Language Revitalization in Northern Manitoba:

A Study of a Cree Bilingual Program in an Elementary School

by Walter Nikkel
## Table of Contents

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 3
Background of Study .............................................................................................................. 4
  Language Revitalization ..................................................................................................... 5
  Alienation .......................................................................................................................... 7
Method ................................................................................................................................ 8
Findings ................................................................................................................................. 9
  Cree Language Proficiency ............................................................................................... 9
  Student Attitudes .............................................................................................................. 11
  Academic Performance in other Subjects ....................................................................... 13
  Adult Perspectives on the Cree Program ........................................................................... 16
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 21
  What does the data tell us about the success of the Cree Program? ................................. 22
References ............................................................................................................................ 24

## List of Tables

Table 1. Data sources for study............................................................................................ 8
Table 2. Cree Program Curriculum Outcomes ....................................................................... 10
Table 3. Student Attitudes .................................................................................................. 12
Table 4. Grade 3 Provincial Assessment Results .................................................................. 15

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Grade 3 Reading Assessment Results for Cree and English Programs ................. 16
Figure 2. Grade 3 Numeracy Assessment Results for Cree and English Programs ............. 16
Introduction

“… If you destroy our languages you not only break down [our traditional] relationships, but you also destroy other aspects of our Indian way of life and culture, especially those that describe man's connection with nature, the Great Spirit, and the order of things. Without our languages, we will cease to exist as a separate people,” (in Battiste, 1998).

These words from Elder Eli Taylor of the Sioux Valley First Nation articulate a perception, common in Canadian Aboriginal communities, that their traditional languages are essential to their cultural identity and that both are in danger of disappearing.

This paper summarizes a study of a community effort to reverse the loss of Aboriginal language and culture: a Cree bilingual program in an elementary school in Thompson, Manitoba. The Cree Program offers up to 50% of daily instruction in Cree and is modeled on Canadian French immersion and heritage language bilingual programs, where students’ language acquisition through the study of other subjects in the target language. The Cree Program is a local initiative, developed by the Thompson school district in response to a demand from the local Aboriginal community. The program aims are: 1) to preserve and revitalize Cree language use, 2) to impart Cree cultural knowledge and perspectives, and 3) to develop students’ cultural identity and pride. An underlying purpose of the program is to better meet the educational needs and desires of the Thompson Aboriginal community.

The Cree Program is housed in Wapanohk Community School, one of six K-8 schools in the School District of Mystery Lake, Thompson, Manitoba. It offers Kindergarten to Grade 4 classes, adding a new grade every year. In the year of the study, 2005/06, 120 students attended the Cree Program out of a total school population of 360 students.
Thompson is a nickel-mining town of 17,000 people located 760 kilometres north of Winnipeg, in traditional Cree country. Built in the 60s as a mining town, the city has become an administrative and economic centre for northern Manitoba with a rapidly growing Aboriginal population (often estimated at 40-50%, though exact figures are not available).

Background of Study

This study stems from my tenure as a language teacher and curriculum coordinator with the Thompson school district where I worked closely with Cree educators to develop curriculum and materials for the Cree Program. At its inception, this groundbreaking language revitalization initiative generated considerable enthusiasm, garnering media and political attention and praise in provincial and national centres. However, the people actually delivering the program, the teachers, faced many immediate obstacles: there were few Cree materials or teaching resources; Cree language isn’t standardized (i.e., people speak a variety of dialects and regional variants of Cree); Cree language is orally focused while schools tend to be focused on literacy; few Cree speaking teachers are trained in immersion language pedagogy or Cree linguistics; etc. Not surprisingly, when the period of fanfare and “feel good” publicity passed, the teachers were left with a lot of hard work and little help. On the surface it appeared that things were functioning smoothly, but inside the school, teachers were struggling to maintain optimism and enthusiasm about the program.

While working with Cree Program teachers, questions often arose about the program’s purpose and effectiveness. Were students actually speaking Cree? What level of language acquisition could reasonably occur in a school language program? What if people’s expectations were too high? Should teachers focus on speaking or writing in the classroom? What about culture, what role should it play in the program? When an opportunity arose for me to undertake
graduate study, I proposed to conduct a formative study of the program to explore these questions. An advisory committee of parents, teachers and school district personnel helped me define and focus the research on issues of local importance and relevance.

