

**mâmwî-nehiyaw iyînikahîwewîn**

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2010

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY / ABSTRACT**

Authentic Indigenous language learning processes are authentic Indigenous learning processes. Our natural learning environments and processes are family, community, ceremony. Learning is a collective activity, not individual, it is built on relationships. It is about relationship with self, with history, with language, with learning, with family, with community, ... when these are attended to, the method identifies itself.

Learners acknowledged the central importance of ceremony, song, land, they acknowledged the difference between learning about the language in a linguistic based approach and learning to use the language in an immersion based approach.

Our findings revealed the challenges that learners face relating to colonization, (where we come from and what we carry into this) which influences family relationships. There are also challenges presented by the prevasiveness of English, resourcing for programs, materials, and staff development as well as to support learners - especially if they are not pursuing a credential, systemic issues such as the constructs of the education system, schedules, and course structure as well as notions of performance/ expectation/ measurement which contradict Indigenous educational philosophies. The uniqueness/complexity of the verb-based indigenous languages differentiate them from the noun-based languages of the Indo-European cultures, resulting in an imperfect fit with learning models derived from other language forms.

Learners are motivated to learn language as a means of restoring connection to self, to community, to knowledge. There is also a strong sense of responsibility to carry the language and to have something to offer future generations.

There was a clear message that language is best learned through immersion, land-based activities, ceremony, song, and story. We need to be mindful of the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the language learning journey which manifest in relationship, as well as the importance of opportunities for speaking, listening, reading , and writing.

Language is spirit and spiritual, so must be approached in a spiritual context. Our educational experiences in western systems have been largely focused on the mental and physical aspects of learning. Our language requires a wholistic approach with priority placed on the spiritual and emotional.

We are all related. We are related to everything. Everything is alive. These concepts are embedded in the structure of our languages, languages that are verb based, relationship oriented.

Our initial research plan was based on Indigenous methodology, but included conventional research methods of pre-and post- testing. Through early experience and teachings it was clear that to gather Indigenous knowledge we must honour Indigenous processes and protocols. We find knowledge in ceremony, in relationship, in iterative dialogue.

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## **mâmawi-nehiyaw iyinikahiwewin**

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### **CHAPTER ONE – BACKGROUND**

Blue Quills First Nations College is an independent Indigenous institution owned, governed, and operated by 7 First Nations in Treaty Six Territory. We have inherited from our ancestors a responsibility to advance and protect indigenous knowledge and thought through education, research, and community service. Since incorporation in 1971 we have grown as an institution from offering programs brokered from other mainstream institutions to the point where we are developing and offering our own programs, grounded in our philosophy, taught by our Elders and our own academics, based in Indigenous epistemology. We have been awarded accreditation by the First Nations Accreditation Board and we are directly accountable to the people in our communities.

Blue Quills First Nations College operates in a former residential school. In 1969 when the federal government proposed closing all residential schools and sending reserve students to public schools, our ancestors demanded the right to operate our own schools to have our own people teach our own children our own knowledge. Blue Quills is owned and governed by seven First Nations, including six Cree Nations and one Dene-Cree Nation, with several Metis settlements in the territory. For the last 40 years, guided by the vision and determination of the ancestors to take over the former residential school, Blue Quills First Nations College has been a leader in local control and has supported our Nations in exercising their rights to local control by shifting the programming from grade school to post-secondary as surrounding communities built their own schools in their communities.

Our research team is Indigenous, we participate in and lead ceremony and understand that learning and education are ceremony, bringing authentic lived experience to this project, placing it clearly and wholly within the context of Indigenous research. Our research methods are grounded in indigenous protocols and knowledge, informed by *nehiyawewin*, the Cree language. This project introduces a methodology informed by ceremony, protocol, and language, while studying effective Indigenous adult language acquisition.

Several of the themes and objectives identified in the SSHRC paper Opportunities in Aboriginal Research are addressed through this project: Indigenous Knowledge, advancing Indigenous Research Careers, and benefit to the community. By investigating effective language acquisition models for adult learners through *nehiyaw mâmitoneyihcikan*, Cree thought, we will explore how language informs our practice in research methodology and language transmission.

Certainly, there has been significant work done in the area of language research, however, the focus has been largely on Indigenous students as learners of English as a second language, teaching Indigenous languages using standard roman orthography and linguistic models, and the impact of immersion for k-12, but there has been little if any exploration of uniquely indigenous methods of language acquisition for adult learners, and not on natural/ authentic models for language transmission/ acquisition. This work is inherently informed by Indigenous Knowledge contained in the language and its structures. Language is at the core of who we are as a people: our languages teach us about the world around us and how to relate with that world, language is an indigenous knowledge system, and contains knowledge on ethics and protocols.

In the research themes identified by SSHRC, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous respondents identified language, traditional knowledge, and methodology as significant areas of interest. The inherent nature of participatory action research using the grounded theory method ensures that the experience will contribute to the healing of our people, will in fact be a decolonizing methodology. In Indigenous communities we don't do things alone. We do things in relationship, in *wâhkôhtowin*. We involve *kehte-ayak*, our Elders, and the knowledge travels the circle. As an Indigenous institution we ensure that ownership of Indigenous Knowledge and intellectual property is maintained within our communities.

This project honours community voices, and places priority on ensuring that the results are useful and available first to leaders and educators in our communities. As an Indigenous institution directly accountable to the seven member First Nations, the research will clearly be in the care and custody of aboriginal people. Because our Nations own the College, they own the work produced by the College.

Undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at Blue Quills will have an unprecedented opportunity to participate directly in a major research project, acquiring skills and contributing to the articulation of Indigenous Research Methodology. The Blue Quills team philosophy will honour students as equal partners in the research.

## **Context**

Our Elders tell us that they would like to be able to speak to us in our language, but we don't know it. When we begin to explore why that is, we encounter a complex web of influences: the punishment and abuse experienced in Residential schools, destruction and replacement of traditional trade and economy, forced participation in public schools with homogenizing policy, and the fear and shame our people accumulated over several generations of assimilation policies. Our parents and grandparents were punished in residential schools for speaking their language and didn't want to see their children suffer, so they didn't teach them Cree or they told them not to speak it outside the home. Or our people were afraid their children would not get jobs or would be laughed at and excluded from society if they did not speak English well, so they quit teaching the language to their children and grandchildren. Or they were convinced by the churches that the only way to be saved was to abandon everything Indian and convert to Christianity and the western Euro-Canadian way of life, so they let go of the

language. All around us were messages inviting us to abandon our language. We looked around and did not see ourselves and our language represented in the world. We did not see the things that our language teaches us to value, being valued by others. We did not see the knowledge our language contains being valued. What we weren't seeing then, was that Cree would keep us whole, and we need to be whole to survive in this world. Our languages are rich and complex, teaching us about the world around us, about how to relate to one another, about how to survive in the world, about ceremony, about life, about kinship with all of Creation. And we give thanks to those brave ones who retained language and ceremony in the face of relentless oppression.

The trauma and effects of residential schools are complex and intergenerational. Taking children away from their families, separating the generations, dismantling family structures, are acts of violence that are embedded in the collective memory and inform our contemporary experience. The public focus through government departments and agencies, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is on the individual, and primarily concerned with physical and sexual abuse. This denies the social effects of separating families and delivering the message that that language and culture are useless or evil. This individualistic focus denies the collective dimension of our cultures, and there is no mechanism in this relationship with government and the institutions of the state to address or redress the harm done to our languages, cultures, communities and families – it is in fact, an act of re-colonization.

