduced the number of Aboriginal mother tongue speakers.

First Nations people living in Cold Lake, Alberta, are just one First Nation community in Alberta that is determined to preserve its language. Currently, one in ten residents speaks Dene Suliné. Through the Daghida project — a name proclaiming “we are alive” — community members are working with the University of Alberta on programs that will help them retain both their language and thousands of years of traditional knowledge. One program goal for the future is to establish cultural camps. Students who attend these camps will learn traditional skills in Dene Suliné, such as trapping, fishing, gardening, and crafts.