The central question of my investigation was: how effective is the Cree Program? This was further defined by the following questions:

- are the students learning to speak Cree?
- are they learning and learning to appreciate Cree culture?
- are they meeting provincial outcomes in other subjects?
- how do parents and teachers perceive the Cree Program? Is it doing what it should be doing?

This paper offers a brief overview of my study of the Cree Program based on research conducted from September to December, 2005. Two themes that figure prominently in the study are language revitalization and cultural alienation. My overview of the study begins with a brief discussion of these themes.

**Language Revitalization**

Experts warn that many of the world’s languages are in imminent danger of disappearing and that over half of the languages spoken today are not being effectively passed on to the next generation (Crystal, 2000; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Norris and Jantzen (2002), in a study of 1996 Census data, find that the prognosis for Aboriginal languages in Canada is even more pessimistic. Only 30 percent of approximately 800,000 Aboriginal people in Canada are able to converse in an Aboriginal language, and only 18 percent speak an Aboriginal tongue as their primary language in the home. Of the 50 Aboriginal languages spoken in Canada, only Cree, Inuktitut and Ojibway have sufficient numbers of speakers to be considered viable in the long
term. Yet even these languages are threatened. Their populations of mother-tongue speakers are aging, and it is generally only in remote areas that they have significant intergenerational continuity. Aboriginal people in urban centers are much less likely to use an Aboriginal language in the home than people living on remote reserves. But the proportion of Canada’s Aboriginal population that lives in urban centers is increasing, and in the cities, the ubiquity of English, separation from extended families and high rates of exogamous marriage combine to create a situation where very few children learn to speak their Aboriginal language fluently.

Language and culture are closely connected. When a culture thrives, it bodes well for the language; when a language dies, the culture is weakened. In Aboriginal communities, it is common for Elders to lament the decline of ancestral language use among the young, and it is not only the erosion of language skills that they fear but also the loss of a set of values, a way of seeing the world, a sense of peoplehood (Crystal, 2000).

The revitalization of Aboriginal languages is a relatively recent concept, coalescing as a movement in the 1990s, in the same generation that saw a rapid decline in indigenous language use in Canada and around the world. Despite its relative youth, the concept of revitalization has become a preoccupation of numerous linguists and educators as well as of indigenous people around the world, and has generated a body of popular and scholarly literature on the topic (Abley, 2003; Crystal, 2000; Fishman, 2001; Francis & Reyhner, 2002; Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Reyhner, 1997). A good deal of the literature focuses on models and programs of language revitalization, and language immersion programming in schools is one approach that is highly recommended (Reyhner, 1997).
**Alienation**

It is widely recognized that cultural alienation is a major factor in the continuing ambivalence and even antipathy of many Aboriginal people towards formal education (e.g. CAAS, 2002). Many Aboriginal people blame the loss of their traditional languages on past education policies, especially in residential schools, where students were punished for using their language. While these policies have changed, their impact remains and in many Cree families, parents didn’t teach the language to their children because they themselves had lost the ability or the will to speak it.

School completion rates of Aboriginal students are not increasing (Hallett, 2000) and education authorities are paying increasing attention to Aboriginal culture in an effort to reverse this trend (Manitoba, 2003). Many Manitoba schools offer Aboriginal studies and language courses, and all schools have been mandated to integrate Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum. However, little study has been done to gauge the impact of these program initiatives. To what extent are students learning Aboriginal culture and language in school, and how are these courses affecting Aboriginal students’ attitudes about formal education?