Some families were so separated from their people that over the generations they began to deny their indigenous ancestry, leaving today's generation to find and rebuild connections to community, and overcome the abandonment and rejection by both cultures. The internal fracturing of families has destroyed the relationships that are essential to education and language transmission, where the resulting emotional distance prevents family members from helping one another on this most intimate journey. The cumulative effect of colonization has also resulted in families where the older children speak the language, but the younger ones do not.

Today, many young adults realize that they exist in a vacuum between the worlds: they neither have the language to carry the knowledge of their ancestors, nor has the promised opportunity in the western world materialized. The emptiness left where the language lives, the sense of having been denied a birthright, seems to be the greatest motivator for adults to recover their indigenous language.

For more than a generation public schools from kindergarten to graduate school have been developing and offering indigenous language courses using English-based linguistic models, and so we have a lot of people who know a few words, but almost no new speakers of the language. In our own experience, very few people have learned to speak the language through these methods. This approach also creates an English mental model which influences culture.

You see, the academy seems not to recognize learning or attach value to knowledge unless it can be committed to paper and measured quantitatively, and so, language courses have relied on what can be committed to paper. The linguistic approach dominates, assuming that if you teach people how the language works and how it is constructed, they will be able to

understand it and use it. In fact, what happens is our language is being archived to paper and fewer and fewer people are actively using the language in everyday and ceremonial contexts.

These schools — residential schools, public schools and universities — not only took our language by punishing us and convincing us that it was useless, but also took our way, our methods and relationships of transmitting and keeping our language living. They taught us other ways of teaching language, and now, the ones who learned in that way don't speak or use the language. And now we are re-searching our language, our ways of teaching, and the relationships that support that. Paradoxically, these institutions that were instrumental in dismantling our languages are now the ones accredited by education systems to develop and deliver indigenous language programs.

Indigenous communities and Alberta Learning have invested significant resources in the development of resource materials. However, there are no easily accessible materials to support immersion approaches to Indigenous language. We have to ask the question, how can you study one language through the structure of another? How can you apply the rules of one language to another? How can you talk about verbs in a language that does not have a word for verbs — these linguistic terms do not naturally exist in indigenous languages? Like Einstein said, the mere presence of the observer changes the experiment; so certainly, imposing one language structure to study another language will radically alter the meaning, understanding, and usage of the language.

We know that we have a responsibility to ensure our children and grandchildren and those waiting to be born have a language to learn. Today, government reports suggest that only 3 Indigenous languages in Canada will survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although Cree is one of those languages, each community has a different experience, and in our region even the largest community is reported as having declining language. Knowledge and ways of knowing are embedded in languages: Indigenous languages contain knowledge about these lands, the earth, and how to live in harmony with it and each other, diverse knowledge that is desperately needed by this globalized homogenized society.

### **Purpose / Importance of the Study**

This study, by the people and with the people, will honour Indigenous research protocols and use a grounded theory approach to research and explore natural Indigenous ways of teaching Indigenous languages. Conclusions and recommendations will support policy making for Indigenous as well as provincial/federal policy makers and educators. Through participatory action research, community members will be empowered with language revitalization strategies and activities, including language acquisition models, teaching methods, and resources. We recognize language learning as an instrument of decolonization, healing the intergenerational wounds of our people — *mâmawi-nehiyaw iyinikahiwewin*.

Indigenous Knowledge is a central aspect of the project, as we explore, with *kehte-ayak*, our Elders, the knowledge contained in the language. We have to look into and through our language to find our natural ways of teaching, and translate those ways into effective methods for

supporting adult language learners. We need to find the root meaning of our words, not simply settle for an understanding of the way we use the words. Most Cree dictionaries offer the definition of words in terms of how they are used, not in their root meaning. For example: *pônâyamihêwikîsikâk* is used to refer to Monday, but the root words tell us that it is the day we stop praying. This is clearly a Christian reference, so until we explore the root words we don't understand how language influences our lives, and we lose opportunities to learn our own philosophies, knowledges, and history.

We need to go to our Elders, honouring our relationships and protocols, *wâhkôhtowin*. Our languages are a gift from the Creator, a spiritual gift, and so any research around language that is not conducted through ceremony is killing our language and our people. We know we have to do this research, because when others do the research about us or for us outside of ceremony, it takes the knowledge away, presents it out of context, essentially killing our knowledge, then research becomes genocide.

The greatest significance of this project is the advancement of indigenous knowledges and research methodologies, while also advancing the careers of Indigenous researchers by involving five undergraduate and five doctoral students in research teams, offering them the opportunity to conduct real and meaningful research.

## **Policy Contributions**

In 2001 the Saddle Lake Chief and Council issued a declaration making Cree the official language of the community. In the meantime, efforts have been made to support the acquisition of language, including the formation of *kâwi-nehiyawitân*, an elder guided, community group tasked with creating resources, curriculum, collecting Cree language interviews, and offering classes and community service broadcasts on local radio.

Other efforts include Cree language classes in the k-12 curriculum, and at the local college. One of the constraints in the school programs is the imposition of provincial curriculum and teacher training which does not align with or accommodate the Cree language and way of thought.

In 2004 the Alberta government announced that by 2006 students will be able to meet the second language requirement by taking one of seven languages offered in the provincial curriculum, including Cree. To facilitate this, there will be a need for continued training for adults to learn the language, and for teachers in appropriate delivery models that will support the acquisition of language.

In the past generation, schools and colleges and universities have offered language programs based largely on the linguistic model, where the structure of the language is emphasized. Unfortunately, the research demonstrates that this does not produce language speakers (Saddle Lake *kâwi-nehiyawitân*, stats). Blue Quills proposes to research new methods of teaching language that will empower learners and ensure future generations have language they can use in meaningful ways.

This research will support communities in policy initiatives:

- to help teachers and schools have confidence that their language programs offer learners real opportunities to acquire Indigenous language fluency
- informing Indigenous governments' community based policy and programs
- providing a framework for provincial and federal governments drafting language policy.

## Foundations

This research project is a natural progression in the history of Blue Quills First Nations College. Through the 1990's Elders and faculty invited more ceremony into the College life, and with that a commitment to the language which carries the knowledge of ceremony. And as the fluent language speakers among the residential school population were aging and leaving this world, the next generation of ceremonial holders demonstrated a new urgency to learn the language. Many of these, mostly men, began independent language learning journeys through ceremony, learning from their mentors by immersing themselves in the ceremonial environment and inviting spiritual intervention.

In 2002 the College launched a doctoral program in *iyiniw* studies, and the cohort developed immersion activities for language learning, involving Elders in real context experiences. From this experience, the College directed energies into developing immersion based programming for students in undergraduate programs, and in response to demand from our people, designed a program to support adult language learners, and then programming to certify language speakers as instructors. Efforts are now underway to develop a degree for Indigenous Language Instructors.

As we learned more about language learning methods we learned more about indigenous culture and knowledge systems, and it became apparent that we had to find a way to relate our learning in a manner consistent with the protocols and relationships of our people. We have to tell the story, this is not an academic exercise, so to express this in academic theoretical frameworks would be to contradict what we have learned, would be a disservice to our people and our knowledge, would be a re-colonization. This learning determined our research method – a qualitative approach which is more effective in evaluating language learning/acquisition experience, rather than seeking empirical data on how many language speakers there are or measuring how much language a learner acquires in a given period by a particular method. Our Elders have taught us that the quality of the experience, is the first measure, the results will follow.

