

# Schooling as a Vehicle for Aboriginal Language Maintenance: Implementing Cree as the Language of Instruction in Northern Quebec

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Aboriginal languages in Canada are at risk. Aboriginal communities that control their own schools often perceive schooling as a means of halting the erosion of language and restoring the viability of their culture. This is the story of such a process. The James Bay Cree live in nine communities, mostly along the east coast of James Bay. In December 1988, the Cree School Board commissioners decided to introduce a program of Cree as the language of instruction in elementary schools. We describe the development of the project (now in the initial stage of implementation) and analyze its strengths and weaknesses. Although this program's ultimate impact on the preservation of Cree language (and culture) cannot yet be known, it is clear that the community plays an important role in creating and sustaining the motivation for the change.

Les langues autochtones au Canada sont en péril. Les communautés autochtones qui gèrent leurs propres écoles voient dans celles-ci un moyen de mettre fin à l'érosion de leur langue et de restaurer la viabilité de leur culture. L'article illustre ce processus. Les Cris de la Baie James vivent dans neuf villages situés pour la plupart le long de la côte est de la Baie James. En décembre 1988, les commissaires de la Commission scolaire crie ont décidé de mettre en oeuvre un programme axé sur le cri comme langue d'enseignement dans les écoles primaires. Les auteures décrivent le processus d'élaboration de ce

projet (actuellement à la phase initiale de son implantation) et analysent ses forces et ses faiblesses. Bien que l'impact final de ce programme du point de vue de la préservation de la langue et de la culture crie ne soit pas encore connu, il est clair que la communauté joue un rôle important dans la volonté de créer et de maintenir ce changement.

#### INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal languages in Canada are at risk. A language survey conducted in 1989–1990 showed that the numbers of Aboriginal language speakers in Canada are diminishing (Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, 1990). The viability of Aboriginal languages in Canada can be judged along a continuum (Bauman, 1980; Pelletier, 1990) with six stages: flourishing, enduring, declining, becoming obsolete, dead, and extinct. It is likely that no Aboriginal language in Canada is flourishing, a few are enduring, many are becoming obsolete, and already a number are dead or on the edge of extinction. A few languages—Cree, Inuit, and Ojibway—are perceived to be enduring, though not necessarily flourishing (Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, 1990).

Even in some Cree, Inuit, and Ojibway communities where the Aboriginal language is spoken, concern is still expressed about the loss of language (e.g., Taylor & Wright, 1989). Most speakers of the Aboriginal language are bilingual and the mainstream language is used exclusively in some situations. The number of speakers remains constant rather than growing, and opportunities for Aboriginal literacy tend to be limited.

Loss of language often leads to community concern, as language both mirrors and codifies culture (Fishman, 1991). Important meanings of the culture are embedded in the language and reflected in the structures that enable individuals to communicate with each other. Aboriginal communities that control their own education often perceive schooling as a vehicle whereby the erosion of language (and culture) can be halted and the language restored (McAlpine, 1992).

Schools in Aboriginal communities were largely created by mainstream policy makers and have tended to reflect mainstream cultural values supporting the dominant social order (Giroux, 1979). The concern over the past twenty years has been to gain control of education (National Indian Brotherhood, 1973), as control of policies, administration, finance, human resources, and curriculum is the means for Aboriginal communities to shape education systems to their own social and cultural ends (Barman, Hébert, & McCaskill, 1987; Matthew, 1990).

We here present one instance of an Aboriginal schooling system using control to further the goal of social and cultural survival: the development of a mother tongue program in the Cree School Board of northern Quebec. After providing some background information on the communities, we use the following factors to describe the program's development and to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation plan: (a) community awareness, commitment and involvement; (b) programming and instructional decisions; (c) curriculum and

materials development; (d) staff training and development; (e) political/institutional support and funding; and (f) evaluation. Although this program's ultimate impact on the preservation of Cree language and culture cannot yet be known, what can be seen in this account is the important role the community plays in creating and sustaining the motivation for the change.