How successfully can “alien” forms of education be used to revitalize the languages and cultures they have helped to destroy? To what extent can school language programs help address Aboriginal language loss and cultural alienation? Will they work for Cree as they have worked for French or German or Ukrainian? Will immersion pedagogy be successful with Aboriginal students? Will parental ambivalence about formal education change when Aboriginal teachers teach language and culture in the school?
Method

To explore the question of how well the Cree Program is working, a variety of data were analyzed including language proficiency, academic performance, and student attendance data. In addition to these, semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents provided perspectives not only on how well the program was working but also how well it was meeting community expectations (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Data sources for study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative data</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language assessment interviews</td>
<td>6 grade 3 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult interviews</td>
<td>3 parents, 3 teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quantitative data</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sources</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2, 3 listening exercise results</td>
<td>teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 3 Provincial Assessment results</td>
<td>School district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance records</td>
<td>School district</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cree language proficiency data was obtained through interviews with 6 grade 3 students. The interviews followed a Cree language assessment protocol modeled on a Student Oral Proficiency Assessment instrument (SOPA) designed for immersion language student assessment (Rhodes 1996). The interview protocol has four components to assess listening comprehension, informal conversation, academic language, and fluency skills. Additional data came from a class listening exercise given to grade 2 and 3 students provided data on students’ Cree comprehension. In an interview component added to the Cree language assessments, student attitudes towards Cree language and culture were explored. Student attendance data was also analysed to shed light on this.

Results of the Grade 3 provincial assessments in reading and numeracy were analysed and compared with English program results for the same school to assess Cree Program students’ performance in other academic areas.
Findings

In the interest of brevity, not all study findings are discussed in detail in this paper. Rather, I will discuss highlights of findings for each of the areas specified in the research question. For a more complete discussion, readers are referred to my thesis (Nikkel, 2006).

**Cree Language Proficiency**

According to listening assessments conducted in class as well as in the oral assessment interviews, many students in Grade 2 and 3 of the Cree program were able to respond to requests to identify or name familiar animals (e.g. Cree equivalent of: Where is the bear?), but were not able to answer more complex questions (e.g. Cree equivalent of: What are the moose doing?). In the oral interviews, students appeared eager to use Cree words but used them only individually, in isolation or as insertions in English phrases (e.g. “napesis (boy) is hiding and iskwesis (girl) is carrying a pail.” When graded according to the SOPA scale (Rhodes 1996), students performed at the most basic level, Junior Novice Low, in oral production categories (i.e. using isolated words, having virtually no or very little functional communicative ability). Similar results occurred in oral comprehension, although some students performed at the next highest level.

In individual semi-structured interviews, parents and teachers provided corroborating views of students’ Cree language ability. One teacher described students in Grades 3 and 4 of the program as follows: “they can understand some Cree and know a lot of words, but they can’t really speak it, they don’t have conversational ability yet” [Teacher 3]. Other teachers’ and parents’ comments concurred with this portrait: e.g. “[students] have learned lots of vocabulary... they really try to speak it” and “use many Cree words,” but the general consensus was that the students were not able to make Cree phrases or sentences. That this was disappointing was especially evident in the parents’ comments, which indicated that the language outcome that
mattered most was for their children to be able to converse with Elders in Cree, especially with their grandparents.

When evaluated against the oral language outcomes identified in the Cree Program curriculum, it appears that students are not learning to speak Cree as well as the program intends (See table below)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oral language outcomes, by grade.</th>
<th>Student oral language use (in oral assessment interviews).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2. Use simple sentences and questions for classroom procedures.</td>
<td>Students were able to understand simple questions, e.g. kekwan oma (what’s this) and tansi itòtak (what is he/she doing) but didn’t use Cree phrases in response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 3. Use basic familiar vocabulary in classroom context.</td>
<td>Students used some familiar Cree words, e.g. iskwesis (girl) and napesis (boy) in isolation or inserted them in English phrases. One student spoke a “phrase” using a root word with affixes: kimowan (it’s raining).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4. Converse informally about familiar topics.</td>
<td>No observed informal conversation in Cree.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But are the curriculum outcomes for oral language appropriate? One Cree teacher was quick to point out that having immersion expectations for Cree bilingual students wasn’t a fair comparison:

... this is not an immersion program where kids have French all day long. Here they only spend 30 – 50 percent of their time in Cree. It’s not fair to compare the two programs [Cree Bilingual and French Immersion]... Even in the French Immersion program [in the local school], students aren’t required to speak in French until sometime in Grade 2 and that’s French immersion [Teacher 2].