Our Elders remind us why we do this. One of our Elders recounts an experience he had as a child of about 18 months. He was playing in his grandfather's house where several old men were visiting. One of them called to him and asked, "*nôsisim*, what will the world be like when you are an old man like us?" With the surety of one who lives close to the spirit world, as children do, he replied, "our people will not speak Cree, *nehiyawewin*, our language." The old men were aghast, but now, about 70 years later, only the grandparent generation speaks fluent Cree.

We know that there is a certain urgency to language recovery, and that while there is significant effort being invested in programs for children, adult learners are essential to the future of the language among our people. Several years ago a small group of educators visited an Elder with an invitation for him to come and teach at the school. His response essentially reminded the group that it was their responsibility to learn the culture and be able to teach it to the generations that follow them – the clear message was we cannot skip a generation.

Our responsibility as Cree researchers is to understand and share the knowledge that will support first language fluency of the adults in this generation who will be the bridge for future generations.

*âhkameyimok kimâmawi-kaskihtânaw* – be determined, together we succeed.

## CHAPTER TWO – CREE WORLDVIEW

Perhaps the most important factor in understanding the context for language revitalisation is to understand world view more so than reviewing all the language theories and studies. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), defines worldview as “the overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world. A collection of beliefs about life and the universe held by an individual or a group”. This chapter aims to provide a glimpse into the worldview of the *nehiyaweyak*, Cree people. It is not meant to be a complete representation but provides direction for those who would utilize the appropriate protocols to pursue the oral teachings and traditions from those who know. Rather than compare the Cree worldview to another worldview or to rationalize as to what happened that caused people to be separated from this worldview, by way of introducing readers to these stories answers to assumptions about how things have unfolded over the course of the relationship between Cree people and others are revealed. The importance of cross-cultural relationships is to achieve a shared understanding based on mutual respect of one’s worldview.

During a nationally broadcast television series in 1991, Bill Moyers asked, “What do aboriginal people have to offer the western world?” Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Onandaga Nation, confidently replied, “We have a long perspective of Turtle Island...” This long perspective is true for the Onandaga Nation upon their ancestral lands of the eastern shores of Turtle Island, current day Canada and United States, and it is also true for the Cree, Blackfoot, and Assiniboine peoples of the interior plains regions. We have a long perspective to share with the people who have arrived to settle upon our territories over the past 135 years or more, earmarked by Treaties Six (1876), Seven (1877), and Eight (1899) that have been instrumental in settling current day Alberta. This long perspective has been passed down from one generation to the next within our oral tradition, and now, in written form, as well. This literature review guides the reader through a brief sketch of the indigenous construct, treaty relationship from the eyes and experiences of Cree peoples. The indigenous context is set for the reader to help better understand the current day experiences of Cree people, to demonstrate what strengths are present to guide educators in their relationships with Cree peoples.

### The Indigenous Construct

Worldview is a noun. Walter Ong (1969), supplicants that, “in oral cultures it is more accurate to speak not of world-as-view, but rather as world-as-event” (Smith n.d., 11). The nature of world-as-event is supplied by Smith who studied amongst the Dene people conceded that indigenous languages, “stress action so heavily that even most nouns are really nominalized action verbs” (Smith, n.d., 11). Recognition that indigenous languages are verb-based is shared by Blackfoot scholar, Leroy Littlebear, who also contends that language is a repository for knowledge as it is steeped in activity and a process-based methodology. Hence, language serves as a source of knowledge as do ceremonies, songs, dreams and territory (Littlebear, 2009). The purpose served

by language is to connect people in relationships with each other, to the land, with the universe and the Creator. Michael Hart (2010, p.3) adds the place of spirituality in indigenous worldview in this statement, “It is apparent to me that these and other discussions of Indigenous worldviews highlight a strong focus on people and entities coming together to help and support one another in their relationship. This has been called a relational worldview (Graham, 2002). Key within a relational worldview is the emphasis on spirit and spirituality and, in turn, a sense of communitism and respectful individualism.”

The Indigenous world view is a way of life that has its beginnings in the teachings of *mâmâtawisit* (the Great Mystery). Within our cosmology, our relationships with the spiritual and physical worlds are informed; and in this world, the peoples were the last to be created, hence, are the most frail and fragile of all of creation. Indigenous knowledge continues to be transmitted by elders, whose roles are very firmly implanted in the social order of the indigenous worldview. Elders’ experiences that culminate in wisdom gleaned from their long years of living, position them to be the true educators of those who would inherit all that was protected and maintained, the children. As inheritors, the children are guided to hone their gifts and to realize the purpose of their existence which they had pledged to *mâmâtawisit* prior to being born into these lands.

Elders are older people who have lived a full life and through their years have accumulated experiences. These lived experiences are valued by the younger generations who are seen as embarking upon the journey of life and seek the wisdom of the elders to guide their movements. Elders are a vital link from one generation to the next and maintain continuity for the oral transmission of knowledge and practice. Amongst the many roles ascribed to elders, they have been identified as repositories of knowledge (Medicine, 1983; Stiegelbauer, 1996; Couture, 2000; RCAP, 1996). Stiegelbauer (1996, p. 66) in consultation with the Native Center Elders’ Advisory Council, Manitoba, itemized an elder’s role and attributes as:

- 1) is knowledgeable about tradition including ceremonies, teachings, and process of life; is ideally a speaker of a native language;
- 2) lives those traditions;
- 3) is old enough to have reached a stage of experience at which it is appropriate for them to communicate what they have learned from life and tradition;
- 4) is recognized by the community for their wisdom and ability to help;
- 5) is still an individual with varying knowledge and skills;
- 6) is able to interpret tradition to the needs of individuals and the community;
- 7) is often asked to represent indigenous views as symbols of the culture or through active involvement with issues and individuals.

Hence, an elder’s skill sets and their presence are rightfully accorded respect by all generations of people for their richness of wisdom in indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge is defined in the literature as a localized understanding of place, time, and relationships between people, the land, and the cosmos (Couture, 1990; Dei, 2002; Deloria, Jr. & Wildcat, 2001). It encompasses holistic representations of the interrelatedness of all life forms inclusive of the social order, economic, political, and spiritual collectivity. Relationships are vital to the maintenance of balance, reciprocity, values and beliefs, and human

and environmental interplays. Ermine (1995) describes the relatedness between understanding at a deep spiritual level, the incorporeal (inner self) and the outer reality of self in relation to others and the environment.

McIntosh (n.d., p. 18) summarizes poignantly, that, prior to colonization, indigenous knowledge and learning was deeply interwoven into a way of life. It was an orientation to life based on strong spiritual beliefs, where the self was constructed within relationships — the self in relation to the family, the community, the world, the universe, and ultimately, the Creator. The sources of knowledge and learning were nature, the Elders, observation, experience, and inner self-reflection. It was a holistic approach to the world, aimed at keeping the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical in balance. Significantly, learning and knowledge were communicated through oral language. The construction of that language reflected the spiritual and natural world in which Aboriginal peoples lived and learned to survive.