#### CONTEXT: THE JAMES BAY CREE

The Quebec James Bay Cree, spread over an area of 150,000 square miles, number about 10,000 people and live in nine communities along the eastern shore of James Bay and inland near Chibougamou. Some communities are accessible only by air, except when winter ice roads are built; others are accessible by road; a few lie close to non-Aboriginal towns. In 1975, the Cree together with the Inuit of northern Quebec negotiated the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement with the governments of Canada and Quebec. The agreement gave the Cree authority over many aspects of their lives (see Salisbury, 1986). Since then they have had to structure services in the areas of health, education, the economy, employment, recreation, and community administration. The Cree have tried to create structures or to modify existing ones so that they are more in accord with Cree than mainstream values.

For these people, Cree is the language of the family and most frequently of the community. It is the language of informal, personal interaction as well as of some work contexts. English has been, for historical reasons, the language of the school, most work documents, and communication with the south. The two Cree dialects, northern and southern, are mutually comprehensible. Differences between them are represented in the syllabic writing system, a series of symbols representing different combinations of consonants and vowels. Although the writing system has existed and been used in church hymnals since the 1840s, adults tend to be literate in English (and more recently French) instead of Cree, since most have received their formal schooling in a mainstream language.

Until now, the language of instruction in the Cree School Board has been English (or French) through all grades except kindergarten. This has been the communities' wish. Cree has only been taught as a subject area, varying from 120 minutes every six days at the primary level to 200 minutes every six days at the higher levels (7%–12% of class time).

On 6 December 1988, a joint meeting of the Cree School Board and the Cree Regional Authority passed a resolution that would lead to Cree becoming the language of instruction at the primary and later the elementary level. The resolution was intended to promote a high quality of written and spoken Cree as well as to promote and enhance Cree culture. This decision to re-orient the direction of the curriculum can best be understood in the larger social context of community awareness of language issues.

## COMMUNITY AWARENESS, COMMITMENT, AND INVOLVEMENT

As the reversing of language shift is ultimately constituted in face-to-face social interactions (Fishman, 1991), decisions like the one taken by the Board cannot be effectively implemented without the support of the communities in which the schools exist. Such support can be achieved through persuasion leading to consensus building or by consensus sampling (Bauman, 1980). Consensus sampling involves surveying a community about an issue that individuals are already aware of so as to have concrete information to help them in decision-making. It can be an effective procedure if opinions are not factionalized. One example of such a technique being used in Aboriginal communities was survey work on language and literacy conducted in the Baffin region of the Northwest Territories in 1987 (Baffin Divisional Board of Education, 1989).

If sampling provides the basis for a decision to change policy, then activities that maintain community commitment and involvement during the implementation period become important. Adult literacy programs, for example, could provide this momentum when the focus is on enhancing and preserving the language. The consensus sampling procedure the Cree used is described below, along with examples of activities showing that the importance of the language issue has been maintained in the communities.

*Consensus Sampling*

In the late 1980s, it became evident to increasing numbers of people that the Cree language might no longer be as strong as it had been. Thus in December 1988, a chiefs' resolution was passed encouraging the use of Cree. In response to the perceived threat to the language, a Cree language study was initiated and carried out by the James Bay Cree Cultural Education Centre in 1989 and 1990. The study's objectives were to determine how the Cree viewed the state of their language, and to investigate the language situation of other Aboriginal groups in Canada.

The study (Bobbish-Salt, 1990) attempted to survey the 5,000 adults in the nine communities. Of the 23% responding to the survey, approximately 80% speak Cree, and speak Cree to their children. Only 40%, however, reported they can read and write in Cree; these people tend to have learned these skills at church. The majority reported using Cree at home, but English at work and school. Although respondents believed that children were learning Cree, they questioned the quality of the children's vocabulary and their ability to understand elders. Investigation of the situation of other Aboriginal languages in Canada proved cautionary: the most common problem cited was discovering the loss of the language too late to be able to preserve it. The report concluded that the Quebec Cree are fortunate their language is still strong, and that measures for language preservation should be initiated before more erosion occurs.

*Maintaining Momentum*

Since the survey, evidence of community commitment to the promotion of language and culture has grown. In 1990, the Cree School Board published a special edition of its newsletter on the theme of mother tongue literacy. In 1991, the Mistissini council decided, in response to community request, to have their employees learn Cree syllabics. In 1992, a similar motion to the chiefs' resolution of 1988 was passed at the elder-youth conference. Further, the regional government and the school board now provide a number of administrative documents in Cree as well as English (for instance, the annual report of the Cree School Board), and the regional radio organization is increasing the radio programming done in Cree.