In an effort to have a more just comparison, I contacted Grade 3 teachers in Heritage Bilingual Programs in Winnipeg to determine the levels of language proficiency and use attained
in their classrooms. Informal conversations with two teachers revealed very different levels of language proficiency between other Heritage Language bilingual schools. A teacher in one program considered the oral language outcomes (see table 2 above) quite attainable and during a class visit to her grade 3 classroom, I found students conversing quite fluently in the heritage language as part of a class activity. However, a Grade 3 teacher in a different Heritage Language program said that her students “don’t speak in sentences in [the heritage language]; they use [heritage language] words in English sentences” (personal communication). Based on this informal comparison, the grade 3 students in the Cree Program have a language proficiency level that is low in relation to students in one Heritage Language programs, but quite similar to students in another program.

While study data shows that the Cree Program students’ language proficiency is not fully meeting parents’ or teachers’ expectations, most of the parents and teachers surveyed stated clearly that, given the program’s relative youth, they were reluctant to pass judgment on it.

**Student Attitudes**

Student attitudes toward Cree language and culture were investigated through a series of questions at the end of the student language assessment interviews as well as through parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of students’ attitudes. All parents felt that being in the Cree Program contributed to greater cultural self-awareness and self-esteem for their children. One of them put it this way:

Kids [in the Cree Program] know who they are. They know that they’re Cree when they come home from the school here... they’re proud of what they do. I want my children to have a high self esteem, I want them to feel good about themselves [as First Nation people] [Parent 2].
Teachers agreed with the parents for the most part on this point. One of them, reflecting on the difference between students in the Cree and in the mainstream English programs, suggested that the Cree Program helped to develop a more positive perception of the Cree language.

Before [the Cree Program] they didn’t want it [Cree language instruction]. Students would go, Aw Cree, what’s that? Is that like Indian talk? ... [Now] they’re knowing who they are, and that pride and that self-confidence provides opportunity for much more success [Teacher 2].

Table 3. Student Attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>question</th>
<th>Student 1</th>
<th>Student 2</th>
<th>Student 3</th>
<th>Student 4</th>
<th>Student 5</th>
<th>Student 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Best thing about learning Cree?</td>
<td>To learn a different language.</td>
<td>To learn Cree words.</td>
<td>Words, spelling, listening</td>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td>You can talk in a different language with someone who doesn’t speak English.</td>
<td>You can speak Cree better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would be more or less happy in English program?</td>
<td>Less happy. Because Cree is my language</td>
<td>Less happy</td>
<td>Less happy, because I like speaking Cree, I even say that to my Grandparents and my Mom.</td>
<td>More happy. Because I don’t really like speaking Cree because I don’t know how.</td>
<td>Less happy. I like my class now.</td>
<td>Just as happy, because I wouldn’t have to listen to so much Cree. Cree is hard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would be more or less happy in non-Cree family?</td>
<td>Less happy.</td>
<td>Less happy</td>
<td>Less happy, because I like speaking Cree a lot.</td>
<td>More happy. I don’t know why.</td>
<td>Less happy. Because I wouldn’t know Cree.</td>
<td>Less happy. No reason.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(see Appendix L for a more complete analysis.)

Student responses to questions about cultural attitudes (see Table 3 above) correspond with the views expressed by the majority of the adult interviewees. It appears that the students in the interviews generally have a clear sense of their ancestry. Five of six students interviewed were quick to identify themselves as hailing from Aboriginal families. The sixth one initially said no, she did not have Aboriginal parents or grandparents, but then subsequently changed her mind and said yes. All but one of them also expressed positive views about learning Cree. When asked whether they thought they would be happier in an English only program, the results were
mixed; however the majority of the students indicated they preferred to study in the Cree Program and gave several reasons. Students were asked if they thought they would be more or less happy if they were in a non-Cree family and one said she’d be “more happy”, but didn’t say why. The other five said they would be less happy. At the end of the interview students were asked if they wanted to add anything that they hadn’t had a chance to say. One of the students responded, “Yeah, Cree rocks.”

While these questions only broach the subject superficially, exploring attitudes but not depth of knowledge or values, the considerable consistency between what the students and the adults said suggests that students in the Cree Program have acquired a sense of cultural pride.