Worldview is embedded in indigenous languages. Due to colonization wherein Canada's *Indian Act* legislation had banned indigenous ceremonies resulting in disconnection between several generations to learn the richness of their identity and languages, a lot of knowledge must be regained. At Yellowhead Tribal College, Jimmy O'Chiese (2010), a ceremonial leader and teacher of the Anishnabe/Cree traditions has begun to teach about the stories of creation to young adult students and members of the faculty. In a Native Studies course taught in the 2010 winter term, Jimmy stated that indigenous languages are important, however, consciousness of the worldview must be understood by all including the people who do not speak or understand indigenous languages. This notion is articulated in his assertion that,

You have to start at the beginning to know the connection, guidance, direction, prevention and your courage. We need to connect and feel belonging first. If I jump ahead and teach in Cree or Ojibway, we're jumping into 2010. We would miss the whole part of what we should be teaching. What we've been teaching, I call that a wave. Pretty soon, you are going to connect then we can start balancing; a lot of these things are in our lives and in mainstream but it has only been one-sided. That is why we need to balance this to understand the native education and native studies because it is there but it's not privileged...How many years has this education system been in Canada and in what part of that have native people been privileged? We need to start at the foundation. The next wave will go to the next one because everything goes by wave. We will acknowledge our ancestors, those who left these for us. They thought of us, they thought ahead; it is for our children. That's why we have to acknowledge those people that brought us here. It goes on from one generation to the next. We are still part of that same creation. They say we have to work with one another so that we can balance. Things will happen if we don't balance. It's about the future generation, what will happen to them if we don't understand our values and our connection to the water, the environment. I'm thinking about the future generations, our children, their children and their children. Everything that we do,

we think about the seventh generation ahead of us according to the Big Dipper and Little Dipper (O'Chiese, 2010).

Connecting to the wave of generations involves cultural protocol. Hence, to acknowledge the ancestors, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts and uncles who once shared food at our tables and have now passed on to the next world, appropriate protocol involves a feast. In a college/university classroom, a feast means introducing a new process in order to prepare the space for oral teachings. Sharing of food with and between those who are present and offering a dish of food for those who once shared our tables represents love, respect, gratitude and appreciation of the intergenerational connection from which flow the oral traditions. The Cree or Anishnabe language is used to offer the food in prayer.

The second feast protocol acknowledges the clans and is conducted during ceremonies on the land in the presence of all our relations that dwell in the sky and on the land. These ceremonies are conducted during different times of the year in conjunction with the seasons. At these times, the people utilize the gifts provided to us to live a good life; fire, earth, water and air. It is these elements that connect all of humanity as one because we all breathe and we all require water, the sun and the earth to sustain us. The same is true for the animals, birds, plants, trees. All who dwell on the land are related and this is taught in the oral teachings. When one is able to use the language to pass this knowledge forward, it is self-explanatory as the language can articulate spiritual connections between all living things. The Cree language, indeed all indigenous languages of Turtle Island, has an animate and inanimate structure. Hence, the rock is animate and as the oldest living being on the land, it is referred to as *asiniy nâpe*, rock grandfather. The land sustains life and connects us to all of creation and ceremonies are conducted to acknowledge the ongoing wave of *miyo pimâtisiwin*, the good life.

The oral teachings are carried from each successive generation to the next and rely on the maintenance of oratory and memory skills. Therefore, it is not unusual for the receiver to listen to the same story repetitively until the teacher believes that the story has been internalized and not only accommodated into the listener. The origin of these teaching is not endowed upon the teacher or accredited as being of their own making, for at one time, the teacher was a listener. The origins of the teachings are attributed to the Creator who gave these teachings to individuals. The individuals were then the first messengers to carry forward the teachings from the Creator for the benefit of all the People. Jimmy O'Chiese (2010) relays the creation of people as:

When God first created us he took the soil to mould us, we became part of the plants, the strawberry looks like your heart, the vines are like your veins. Everything is symbols for us. When he took the soil to create us then we became part of the herbs. When he moulded us, he took the aspen tree to make our bones that is why the people in the sun dance use *okimawahtik*, (lead pole). Then he made spirits. He made the stars and the big ball of sun. He took a little bit of the sun's flame and put it into our hearts. That is why you feel the warmth of the sun and fire in your palms. The fire regenerates you when you are cold. Now he created the thunderbird to look after the water where it is kept in a sacred place so no one can ruin it. No one can get to the sun either. When he created the thunderbird to look after that water, how many percent of our bodies is water and the child has to grow in water before he is born to mother earth. The sun's flame is in our hearts and the thunderbird's water in our bodies.

God created two of each people. Think of the native side, man and woman from the soil, aspen tree, sun, water, that is us. Those two people had five boys and five girls. God never allowed those kids to marry, so the oldest son, when he was hunting, met a young woman and he knew she wasn't his sister. So he kept meeting with her while hunting. Finally she invited him to meet her parents. They went into the bush and they came up to the big mound and there was a hole in that mound which is the symbol of the earth, that sweatlodge, is a spirit home. It is connected. It is a symbol to the mother earth. When a woman is going to have a child, the symbol is there. The connection is to you and the child, connected with the spirit and creation. Women are next to the Creator because you can create life on earth. As long as there are people, the sun will never stop, because it's in your heart. Who starts the beat? It is you (women) that is why you don't hit the drum. The woman already started the heart beat but men have to hit the drum to start the heart beat. When God created, he needed workers, we are part of the workers because you have to create the people, the sun, the thunderbird, the tree, the north wind, and the mother earth. These are all workers. *Kimaci-iyiniw* the breath is a worker. This is the Creation in a short teaching. There is more. There are so many teachings to put together.

The teachings of the Life Force have come to be known by a number of different descriptors such as, the natural law, the four principles, basic values, or the Medicine Wheel. Each of these descriptors are correct and are accepted by the people when referenced during periods of sharing. For the purposes of this chapter, they will be referred to as the Life Force teaching. Following is one teaching which has been handed down to the writer by Peter O'Chiese (1992). It is the first of a long series of teachings when natural leaders speak of issues such as Treaty signing, communal living, reciprocity with the land, and ceremonial practices.

### **Teachings of the Life Force**

The Creator gave the People the teachings that would be needed to live a full and purposeful life. The teachings were based on the land so that these lessons would be constant reminders for the People. Everything has a spirit. The Creator's plan was to ensure that each spirit would help the other. The basic laws of the Life Force are intertwined with four lessons of the land: grass, trees, animals, and rock. These elements can be seen each day by people and thereby the lessons would be difficult to neglect or forget. Thus, the survival of the Life Force teaching would be ensured.

The grass is a symbol for the lesson of kindness. The spirit of kindness is taught best by the grass since it is the covering, the cloak, of the earth. Without this earth covering, there would be constant soil erosion and the land base would be consistently changing its form. The ecosystem is dependent on a consistent land base. The grass is trampled, stomped, walked upon until it bows low and lays flat against the earth. However, it eventually picks itself up and continues its upward growth. Each spring, the grass would get burned in traditional plains fires. No matter, it returns to adorn the earth in a new rich shade of green. The grass is pulled up by all forms of herbivores and people for life sustaining purposes. It resumes its growth eventually and consistently. This constant revival is believed to be humility, forgiveness, and especially

kindness, displayed by the grass spirit. This lesson, as lived by grass, is a pillar of the Life Force teaching.

The tree symbolized the lesson of honesty. The tree's purpose in life is to grow towards the sun, the source of life. The process of growth is in a straight upward movement as is evident in the trunk of the tree. The core of the tree trunk is in balanced alignment. It is this balanced alignment that is presumed people will emulate in determining their own purposes here on earth. The central nervous system is the core of the person and is best maintained in an upright posture with head, neck, and back being aligned. To grow straight like a tree is metaphoric for being an honest person. When a person is honest it is easy to hold one's head upright without shame or guilt. Straight like the tree, honesty, is a value taught in the second pillar of the life force teaching.

Sharing is the lesson best taught to the people by the animals. It is they who openly share of themselves, graciously giving their own lives for the sustenance of the people. In an intricate balance, people take these gifts from the animals, always being sure to give something back to the spirit of the animal. It is this teaching which is evidenced in ceremonies and songs honouring the animal spirits who in sharing their lives, teach that is the People about life. People offer tobacco, a prayer of thanksgiving to the animal prior to the hunt. It is why the hunter bestows the credit upon the animal who came to give his life. It is a wondrous lesson, one that is perhaps the best value retained among the People. Sharing is the third value presiding as the pillar opposite and adjacent to the teaching of kindness.