Parents in the village of Chisasibi who have enrolled their children in a pre-school program in Cree report that their children are teaching them how to speak the language better. Teachers of these children (when they enter school) report that they have fewer difficulties with math concepts than children who have not done pre-kindergarten in Cree; these teachers suggest that language contains thought processes and that use of the language has enhanced the cognitive development of the children.

Maintenance of the Cree language appears to be a top priority in the Cree nation. Although this provides a very supportive environment for the implementation of mother tongue instruction, developing such a program implies some careful decision-making and enormous commitments of time, money, and personnel.

## PROGRAMMING AND INSTRUCTIONAL DECISIONS

Until now, all students in the school system have received instruction in English (or French) after kindergarten, with the exception of Cree language and culture classes. This has been the case even though a number of Cree consultants and teachers believed that the majority of students were not comprehending the mainstream language as well as they needed to due to the disruption of their Cree language development. Parents and other community members were not convinced; they generally believed it was important to learn in a mainstream language at school. In December 1988, the resolution was passed that would lead to Cree being the language of instruction. This was likely a result of two factors: growing awareness in the villages of the language shift reducing the use of Cree in community interactions, and the commissioners' increased understanding as to why Board educators felt Cree should be the language of instruction.

The Board policy to implement Cree as the language of instruction required some specific, concrete decisions regarding what form of bilingual program would best represent the Board's will. The people responsible for making the programming decisions, for translating the resolution into a coherent program,

were those in Education Services: specifically, Cree Programs, Instructional Services, and Professional Development.

This is how the policy is to be implemented. Cree will be the only language of instruction in Grade 1 (24 hours per week). In Grade 2, physical education and art will be taught in the second language, so Cree will be the language of instruction 20 hours a week. The rationale for choosing physical education and art is that the major goals in these areas are kinesthetic and that learning can be done through observation, listening, and non-verbal responses. In Grade 3, science will be added to the list of second-language subjects because it is perceived to be experiential and hands-on. At this point, there will be mother tongue instruction 18.5 hours per week (out of 24). In Grade 4, math will also be added. This is felt to be an appropriate time for the math change because Grade 4 is the beginning of a second cycle. The curriculum is a spiralling one and the second cycle is designed to reinforce concepts introduced during the first cycle. In other words, math concepts learned and practised in Cree will now be learned and practised in greater depth in the second language. At this point, half the school week will be in Cree and half in the mainstream language. From Grade 5 on, the mainstream language increases in prominence: only social studies, language arts, and Cree culture will be taught in Cree. The understanding is that these programs will ensure maintenance and enhancement of language and literacy skills developed during the first years of schooling.

The ultimate intention is that students will gain the compulsory 6-credit mother tongue program required for high school graduation in Cree rather than a mainstream language. This implies the development of secondary programs in language arts. As well, there is a commitment to the development of programs in geography, history, and economics that reflect a Cree perspective and that ultimately can be taught in Cree. At the moment, however, there are not enough Cree teachers at the secondary level to carry out such a program. The program targets the primary and later elementary levels, as it is believed that focusing on these areas will provide a firm basis for a cumulative process of change.

In the fall of 1993, the pilot program was initiated in two communities, Wasaganish in the south and Chisasibi in the north. Both have large schools with sufficient numbers of Cree teachers to be able to fully implement the plan, as well as Cree language consultants who can provide active ongoing support. At this point, approximately 60 students are participating in mother tongue instruction in Grade 1, in three rather than two classes as originally intended.

The bilingual program decided upon is not the only option the Board could have chosen. Another possibility was a transitional program in which students are only taught in their mother tongue until they have enough competence in their second language, English or French, to function comfortably in the school environment. Unlike many bilingual programs for minority students reported in the United States (e.g., Cummins, 1989; Lambert & Taylor, 1990), the choice made

here is for a program that focuses on the retention and enhancement of the mother tongue. This choice is constrained by the number of Cree educators trained to teach in Cree and by the amount of instructional material available in Cree. Thus, this language policy entails a strong commitment to materials development and teacher training, and to the funding to do these effectively. It is unlikely the intended change will occur (Fullan, 1981) if any of these areas is not addressed during program implementation.