**Academic Performance in other Subjects**

Grade 3 Provincial Assessment in Reading and Numeracy results were analyzed to obtain a picture of Cree Program students’ academic performance in subjects other than Cree. The Grade 3 Provincial Assessment in Reading and Numeracy is a list of three reading and nine numeracy outcomes used by teachers in the formative assessment of all children in Manitoba schools in the first few months of Grade 3. While these assessments are not designed for program assessment purposes and aren’t based on standardized instruments, procedures, or conditions, they do shed light on the academic performance of Grade 3 students in the Cree program and permit a comparison with student performance in the English program in the same school.

The data portrayed in Table 5 and in Figures 1 and 2 below represent Provincial Assessment aggregated mean results for 32 Cree Program and 17 English program Grade 3 students in Wapanohk School. Classroom conditions for both programs are similar, with the Cree Program students divided into two classes of 16 students, and the English program comprising
one class of 17 students. A comparison of percentages of students performing in each category suggests that there is little significant difference between students from the two programs housed in the same school. In reading, for instance, the percentage difference between the two programs is slim (less than 2.5%) for all three of the assessment categories: “meeting expectations, needing some help, or needing ongoing help” to meet the outcomes. In the numeracy assessment, there is a greater difference between the two programs but the difference doesn’t strongly favor one program or the other. The percentage of students meeting numeracy outcomes is higher in the Cree Program, but so is the percentage of students needing ongoing help. In both programs, the majority of students do not yet meet the Grade 3 reading and numeracy outcomes, while a significant minority do. That this is so is not unexpected and is in fact the case in many schools across the province. What appears clear, according to these data, is that students in the Cree Program are not falling behind their peers in the English program, in which the classroom conditions and student population are very comparable to those of the Cree Program. While it’s important to exercise caution when drawing conclusions from such a small student sample, the data offer no reason to suggest that student learning is suffering because of time accorded to instruction in Cree.

One teacher’s comments on this topic suggested that the amount of time devoted to Cree instruction was having negative effects on Cree Program students’ other academic skills.

Sure it’s good to teach them Cree, but you can’t just do that all day long. I have students in my class who hardly read, they’re one or two years behind grade level. You can’t just neglect that and teach them Cree. [Teacher 3].
Other teachers disagreed with this assessment, and parents didn’t seem to consider students’ learning in other areas a high priority. In fact, what was most interesting about the parents’ comments was their apparent lack of interest in this area.

I’m really not too sure what to say about [students’ meeting curriculum outcomes in other subject areas)... I’m glad Wapanohk is looking at those [other subject] areas, ...making sure that the children, and that the other areas don’t suffer... I guess I’m glad Wapanohk’s looking at that...[Parent 2].

This statement was delivered with hesitation and a questioning tone that suggested doubt and lack of conviction about the matter. The parent then went on to state that she holds self-esteem and instruction in Cree culture and traditional ways to be “more important than Science or Math” [Parent 2]. This sentiment was echoed by other parents. In fact all three of the parents felt that traditional Cree culture and cultural practices should have a more central role in the Cree Program, and two of the parents even suggested that the attention given to more conventional subject areas could be reduced to make room for even more Cree language and culture instruction.

Table 4. Grade 3 Provincial Assessment Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>program</th>
<th>number of students.</th>
<th>reading (avg. of 3 categories)</th>
<th>numeracy (avg. of 9 categories)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>need ongoing help</td>
<td>need some help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cree</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Grade 3 Reading Assessment Results for Cree and English Programs

READING ASSESSMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Students</th>
<th>Cree Program</th>
<th>English Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meets expectations</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs some help</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs ongoing help</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Grade 3 Numeracy Assessment Results for Cree and English Programs

NUMERACY ASSESSMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Students</th>
<th>Cree Program</th>
<th>English Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meets expectations</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs some help</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs ongoing help</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adult Perspectives on the Cree Program

As mentioned earlier in this paper, ambivalence and alienation are common themes in the context of Aboriginal education. However, the only sign of ambivalence came when parents
were talking about their children’s academic performance in other subject areas. Instead of ambivalence and alienation, it was expressions of support, commitment and engagement that featured prominently in the interviews.

Support. When parents and teachers were asked to assess how the program was working, their observations generally indicated that they had a realistic knowledge of what their children were learning. As mentioned above, they recognized that students were not yet conversing in Cree, and while they admitted that this was disappointing, they also expressed continued support for the program.