The fourth lesson is that taught by the rock, the value of strength, and it is synonymous with determination. The rock is a tough, resilient element that is most available in the environment. Like the rock, the People's spirit must be strong in order to continue in a life that will be filled with struggles and challenges. Equipped with determination, the individual will be resilient to change, rather than to break down or fall apart. This teaching is very important for continuity of one's own identity and has relevance to humankind as a whole. The biggest rock clusters are the mountains. These mountains are constant reminders to the people of strength that is possible in greater numbers. Strength is combined to benefit the collectivity and ensure the continuous existence of the four teachings of the land.

These four teachings are referred to as Natural Law. The Life Force teaching comes from these laws and serves to guide the individual. These laws are challenging to live by, at any time, from the past to contemporary times. Not very many people can claim to be all of these things at all times. Humans are weak beings in the scheme of life. The point is to try, as is taught by the rock; individuals must not give up.

From these pinnacles of the Natural Laws of the land, the individual must forge a life. The teaching tells of the Creator's intent to instil life in people. People have a purpose to fulfill during this lifetime. It is the responsibility of each individual to discover and fulfill that purpose. The Natural Law equips the individual with the solid base that will be needed to live a life of purpose.

In attempting to internalize the Natural Law, by discovering and working towards one's purpose, a process has begun. A metaphor captures this process of self-actualization. When an individual attempts to lead a life of balance it is often said that the person is walking on the "red

road”, following the “sweetgrass trail”, or finding their “path”. This entire process is the *Life Force*, as is depicted in figure 1.

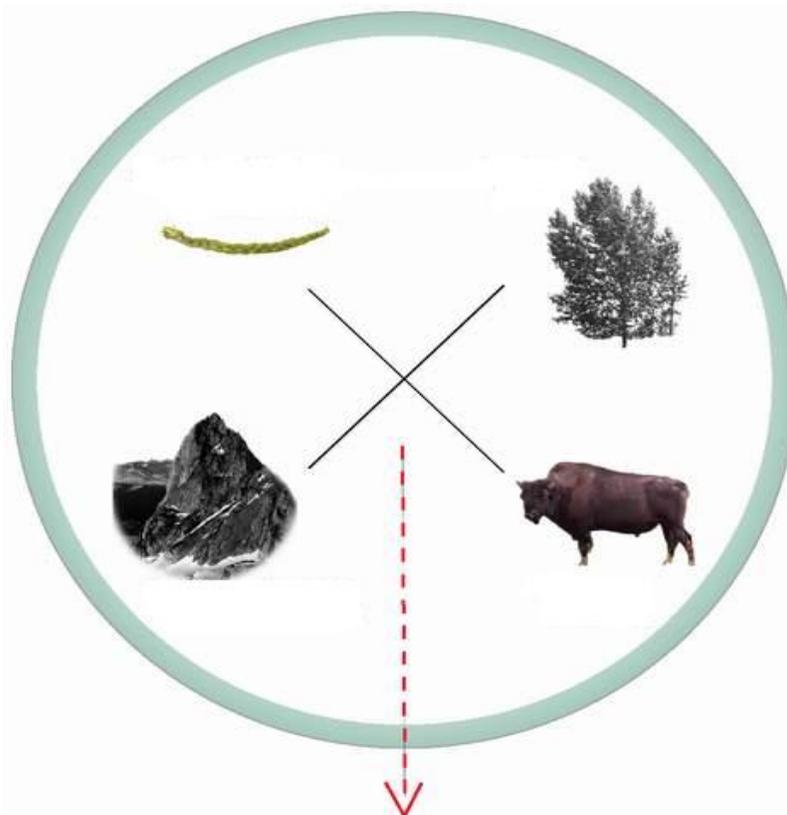


Figure 1 – Natural Law (P. O’Chiese, 1990)

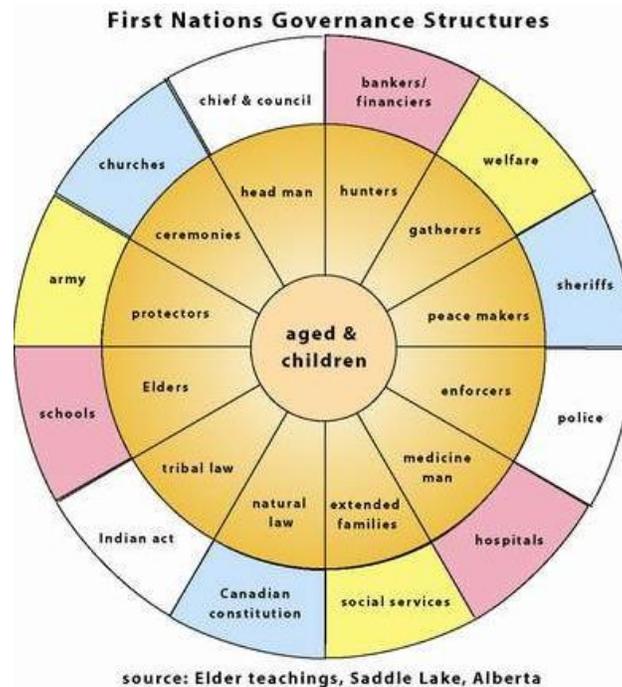
### ***Miyo-pimâtisiwin* – Good Life Teachings**

Jimmy O’Chiese (2010) had stated that the instructions of living a good life were to be shared with all the people who would come to live with the indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, North America:

First of all, what we want to do is connect people to understand the beginning of time; how things were created and how we are connected to that creation. From there, they said, we’re going to bring your white brothers and the black and yellow people to this Turtle Island. You welcome them and help them to learn. First they have to learn about this island because they would not survive on this island. When they arrived they could have starved. Our people fed them and kept them alive. Then they started to build what they brought. Our people helped them to build. Our people became teachers. We have to be kind to them so they could share. Later on, Treaties occurred. That is the past. It’s not history, because what started is still alive.

These teachings of connection and balance are evident in the roles and responsibilities of men, women, children, and elders are delicately balanced in the interplay of the social order.

This balance is maintained through circular structures of kinship hinged upon interdependence. At the core of the circle, spiritual laws and beliefs are the compacts, renewed season upon season through ceremony (refer to First Nations Governance Structures diagram below). Ceremony is at once practicing the laws, giving thanks to the higher power, and passing on the traditions to the younger generations through a pedagogical approach that has love at the center.



Indigenous pedagogy is informed by the values and beliefs of love, honesty, sharing, and strength through prayer (First Rider, 1999). Inculcating the next generation into the spiritual foundations inherent in these laws is paramount in all interactions between the adults and children. Viewed as gifts from the Creator, children are born with their personality and character intact (Sinclair, 2001). They are seen as having a purpose and belonging to a family, clan, and spiritual guide. These attributes give the child a place and a sense of belonging within the social order.

The family includes the child’s birth parents, siblings, extended family relations, and community; all with a shared responsibility of guiding, disciplining, and mentoring the child in a life-long educational process. Pedagogical approaches include daily activities that require the child to observe, listen, and learn. Reciprocally, a child’s attributes are observed from birth, to identify their inherent gifts. Depending on their gifts, children are apprenticed to adults who mentor them to hone their gifts. With the guidance of a mentor, children practice until they achieved mastery of newly acquired skills and abilities, in the context of real activity. Hence, children enter into subsequent stages of their lives through experiential learning and teaching practices.