#### CURRICULUM AND MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

If figures in Aboriginal schools approximate those in mainstream schools, then up to 90% of a child's learning time in school is spent interacting with instructional materials (Tully, 1985). If one believes that control of Aboriginal education implies the right to education in one's own image (Krotz, 1990), then the use of materials sensitive to one's culture becomes crucial. Nevertheless, many Aboriginal education systems in Canada have relied largely on instructional materials prepared by textbook publishers for mainstream schools (Madsen, 1990). This is due to the difficulty of creating sufficient materials to sustain culturally relevant programs with limited human resources, limited time, and, in some cases, limited expertise. In the case of a fully bilingual program such as that envisaged by the Cree School Board, the challenge could be perceived as overwhelming.

In the past 15 years, materials development by the Board has focused on areas where there are no mainstream materials, basically Cree language and culture classes, which make up a small percentage of class time. Given institutional constraints (for instance, lack of personnel), the model used has been for teachers responsible for the subject to work together with an outside consultant, a curriculum specialist, to develop a syllabus. Elders review the syllabus and then, on their own, teachers create instructional materials and strategies to implement the ideas. There have not been the resources to fully evaluate and improve these teacher-based materials. This dilemma is a common one in Aboriginal communities; the choice is often between using untested materials and ones developed and validated by experts but which remain culturally inappropriate (Taylor, Crago, & McAlpine, 1993).

#### *Instructional Materials for the New Program*

To reduce time and expense the Board has chosen to use the "régime pédagogique" developed by the Ministry of Education in Quebec as the basis for curriculum decisions. This syllabus, developed for use in all public schools in Quebec, is not culturally sensitive to the Cree. It does, however, set out guidelines that, if met, prepare students for high school leaving and post-secondary education,

something to which the Board and the communities are committed. Thus, there is a relatively concrete curricular plan to modify and build upon.

Given that the previous model of materials development (teachers working together) has proven useful, the same model is being used again. Experienced Grade 1 teachers met with the teachers piloting the project to develop culturally based instructional guidelines, and strategies based on the *régime pédagogique*. Further, the two teachers originally chosen to pilot the program developed and exchanged materials based on these guidelines. The original plan to field-test these materials was dropped due to logistics; field-testing is occurring during implementation. A Cree dictionary has also been created, and the Circle Program (Burnaby et al., 1985), an English series of readers designed for Aboriginal children, has been translated. This year, while the Grade 1 is piloted, Grade 2 teachers are meeting in the same manner preparing for the Grade 2 pilot next year.

The decision to have Cree as the language of instruction requires the development of materials other than those for the classroom. Also required are resource materials, such as teaching grammars that can be used by teachers and materials developers to create curricular materials, and literacy materials of various kinds, such as library books, needed for reading outside the instructional setting. These types of materials, as well as the instructional ones, need to be published in both dialects.

#### *Resource Materials*

A Cree lexicon already exists. A resource book of instructional terms appropriate for the lower elementary level is complete; an upper elementary one will follow. These books provide terminology particular to educational concepts not included in the lexicon. The Board has hired a linguistic specialist to help the Cree language consultants develop a Cree teaching grammar. This grammar will be a useful resource for teachers who have not until now taught language arts in Cree.

#### *Literacy Materials for Adults*

Some literacy materials for adults already exist, and the Board is developing a spelling manual for teachers and others who are learning to read and write in Cree. Personnel in Education Services do not, however, feel it can be their principal concern to respond to this need given the other tasks before them. They have met with the chiefs of the different communities to discuss the work already being done by the Board and to suggest ways in which communities (with the support of the Cree Language Commission) can accept greater responsibility for this area.



## STAFF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Although training is needed for materials developers, consultants, and teachers, our focus here is on teacher development, as teachers are the interface between the students and whatever learning objectives and materials are chosen. A number of years ago, the implementation of the proposed program would not have been feasible because there were too few Cree teachers in the schools. That has changed. About 30% of teachers in the Board are Cree, mostly at the primary level. These teachers were all, however, trained to teach in English or French, as both their schooling and their professional training were principally in a mainstream language. The task now is to provide these individuals with the skills they need to implement the goals of the program successfully.