I would give it a... B. I would like to give it an A, because my kids come home knowing more Cree than I do. The reason why I don’t, why I say it’s not an A yet, is that I think that the way the language is taught could be improved somewhat [Parent 3].

When asked to identify what the program was doing particularly well, all of the teachers mentioned parent and student interest. To illustrate this, one teacher described how:

... parents would come to me for lists of what the kids were learning so they could go home and put them on the fridge and make their own flash cards. And you could see that a fire got lit in those parents, because those kids were coming home with Cree words [Teacher 2].

Commitment and engagement. The previous quotation also illustrates the level of commitment and the type of engagement that some Cree Program parents have toward the program. A further illustration of this is that each of the adults interviewed in this research project indicated that they would like to see Cree programming for parents so that they could better support their children’s learning in the home. In contrast to ambivalence and alienation
from the school system, these parents wanted more and closer involvement with the school because they were very interested in what their children were learning.

I think if the kids see their parents wanting to learn [Cree], they’re going to want to learn with their parents. [Teacher 3].

I would like to learn more Cree. And I would like to follow up what the children are learning in school, so I could follow it up at home... I have a lot of Cree speaking friends but I’m not immersed in it the way my children are so that I’m not picking it up as easily as they do... I would just like to see that what the children are learning at the school be transferred to the home so that we could be working closer together the home and the school [Parent 2].

More Cree culture. While all of the adults indicated that they supported the Cree Program and parents said they were generally pleased with it, they also indicated that even more Cree cultural programming was needed. For teachers this generally meant more cultural events in the school where students would be exposed to Cree cultural events. For parents this meant a more fundamental and bolder shift to a cultural paradigm where Cree would be dominant and schooling would be adapted to fit the culture, rather than vice versa.

More cultural activities are needed to give the students an opportunity to be able to relate and give meaning to all the other subject areas. That is the most important part... [if] they’re learning [the culture], then things like the language fall into place [Teacher 1].

Maybe [we could have] more on the cultural knowledge, …including… even the naming ceremonies, because that’s another important part of our culture, having our spiritual names. Now that we’re on that… I think teaching them about the sweat lodge and
the meanings of the animals as well…there’s so much more [that could be done] [Parent 1].

One of the parents suggested that, just as Aboriginal people didn’t have the physical constitution for the foods and lifestyles introduced by Europeans, and were suffering ill health as a consequence, Aboriginal children were perhaps not suited to the methods of schooling used in Canadian schools, and their learning was suffering accordingly. She suggested that perhaps schools should be altered to fit children’s culture, rather than they other way around.

Nowadays we’re looking at a lot of things, like how alcohol affects First Nation people, how sugar and food that never was a part of our culture affects us, and now we’re suffering not only from addictions, we’re suffering from diabetes and…. You know all this because our bodies weren’t meant for things like that. And if that’s valid, then why aren’t we looking at education and that type of learning like something that’s foreign to our systems too. Instead... of putting First Nation children ...on Ritalin all over the place, why don’t we make learning institute learning more relevant to First Nation kids if they’re not quite fitting in? [Parent 2].

It’s a sign of hope. Adult interview participants were asked to identify what, if anything, they viewed as being of particular importance in the Cree Program. Several people maintained that it was the fact that this came from the grassroots that was important. One of the parents stated it this way:

For a long time, especially in this area, people have never seen [Cree language] as having any value. This is a really good start. It’s kind of like, in your face, we’re saying: “Look, these are our children and we want them to learn the language.” And then we went and did something about it. I feel that this is a very good start [Parent 3].
Most participants agreed with the above assessments of the program’s importance: that it was overdue, that it is a bold step, that it is matter of pride. The symbolic value of teaching Cree in school is also significant and was mentioned by three interviewees. While the irony of using the school system to save the Cree language was acknowledged, what is striking is that the participants were moved by the hopefulness rather than the irony of the situation. Ron Cook, a Cree Program teacher and my collaborator in the Cree language assessments, explained the symbolism in the following way:

“When I was in school we were forbidden to use Cree. I think the fact that Cree children don’t know their own language is a legacy of that. This [Cree] Program is a chance to change that, to redress it. That’s why it’s so important to me that it’s happening in the school” [personal communication].