In the indigenous construct, there are seven stages in life, marked from birth to death. Each stage is celebrated through a rites of passage ceremony that heralded the individual’s place in the community. The first stage of life is called happy life where the birth of the infant was

celebrated in a name giving ceremony. The child is nurtured through this dependent phase of life by the parents and extended familial relations. The second stage, fast life, is marked by the child's progress through childhood where they enjoy "total autonomy and freedom" (Sinclair, 2001) to explore; watching and learning as daily life unfolded. Through the rites of passage into manhood or womanhood, children enter into the stage of the wondering life. In this part of life's journey, the individual masters their gifts and begins to search for their purpose. Through this search, they enter the truth life, where the youth, now equipped with the tools and skills necessary to contribute to the society, earn their place as adults. Woman at about the age of 20 reached physical maturity and became adept at the women's roles and responsibilities. Men reached maturity at about the age of 30, mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. The next phase of life is marked by the marriage ceremony during the time of decision. Lifetime marriage alliances require that both the man and woman be prepared in all aspects to enter into the next phase of life, planting time. At this point, the cycle is renewed as children are gifted to the couple; with the guidance of elders, parents are prepared to guide new additions to the family. The seventh and final stage of life, known as wisdom time, is when individuals are grandparents, having lived through many experiences, granting them ascendancy into wisdom. The final ceremony of an individuals' life is their passage into the next world where they return home to the spirit life.

Indigenous knowledge, such as this teaching about the seven stages of life, is transmitted orally from one generation to the next through stories. Storytelling is an integral aspect of societal regeneration and is most powerful in the original language, becoming for some, the motivation for sustaining the language. Within each ceremony dwells a story specific to the season, its spiritual aspect, and explains the reason for celebrating that particular aspect of the life cycle. A story that represents the cycle of life is about the little Eagle Child who we observe move from one stage into the next. Through Eagle Child's movements and transformations, many aspects of life are revealed including lessons of the relatedness of the physical and spiritual worlds; the seven stages of life; the healing ceremonies; discipline; resiliency; and how to live as an individual in a collective society.

In the story, as the lone survivor of a catastrophic event, Eagle Child was nurtured by means of alliances with the animals of the region. Recognizing difference in physical appearance, Eagle Child sought guidance from the four directional grandmothers and grandfathers of the spirit world. Visiting each in turn, Eagle Child was repeatedly gifted and sent back to his original place of birth to reclaim what was lost in the catastrophe. Starting from nothing, relying on his own resiliency and gifts, Eagle Child is guided once again by bird relatives to seek a vision in the mountains. Disciplined preparation allowed Eagle Child to be taught the order to life from birth to death in the physical world by the spiritually wise speakers, the rock grandfathers. Retracing his footsteps back to his birthplace, Eagle Child is shown the ceremony of the sweat lodge to use for continued dialogue with the spiritual world to renew the self and seek healing. At the end of his journey, Eagle Child practices the laws and traces the journey of the life path to find what it means to walk the sweet grass trail. The blades of the sweet grass are braided and "with its three strands represents a harmony which is necessary between the Giver of Life, all that lives, and Mother Earth; it is a harmony that cannot be deliberately imbalanced or separated by man" (Treaty Seven Elders and Tribal Council, et al., 1999, p. 12). Hence, the sweet grass trail is a metaphor for journeying on a good path or *mîyo pimâtisiwin*.

The story of Eagle Child metaphorically illustrates the intuitive search made by all indigenous peoples who are stirred to discover their roots. This timeless story is as relevant to learners today, as it was in the past. The theme of searching in every possible place for a semblance of truth, and finding it back at home, intrinsic to the self when interconnected to the plants, animals and birds of the land, with help from the spiritual world, is commonplace. It speaks about how the journey of life is finding one's place in creation. The story reveals our resiliency and resourcefulness in facing adversity courageously, with our feet firmly planted in a world view steeped in the truth of our existence.

It is from this stance that we begin to tell the story of the treaty relationship between our ancestors and the Queen of Great Britain, her subjects and subsequent heirs to the treaty. This story reveals adversities and traumas experienced by indigenous peoples in the colonial period of Canada, the impacts of this legacy on our peoples, and the current day situation.

### **Treaties: The Oral and Written Texts**

To understand the experience and context of the Cree peoples in Canada, one must begin by exploring the relationship at its origins – the treaty making process and agreements. When our forefathers were discussing the processes of entering into the treaty negotiations, the laws of the Creator were strong, enacted and embodied by the trusted leaders chosen by the grassroots people. In indigenous societies, the power lies with the grassroots people; like the grass, the Creator's power is humble. The people chose the leaders on the basis of their ability and responsibility to live by the Creator's laws. This was especially important in the negotiations with the representatives of the British Crown. Our forefathers were strong and closely united in collective bands. Jimmy O'Chiese (2010) emphasizes the unity of all peoples living in Turtle Island as stemming from the original first two people, *nistameyimakanak* (first people):

Our identity has been here for thousands of years, we had our own governance, education system that is connected to Turtle Island. Everyone had a part in it, the Cree, Blackfoot, Bloods, Dene, and they all worked together. They all had their places. Every person connected to this land should know their clans, identity and connection to the environment because that is who they are. They were created from the same source no matter who it is. Our identity is always to the land. When God created us, he took the soil to make us. That is how we are to share the land. That is why they said, we would share six inches of the land in the Treaty signing. We share ourselves as we are part of the ecosystem. The relationship is in accordance with natural law.

The unifying force was in knowing and living the laws set forth by the Creator, and handing down through the oral traditions and ceremonies, these truths so that the next generation of indigenous peoples would also lead purposeful and fulfilled lives in respect of the Creator. This process of extending the laws to successive generations is inherent in the structure of indigenous peoples' way of life.

Since the signing of the treaty, our peoples have witnessed rapid change through the experiences of exposure to living side by side with the Crown's people who settled upon our lands. Aware of these rapid changes, our forefathers centered the challenge upon each new generation to keep the spirit and intent of the treaties intact. The people knew, at the treaty

signing, of the events that would attempt to turn our world upside down and lead our people in different directions. Minding the laws of the Creator, it is our inherent right to determine our futures amidst the growth and change that we have experienced; this inherent right is closely linked with the sacredness of the spirit and intent of the treaty agreements. For the indigenous peoples, the treaty means more than the words written in a document. The treaties represent and carry the message of the truth of our lives as the Creator's peoples set upon these lands for time immemorial.

Indigenous peoples' languages define the people and our purposes. Indigenous philosophies contain the teachings given to us at the time of creation from our Creator. These teachings include the laws that have remained intact as a result of the care and responsibility ensured by each generation to live and abide by them. The laws are still the same because of the integrity of the generations who have passed them to each successive generation, retaining this inherent right to the sacredness of life. The methods of teaching and learning these laws are in the stories and legends of the people, as told in the indigenous languages. The spirit and intent of the treaties is in the story that is told to remind us of our purpose - that is to maintain the sacred balance of life and to pass it on to the next generation.

Hence, the grassroots people continue to challenge the leaders of today to bring to fruition the intended purpose of the sacredness of the treaties as determined by our ancestors. The grassroots people stand by this inherent right to live and abide by the Creator's laws in order to forge a truthful life in a modern context. Our peoples respect the three parties present at the signing of each treaty: the indigenous leaders, official representatives of the British Crown, and the spirit world. Treaty Six was signed in 1876 at Fort Carleton and Fort Pitt with the treaty commissioner, Governor Alexander Morris. Treaty Seven followed in 1877 with Governor Laird at Blackfoot Crossing. In 1899, Treaty Eight was signed. The pipe ceremonies that preceded the negotiations and signings set into motion the bundles of rights that would be held in trust forever by the two nations of people who participated in the treaties. Thus, a relationship of kinship was forged based upon the "doctrine of *wahkôhtôwin*" (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p.34).