As with curriculum and materials development, the Board hired consultants, one in professional development and one in linguistics, to design and develop the teacher training in partnership with Cree Programs, Professional Development, and the teachers who will implement the program. The contents of the training workshops are based on a needs assessment and include content from a variety of subject areas—for instance, a linguistic analysis so that teachers understand how the language operates; methods such as whole language with specific attention to how to evaluate student progress in language development; and curriculum planning and modification of instruction.

The literature suggests that teachers are an important source of help for one another in questioning and changing their practice (see, for example, Brundage & Mackeracher, 1980). The initial curriculum planning was done through a series of meetings among a group of skilled, experienced Grade 1 teachers. The two teachers implementing the initial project worked together on planning and materials development. Also, the implementation sites are perceived as a training ground; other teachers visit the pilot classes to talk with the teachers about how they use Cree as the language of instruction.

As well as learning from each other, teachers can also learn from interaction with instructional materials. By putting into practice ideas expressed in materials, practice may become informed by the ideas (Gough, 1983). Of course, if instructional skills are lacking, the reverse may be true; the materials may not be used as intended. Thus, samples of instructional materials are presented and discussed during the training workshops, and appropriate instructional strategies are modeled by the instructors. As well, specific opportunities to try out the materials and strategies are incorporated into the training.

Finally, the implementation literature suggests that ongoing support during implementation is a crucial factor in the success of new programs (Fullan, 1981). The plan provides for this kind of support: language consultants are on-site during the pilot projects, piloting teachers meet with each other regularly, and additional training is provided as requested.

## POLITICAL/INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND FUNDING

Although there is no long-term funding plan, people in Education Services feel highly supported by the commissioners and are not concerned that funding may be unavailable when needed. Two new people, the two teachers piloting the implementation, are dedicated full-time to the project. Although those responsible for Cree programming have not received increases in person-years to handle the increased demand for materials development during program implementation and evaluation, no request for funding for capital costs or training has yet been refused. As well, the Board has recognized that implementation is a long-term project, and funding for teacher training is available for three years.

## EVALUATION

As well as summative assessments of goal achievement, it is important to have formative procedures for improving a program. Formative evaluation (Scriven, 1967) is an iterative process wherein data are collected from a range of sources and used to make adjustments to an educational undertaking. An example of such an adjustment in this program is the change in start-up date. It was to have been 1992, but as teachers did not feel confident enough about their Cree literacy skills, the start-up date was delayed to 1993 to allow time for additional training. Both summative and formative evaluation need to be firmly rooted in the goals of the activity or activities being evaluated.

A number of Aboriginal educators have suggested that effective education in their communities must address the interweave between language use, cultural identity, and academic achievement (Education Secretariat Assembly of First Nations, 1991). In other words, one important factor in the Aboriginal child's academic success is the cultural integrity of the classroom. Language and culture are deeply embedded in the communicative interaction patterns that form the framework in which language is used. Staff in Education Services believe children respond positively to material they perceive to be culturally relevant, and have seen evidence of this in the improvement in students' reading ability since the introduction, three years ago, of an English reader series designed for Aboriginal children.

On the other hand, when the classroom's culture is foreign to the Aboriginal child, the child is forced to adapt; responses include change in communicative patterns over time (Crago, Annahatak, & Ningiuruvik, 1992) or resistance to change (Ogbu, 1987). Rains (1992) suggests that the concept of resistance helps explain Aboriginal youths' decision to leave school. Thus, the Board's decision to implement mother tongue instruction can be seen in a much larger context than the preservation and enhancement of the language. It also is potentially a vehicle for strengthening self-identity and increasing academic success.

Given the major educational changes envisaged here, and the range of goals from concrete language development to more subtle enhancement of self-identity, it is readily apparent that any evaluation plan encompassing them will be exceedingly complex. It is therefore not surprising that the Board has moved slowly in defining the procedures of evaluation. Nevertheless, it is clear the evaluation process must involve collection of data which make it possible to see if there is a match between intended goals and actual learning outcomes. For instance, if changes in self-esteem are important, then changes in attitudinal tests and attendance or retention figures would be important. Data could be collected and evaluated for such things as student learning, both cognitive and affective (for example, identity, liking for school); the effects of the new materials (both intended and incidental); changes in instructional strategies; effect on family and community interactions (for example, changes in reading and writing patterns); and rates of student retention and admission to post-secondary education.

