

WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Healing Historical Trauma Aboriginal Languages: Revitalization

Excerpt from *Peoples and Cultural Change*

Teacher Resource

Government of Alberta ■





ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES: REVITALIZATION

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ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES: REVITALIZATION

In Alberta, the major Aboriginal languages spoken are Blackfoot, two variants of Plains Cree (one sometimes known as Woodland Cree), Dene Suliné, Dene Tha', Dunne-Za, Métis Cree, Michif, Nakoda, Sauleaux, and Tsuu T'ina.

More than half of the sixty Aboriginal languages in Canada today are endangered. Ten Aboriginal languages have become extinct over the past century. With a growing general awareness of the importance of maintaining Aboriginal languages, an increasing number of specific programs and community efforts aimed at revitalization are underway. From 1996 to 2001, eight languages showed an increase in the number of speakers. According to Statistics Canada, more people can now carry on a conversation in Inuktitut, Dene, Montagnais-Naskapi, Attikamekw, Mi'kmaq, Dakota, and Oji-Cree. The Aboriginal Studies 10 text, *Aboriginal Perspectives*, also presents statistics for Aboriginal languages in Canada.

A New Beginning

The first Aboriginal language immersion program in Canada was established in 1980 by the Mohawk people of Kahnawake, Quebec. It was modelled after the French immersion programs elsewhere in the province, and it has since become a model for other Aboriginal communities in North America. Recent surveys of language use show an increase in the speaking of Mohawk, including mixed into English conversations and in private by young people. Overall, more people are now able to speak Mohawk, especially the younger generation who went through the immersion program. The middle generation, however, did not know the language and had not learned it.

Language Interrupted

Generally, language is passed down from one generation to the next. A child learns to speak from its parents. Across Canada, however, many members of an entire generation of Aboriginal people lost the ability to speak their mother tongue. Students who attended residential schools were often forbidden to speak their own language, even if it was the only language they knew.

This excerpt on Aboriginal languages revitalization ©Nelson Education Ltd. *Peoples and Cultural Change Teacher Resource*, Toronto, ON, 2004, pp. 392–397.

On the decreasing number of people able to speak Aboriginal languages today, the Report of the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* states that “an underlying reason for the decline is the rupture in language transmission from older to younger generations and the low regard many Aboriginal people have had for traditional language proficiency as a result of policies devised by government and enforced by churches and the education system.”

Oral Languages

Because Aboriginal cultures are based on an oral history, language instruction has to begin with the basics. How do you spell a word that has never been written down? Because these languages are still evolving in the written form, various spellings for the same word exist.

One of the challenges faced today in recording Aboriginal languages on paper — in an attempt to prevent their loss as numbers of speakers diminish — is that the Latin alphabet does not easily address the required phonetics. The solution of using diacritics and other modifications results in words that remain unpronounceable to many English speakers, who have not yet been taught what sounds are indicated by those symbols; for example, Kwagu and Suliné.

Although the handling of Aboriginal languages in written form currently remains inconsistent, standard grammatical rules and bilingual dictionaries (e.g., English to Cree; Cree to English) are being developed. Another challenge is that some Aboriginal languages can be written in syllabics as well as roman orthography. Some learning materials are developed in three formats.

Sample Text in Cree

ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ
ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ
ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ ᑭᑦᑭᑦ

Transliteration

misiwe ininiw tipenimitisowinik eshi nitawikit nesta peywakan kici ishi
kanawapamikiwisit kistenimitisowinik nesta minikowisiwima. e
pakitimamacik kaketawenitamowininiw nesta mitonenicikaniniw nesta
wicikwesitowinik kici ishi kamawapamitocik.

Translation

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

— *Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

Language Revitalization

What it will take to restore Aboriginal languages to health depends on many factors, including the circumstances of each community. In some communities, only a few Elders can still speak their language fluently.

In general, Aboriginal languages are spoken and understood more widely in First Nations communities than in cities, which offer fewer opportunities to practice and learn these languages.

More remote communities are often more successful at retaining language skills. The 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey indicates that proportionately more than twice as many adults living on reserves could speak an Aboriginal language.

In 2001, more than 156 000 Aboriginal people lived in Alberta, giving the province the third largest Aboriginal population in Canada. Over three-quarters of those people live in urban centres, away from reserves or settlements.

A language program planning handbook produced by a BC First Nations education steering committee states that “language education for children and young people will be most effective if there is an opportunity to practise the language in the home and the community. There is a need, therefore, for adult language courses, as a number of First Nations communities have recognized.”

It is easiest to learn a language in early childhood, and increasingly difficult as people age. Though in some cases finding qualified teachers and appropriate educational materials remains challenging, more teachers are being trained through targeted programs and support materials are being developed.

Aboriginal Immersion

The Onion Lake First Nation in Saskatchewan assumed control of its community’s basic education in 1981 and added responsibility for post-secondary education in 1984. Chief Taylor Elementary School runs a Cree immersion program from preschool to grade three. Students then switch to a combination of Cree and English instruction.

In 2003, the Onion Lake First Nation began a joint effort with the Lac La Ronge and Peter Ballantyne First Nations to expand the immersion program through to grade nine. This five-year language initiative will provide a fully developed First Nations language curriculum and resources to all First Nations schools in Saskatchewan.

Numerous immersion programs are underway in Alberta, including Niitsipowaahsini, a Blackfoot language program spanning kindergarten to grade five, run by the Kainai Board of Education since 1997. Cree immersion programs are offered at the Nipsihkopahk and Miyowakotowin schools in Hobbema. Successful immersion programs often incorporate Elders who are fluent in their language and able to also teach cultural traditions and values. The Samson First Nation has also implemented a community initiative that supports language revitalization efforts with evening language classes and numerous language-related activities.