Recorded in the written text of the treaties were the summarized negotiations. In addition, the oral attestations recorded in the journals of the treaty commissioners address the presentations between all parties. Within the oral histories, our peoples have also recorded the extent of the negotiations. Both interpretations of the treaties demonstrate differences in what was settled upon. In accordance with the oral interpretations, the indigenous bundle of rights included the water, air, animals and plants, and the fire (hunting, fishing, and gathering). Our peoples agreed to share our lands to the depth of the plow, with the exception of some lands which would be reserved solely to continue our own livelihood and governance upon. The indigenous peoples also requested health benefits, relief in times of pestilence and famine, and assistance in the transition to a new economic lifestyle because they knew that the future generations must come to understand the Crown's subjects. Additionally, the Crown offered to extend opportunities of schooling whenever the people should desire it (Henderson, 1995, in Battiste). The Crown claimed taxation, settlement, and government in the bundle of rights for her own subjects. These terms of the treaty were basic necessities for life to continue for both parties. The terms set down the path for the indigenous peoples and those subjects of the Crown to live side by side and share the land. It was believed that the paths were distinct in that the indigenous peoples firmly held to continuing to live by the laws of the Creator.

Over time, and particularly as a consequence of the Indian Act, Canada, and Canadians, have come to see the land as theirs, and to see indigenous peoples as an ethnic minority, known as aboriginal peoples. However, this view does not match up with the indigenous perspective, nor does it match up with international law, or even Canada's own Constitution (1982).

The idea of indigenous title to Turtle Island (root title, not the fee simple title which people transfer back and forth such as when you buy or sell property off of the reserve) is, at the level of international law, connected to something called an autochthonous constitution. 'Autochthonous' simply means, 'rooted in the land' or 'of the land'. In societies with oral, rather than written traditions, the 'autochthonous constitution' is detailed in traditional spiritual practices. In effect, the cycle of ceremonies which carry us around the year, literally describe, embody and display our constitution.

The Canadian constitution claims that 'root title' belongs to the Queen of Canada, also the Queen of the United Kingdom, formerly Great Britain. However, there is a slight problem at the international level: Her Majesty cannot claim having an 'autochthonous constitution' here on Turtle Island, because everybody in the whole world knows she's English, not indigenous to Turtle Island. If there is any group of people who can show that they, indeed, have an 'autochthonous constitution', which they keep alive through continuous practice of their spiritual beliefs, then that group of people can, at the international level, honestly claim 'root title'.

There is only one way in which 'root title' can be legally extinguished. A nation of peoples can voluntarily, with full knowledge and consent, relinquish title to territory – a reminder that the treaties are about sharing not relinquishing. Canada's history of Indian policy shows a steady trail of efforts to extinguish root title. Indigenous peoples can give up 'root title' by converting to Christianity and unanimously and deliberately abandoning their own spiritual traditions. By switching to Her Majesty's religion, indigenous peoples voluntarily relinquish the spiritual practices and beliefs which define the 'autochthonous constitution'. Then, all claims to title will shift to Her Majesty's claim, making her claim 'root title'. Similarly, by entering into a Land Claim agreement, drafting a new constitution, or any other of the proposals put forth by the government of Canada, indigenous peoples can be seen as having voluntarily extinguished "root title", and voluntarily accepting ethnic minority status as Canadian citizens.

Canada's basic approach is to first systematically exclude indigenous peoples from economic activity, and then dangle dollars as bait. We are being pushed to write our own constitutions. However, at the international level we already have an "autochthonous constitution", acknowledging our 'root title', which we maintain through our traditional spiritual practices, and which we will nullify by writing a new one.

In the 1860s, Big Bear said, "If you want to trap a fox, you spread meat around the trap. When the fox is in the trap, then you knock him on the head. We want none of the Queen's presents: let her representatives come and talk to us like men" (Morris, 1991). Big Bear's words are very prophetic; in 2004, our statistics on quality of life, as measured by the United Nations Human Development Index, puts indigenous peoples inside of Canada behind countries like Brazil, and Thailand, around number 64, while Canada consistently enjoys a spot at or near number one.

What do the numbered treaties say about root title to land and resource? There is a famous “cede, release, surrender, and yield up” clause in each treaty text. What do these words mean? The numbered treaties, including treaties six, seven, and eight, are many things. They are a spiritual commitment to share the land in territories where indigenous peoples have been placed by the great mystery. They are agreements on how to go about making the transition from indigenous-only usage, to a shared usage. They can also be read as straightforward international commercial lease agreements. In 2004, indigenous peoples may not act like shrewd business people, but if we say that our indigenous ancestors were not shrewd business people, then we have missed the whole point of these treaties, and the two hundred years of trade relations between Europeans, and indigenous peoples which preceded the numbered treaties. Switlo (2003) contends that the, “cede, release, surrender, and yield up” clause is standard commercial lease terminology still used today. It refers to ‘outside deals’, say between the Blackfoot Nations, and the United States of America. In the treaty negotiation period, the United States was pressing for entry into and ownership of indigenous territory. Louis Riel, and Gabriel Dumont turned back an American expeditionary force coming up from Minnesota.

Look at the treaty text just before the “cede, release, surrender, and yield up” section, and you see the words “for Her Majesty the Queen and her successors forever”. If our ancestors had been selling the land, there would be no reason to mention the Queen’s heirs, although euro-centric historians will beg to differ (Alberta Learning, 2002).

In international law, Treaty Six sets a standard for negotiated agreements between Euro-derivative states, and Indigenous Nations. The United Nations (U.N.) studied our treaties (described in more detail, below, under ‘Historical Impacts’) and agreed completely with what our elders have been saying all along (Martinez, 1999). Neither sovereignty, nor root title to land had been surrendered in our treaties.

The treaties very specifically defined what was being shared, (agricultural use of land, only), where that land lies, and which pieces of land are being “reserved” from the commercial lease (hence “reserves”, another common commercial lease term still in use today). Treaties also indicate that the connection to the land is, for indigenous peoples, a spiritual relationship, governed by such elements as the sun, wind, grass, and water, and in the situation of treaty seven, the mountains. This kind of relationship is not for sale, is non-transferable, and cannot be extinguished. Our ancestors made this agreement with the pipe, at a time when the pipe meant something to absolutely everybody. To bring this point home, Jimmy O’Chiese (2010) relates the treaty to the home-fire,

Everything comes from our home and everything is connected. The spirit of this home will always be connected. When the child leaves that door, the spirit protectors go with them to protect them and to bring them back to their home fire. All of us work for the home. We work for the children for something that they can have for their future. Education goes hand and hand. The four directions at the door line up with the fire which is what the treaties are based on: grass, sun, rivers. It is for those homes that we have treaties. It will continue from generation to generation. The home is to provide us the knowledge that was passed on. The teachings, future and guidance, prevention, protection and connection: these are the connection, the energy.

The treaties are sitting stuck between the implementation stage and the enforcement stage (Makokis 2001; Steinhauer, 2004). The Federal Indian Act as a unilateral legislative construct, violates the treaties, as well as indigenous basic human rights. This is all well explored in both the legal, and the political sense. Canadians continue to receive the benefits of the treaties, while indigenous peoples' treaty benefits are illegally suppressed.