A further criterion to bear in mind is that those involved in the evaluation should represent children, youth, parents, elders, community leaders, school board members, and school staff. In other words, both involved and uninvolved community members must somehow be polled to ensure the validity and integrity of the program and the plan for evaluation. Reversing language shift, in this case increasing the use of Cree in the communities, is essentially a collective action in which individual community members play an integral part. Thus, schooling goals and standards need clear articulation so all will know the program's intentions and can work toward the goals rather than at cross-purposes (Fishman, 1991). Without ongoing deliberation by all community members throughout the process, there is a substantial risk that levels of commitment may change. For instance, parents need opportunities to provide evidence as to whether the new program is hindering or enhancing their children's development.

The Board perceives the resolution of these complex issues and the development of an appropriate evaluation plan to be an emergent process, one that cannot be decided a priori but must evolve throughout the preparation and implementation period. Nevertheless, an initial evaluation is in progress at this time, with information being collected from a range of stakeholders, including parents, elders, grandparents, students, and teachers.

#### STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE PROGRAM

The major difficulty foreseen for this program is the lack of written Cree in community life. Although most organizations use Cree for oral communication, almost all written communication is in English. Unless written Cree is emphasized in business and social settings, and is something that adults are seen to do, children will not find their efforts to read and write in Cree to be socially valued. Fortunately, momentum appears to be increasing in this area, but there is still a severe lack of reading materials in Cree. Those in Education Services hope that

with the support of the Cree Language Commission communities can address this need.

The proposed strengths of this program are that children will become more fluent in their mother language; parents will become more aware of the value of their language (and the potential for losing it if it is not used); and children will participate more in the school system because they can understand and respond in their own language. Unfortunately, the lack of Cree teachers and instructional materials in Cree have constrained the programming decision about the relative weighting of Cree and English throughout the child's schooling experience. In other words, the present program is seen to be an acceptable approximation of the desired goal, but not a complete or clear articulation of the intended policy. Changes toward greater use of Cree will be made when the results of present training and materials development make this feasible.

The model being used for materials development has proven successful within the Board before, but it has never been used on such a large scale. Thus, it is crucial to observe and evaluate the process, and to make modifications as needed. The continuing concern is how to evaluate and revise the wealth of materials that need developing given the constraints described previously.

There is a clear commitment to providing teachers who will be involved in the project with initial training based on the needs they themselves have defined. The principal concern has to be the maintenance of teacher support over the lengthy period required for the program to be fully implemented. It is not unusual for institutional constraints to limit teacher support after initial implementation, and such lack of support can have extremely detrimental effects on outcomes (Fullan, 1981).

Institutional support appears firm, as does funding. Recently, a new process for budget preparation has given Education Services greater control. The principal cause for concern would be if Board commitment to the policy changed, for example, if initial data on learning outcomes were less positive than expected.

By using emergent data as an evaluation mechanism for modifying and even redefining goals, materials, and training, the implementation procedure can be sensitive to the needs and responses of everyone involved in the process. The strength of the evaluation strategy, however, is equally its weakness. Without careful and constant attention to the ongoing collection and use of data, the program could lose direction and momentum.

#### CONCLUSION

Falgout and Levin (1992) have suggested that Aboriginal education systems can be viewed along a continuum, from being totally westernized to being totally localized, due to the very divergent models of teaching and learning that appear in different cultures. The transforming influence is frequently believed to be pressure to move toward more westernized ways of thinking and learning. As

Falgout and Levin suggest, however, transformation can equally be toward making a western system fit the local indigenous community. We have tried in this article to describe just such a shift: to show how the Quebec Cree are creating a schooling environment, an institutional environment, that more closely matches the wishes and needs of the community, and that will ultimately provide a more congruent context for Cree ways of teaching and learning. What is perhaps most striking about this transformation is the important role the community has played; their commitment has provided a firm basis on which to begin the process and their motivation continues to provide the momentum.

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