Strength in Numbers

Though the Chiniki First Nation — one of five Nakoda communities in Alberta claims to have one of the highest language retention rates in North America, today the Nakoda (Stoney) language is considered to be at risk of extinction because only a few thousand speakers remain. The Nakoda language is part of the Siouan language family, which covers a vast area of North America, but Nakoda is spoken only in Alberta. There are three dialects: those of the Alexis First Nation, the Paul First Nation, and the Nakoda First Nation at Morley.

In the 1960s, in conjunction with a linguistics institute, the Morley Nakoda community, which includes the Chiniki, Bear’s Paw, and Wesley/Goodstoney First Nations, developed a writing system and standard alphabet for the Nakoda language. In the 1970s, it became one of the first in Alberta to operate its own cultural program promoting the use of the Nakoda language

in schools.

Today the Stoney Language Project is underway. Among its goals are the development of educational materials, a dictionary, and electronic resources. Alberta Education and the Alexis Board of Education are working together to develop a secondary-level Nakoda language program.

The Daghida Project

In 1998, only 285 of 1908 members of the Cold Lake First Nation could speak their language at a conversational or fluent level. The Daghida Project — named for a Dene Suliné word meaning “we are alive” — is an alliance between the Cold Lake First Nation and the University of Alberta.

Goals of the program include establishing an immersion program in community schools; producing a Dene Suliné–English dictionary, grammar manual, and website; and initiating university-level language courses at the University of Alberta. Ongoing or proposed projects include an Elders’ advisory group, an adult Dene language class, immersion daycare, and teacher education. Considered key to the overall project is restoring pride in the Dene language and culture, and implementing language use into everyday life. The Dene Language Cafe is an informal weekly forum for interested community members to share a meal and converse in Dene.

It Takes a Village . . .

With the goal of increasing the use of Cree and supporting school-based language instruction, the Saddle Lake First Nation initiated a community language revitalization program in 2001 called Kawi Nehiyawetan, which means “Let’s speak Cree again” in the Plains Cree dialect. At many community events, only Cree is spoken. Activities include ceremonies, feast, camps, and storytelling. A Cree radio program sponsored by the initiative operates for an hour each day.

True North Strong

In Canada, only two territories give official status to Aboriginal languages: Nunavut, with Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun (a western dialect that uses roman orthography rather than syllabics) as well as French and English, and the Northwest Territories, which specifies eleven official languages: Dene Suliné, Cree, English, French, Gwich’in, Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut, Inuvialuktun, North Slavey, South Slavey (Dené Tha’), and Tâîchô.

“Official status” means that citizens are entitled to receive services in those languages on request and to use those languages in dealings with the government. It also allows their use in the Legislative Assembly. In its Official Languages Act, Nunavut has also committed to making Inuktitut its working language while still respecting the rights of English and French speakers. All government websites, for example, display Inuktitut syllabics. As well as making information more accessible to the older generation, the increasing use of Inuktitut on the Internet serves as a means of attracting the younger generation by modernizing the language — a proven strategy in language revitalization.

Another proven strategy is making the language useful in everyday life. While newspapers in Aboriginal languages remain uncommon, the Inuit in the eastern Arctic region have received the news in both Inuktitut and English for over twenty years via the bilingual

Nunatsiaq News newspaper.

Inuktitut remains one of the strongest Aboriginal languages in Canada. In 2001, 82 percent of Inuit of all ages knew Inuktitut well enough to carry on a conversation. Of Inuit people living in the Far North, 97 percent said they could speak Inuktitut very or relatively well. Nine in ten Inuit children in the Far North could speak or understand Inuktitut. There are at least 60 000 Inuktitut speakers in Canada today.

Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute

Until 2000, many Aboriginal language educators headed south of the border for training, to the twenty-five-year-old annual American Indian Languages Development Institute at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Now they can attend the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI) at the University of Alberta. Modelled after the specialized course in Arizona, it is the only one of its kind in Canada.

The CILLDI intensive summer school trains Aboriginal speakers and educators in First Nations languages, linguistics, curriculum development, research, and second-language teaching methodologies. Its mandate is to help preserve endangered languages by developing research skills and teaching resources for those who speak the languages. The program runs for three weeks each summer and also provides a Cree immersion day camp for children.

The institute began in 2000 at Onion Lake with 14 people in attendance and moved around for three years before finding a permanent home at the University of Alberta that could accommodate the number of expected students. By 2003, attendance had grown to more than 150 participants. From the initial two, six languages are now represented: Dené Tha', Gwich'in, Dene Suliné, Nakoda, Inuktitut, and Cree.

Kindergarten to Post-Secondary Education

Across Canada, public school boards are now offering Aboriginal languages classes in many schools. Alberta schools can now offer Cree and Blackfoot language programs from elementary through senior high. In Calgary, the Medicine Wheel kindergarten program, created in conjunction with Métis Calgary Family Services, includes Michif and Cree language instruction as well as cultural activities.

The First Nations University of Canada offers introductory and advanced language courses in Cree, Saulteaux, Nakota, Dakota, and Dene. In Alberta, adult students of all ages can improve skills or learn to speak Blackfoot, Cree, and other languages at the University of Alberta, University of Lethbridge, Blue Quills First Nations College, and Red Crow Community College, among other avenues including through Friendship Centres and community-run programs. Kayas Cultural College at Fox Lake provides language training in the Woodland Cree dialect, including in syllabics.

We have to see our language not as a problem any more, but as a resource. I'm making a career out of my language.

— Donna Paskemin, CILLDI co-founder and Cree language instructor, School of Native Studies, University of Alberta

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