Several of the interviews occurred in settings where participants’ partners and children were in attendance. In several instances, when the question about the program’s importance was posed, these “bystanders” intervened and stated their views. One of the “bystanders” offered the following point of view.

“There’s a generation of people who are lost…. who were made to feel badly about who they were and about speaking their language at school, and who didn’t teach their kids the language because they were ashamed of it. And now they can learn it at school. That’s hopeful. I would have loved to have an opportunity to do that, to learn my Mom’s language at school” [Parent 1 interview bystander].

The notion that the Cree Program is a sign of hope was expressed in many of the interviews. One of the parents explained the hope in the following way:
“Introducing Cree or any of the Aboriginal languages in schools that are attended by First Nations kids, I think that’s a really powerful message that your giving the children that your language is important, and that your history, your background, your culture, everything about you as First Nations is important... It’s saying you know, we’re willing to adapt to your world, your worldview, your languages and it’s just really encouraging for First Nation youth. It says that this is your community as well” [Parent 2].

Conclusion

Until very recently, the intergenerational transmission of the Cree language occurred as a natural part of everyday life, with children growing up in a context where learning to speak the language was the norm and was supported in the home and the community. Due to an array of factors the future of the Cree language is now threatened and new approaches to language transmission are being explored. Aboriginal language activists are advocating Aboriginal language immersion programs as a way to address the problem of language loss.

How effective can a school Cree program be? Learning approaches used in schools are quite different from those used in traditional Aboriginal societies. With alienation from schools and educational systems common in Aboriginal communities, how will the presence of Cree in schools be received? The focus of the study described in this paper has been on the Cree Bilingual Program in Wapanohk Community School in Thompson. The study has explored the central question: how effective is the Cree Program? addressing the following areas:

- are the students learning to speak Cree?
- are they learning and learning to appreciate Cree culture?
- are they meeting provincial outcomes in other subjects?
- how do parents and teachers perceive the Cree Program?
**What does the data tell us about the success of the Cree Program?**

The findings presented above suggest that the Cree Program is somewhat successful as an agent of Cree language revitalization. On the topic of the students’ Cree language proficiency, it seems that students in Grade 3 of the Cree Program have acquired only a very limited knowledge of Cree and do not fully meet the outcomes of their Cree language arts curriculum. They understand some spoken Cree, can follow some directions and answer some simple questions. The students are able to speak some common Cree words correctly and comprehensibly but they do not construct phrases or express complete thoughts.

On the topic of students’ attitudes toward Cree language and culture, the students surveyed had a positive view of Cree language and culture and of themselves as Cree people. Parents’ and teachers’ comments expressed a similar perspective. Nevertheless, both parents and teachers called for increased cultural programming to support students’ learning.

While parents and teachers were in agreement on their call for more cultural programming, there was a significant difference between the types of changes envisioned. Parents suggested bold and fundamental changes to fit school into their Aboriginal culture rather than fitting Aboriginal culture into the school. Despite this difference, the degree of common purpose evident in the data is impressive, as is the parents’ level of support and commitment to the Cree Program, especially in light of the recent history of Aboriginal alienation from schools.

Students in the Cree Program appear to be performing about as well in English reading and math as their peers in the English program in the same school and there appears to be no reason to suspect that the reduction of time spent in English instruction has had a negative impact on student development in these areas.
How is the Cree Program perceived by the community? The data in this study came from parents and teachers who have a very positive view of the Cree Program and a strong sense of commitment. They support the program goals, actively participate in school events, state clearly that they are happy with the Cree Program and give it high marks.

Parents and teachers agree that program improvement is needed in two important areas: more Cree culture in the schools; a higher level of Cree language development for students. They also generally agreed that the focus of the Cree Program should be on oral language skills.

Despite indications of some concerns with the current program, parents and teachers also agree that the Cree Program is very important. They find it important because they believe that learning Cree language and culture will lead to enhanced self esteem, confidence, pride and greater academic success for the students. They believe it will help to preserve the Cree language and make cultural knowledge accessible to the students. They view it as a source of pride and a symbol of what a community of Aboriginal people can achieve: “It’s like in your face, we’re saying: ‘Look, these are our children and we want them to learn the language.’ And then we went and did something about it” [Parent 3].


References


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