## **Conclusion**

As the legal and moral beneficiaries of the treaties, our life's work is to find a balance for our customs, languages, and traditions in a complex world. For the indigenous peoples, this challenge has not been forgotten. We cannot forget. There is no failure. We must succeed. The grassroots people who maintain the sacred trust of the treaty agreements pledge to continue to meet this challenge set forth by our ancestors. The spirit and intent of the treaties is foremost in our struggle to succeed and meet this challenge as our basic and inherent right of self-determination. This challenge is our inherent right to pursue and succeed no matter what the odds. This section resolves with a reminder about the inherent connection between our teachings and the spirit of the treaties relayed by Jimmy O'Chiese (2010), "As long as there are people, the sun will never stop, because it's in your heart."

Our Elders remind us that the context is an essential element of any language revitalization strategy, more so than any language theory or method. We must undertake this work in the context of our spirituality, our ancestral knowledge, our treaty responsibilities and relationships. Language learning initiatives disconnected from ceremony compromise the wholeness of the language, disconnecting it from meaning and knowledge, from culture, and from people. We are reminded that language is knowledge, ceremony is method – original and authentic method. To sustain our knowledge we need our language, to sustain our language we turn to ceremony.

## CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY

### Context

Our language research is a spiritual responsibility. We are governed by the protocols of ceremony and traditional knowledge. We are researching language learning methods for our community, for our ancestors, and for our future generations, which reflects the responsibility of all generations, to be the bridge between the ancestors and the future. Our research methodology honors the relationships and ceremony protocols, and also depends on the support of the Blue Quills First Nations College team and student community – for this we are grateful and give thanks.

The traditional teachings of the Natural Law and the core principles and values of love, honesty, sharing, strength and determination inform and direct our relationships with each other on the research team, the Elders, with the language speakers and learners. We begin with ceremony and prayer and always acknowledge the presence of the spiritual dimension – the Creator, the Grandmothers, the Grandfathers, our ancestors, all our relations and we accept our spiritual responsibility to be doing this work with the language for and by the people.

We have addressed the ethical space (Ermine, 2000) required in this research process as outlined in our research proposal. Our ethical boundaries are established by collective principles such as our knowledge systems, the autonomy of our communities and our treaties. All our relationships are governed by *wâhkôhtôwin*, *kâ-mamâhtâwisit*, *ospwâkan*, *matotîsân ekwa kâkîsimowin*. These, all go before us, informing our intentions, directing our purpose and are central to the research questions and our reasons for doing this work. As nurturing relationships and ceremony have been essential and part of our patterns of existence historically, we draw on and depend on these kinship relationships between each other. We follow the natural rhythm of the circle, reflective of all the other natural processes of life on Mother Earth. We use the process of the circle to allow for equal presentation, voice and a collective learning from each other. The practice of *mâmawi-kiyokeyahk* – visiting among the people has been one of the central methods of language acquisition used in the practice and teaching between the language learners and the teachers of the language for time immemorial. *Mâmawi-kiyokeyahk* is an essential protocol for building and maintaining our loving relationships – it invites humility and openness into the learning environment and establishes a focused intensity and observation for learning and retaining information. We learned that there must be an alignment in the processes between the research approach and the topic being investigated.

The language learning experiences that were created in this research journey helped define our relationships and commitments to each other making the process one of a truly authentic lived experience. Chisan (2001) said “Indigenous people have within their experience a concept of teaching and learning and ...there must be love and caring in the (learning)

relationship and there must be an honoring of the student as a whole person guided by the Natural Laws of the Creator” (pp 42-43). Cajete (1994) agrees, and describes that Indigenous teachers understand that people learn in many ways and that most of Indigenous education is experiential and occurs during the course of doing work. Indeed, all of our social behavioral patterns have involved learning by watching and doing *kiskinwahamâtowin* -(essentially the relationship between the teacher, learner and researcher). Research as a specialized form of learning must honor the protocols, processes, and relationships of Indigenous learning principles.

## Research Relationships

Our language events, activities and outings often centered around common traditional activities and were communicated in place, in context and in the language. Stories were used often by the Elders and the traditional language speakers. They used Cree stories to teach and answer questions posed to them *naskweytowahk*. People reflected on these powerful learning experiences; they felt safe, connected to their life experience and history, increased their language vocabulary and experienced healing somatic emotional moments both privately and in the circle. We observe from reflections and personal accounts, that this process has been an instrument of decolonization and healing for the intergenerational trauma, the blood memory and deep spiritual wounds of our people- *mâmwî-nehiyaw iyinikahiwewin*.

V. Steinhauer (2004) states that “developing and fostering good relations is paramount if we are going to lead *miyo pimâtisowin*”, the good healthy life (p 39). Therefore, it is essential and crucial to our survival that our Indigenous language acquisition be happening in our circle of community and in a Cree immersion context allowing for the personal growth of all individuals and future resilience in our communities. Stan Wilson (2000) said “rather than viewing ourselves as being in relationship with other people or things, we are the relationships that we hold and are part of” (p 108).

Language is a Spirit. To launch this journey we followed protocol and requested a ceremony to invite and host the Spirit of the Language in our learning process and into the research journey. This helped to solidify our direction and amplified the importance of the project and our relationships and responsibilities with the Spirit world. Research and language learning needs to be treated with respect and we acknowledge it as a ceremony. Elder Lionel Kinunwa said “a ceremony is not just a period at the end of the sentence. It is the required process and preparation that happens long before the event. It is the knowing and respectful reinforcement that all things are related and connected. It is the voice from our ancestors that tell us when it is right and when it is not (P. Steinhauer-Hill, p135). Indigenous language research is a life changing ceremony. And it also holds that once ceremony is launched the spiritual energy and responsibility continues beyond the event and becomes a lifelong commitment.

## Protocol

In our culture, an integral part of ceremony is setting the stage properly. When ceremonies take place, everyone who is participating needs to be ready to step beyond the everyday and to accept a raised state of consciousness. We move into a spiritual space when we

are in the language and we address a larger circle of knowing beings – we join with our ancestors, for they can hear us. Alfred (2005) said: “Ceremony keeps people connected to their past it preserves memory... The wisest among our Elders and spiritual teachers tells us that there is a connection between all of our peoples and that each ceremony possesses part of the knowledge we need to survive. The ceremonies do more than connect us to a particular tradition or community, they connect us to the earth and to our true, natural existences as human beings...” (pp. 249-251)

Research as ceremonial process creates sacred connections. Cajete (1994) describes this learning path: “[It] begins with appropriate orientation, acknowledging relationships, setting intentions, seeking, creating, understanding, sharing, and then celebrating one’s vision with reference to a place of centering” (p. 69). The many rituals and processes involved in our orientation and preparation for this research have created spiritual connections.

Lewis Cardinal (2001) said “our relationship to the land and animals teaches us about our relationship to our research ideas and practices, and that our methodologies of observing, listening and story telling are as old as our ceremonies and our nations. They are with us and they have always been with us. Our Indigenous cultures are rich with ways of gathering, discovering and uncovering knowledge. They are as near as our dreams and as close as our relationships” (pg182). Making meaning is what we do with our knowledge. Our collective language learning and our research is essentially preserving the knowledge of the earth and how to live in harmony with it and each other through the language.

## **Method**

Indigenous research methods are based in the fundamental principals and values that all knowledge is relational, that it is shared with all living things in creation and, so it cannot be owned or discovered – it has to be lived and experienced. Indigenous ways of knowing embody and value spirit and heart and include a distinct way of being and of viewing the world. Traditional knowledge and traditional ways of thinking and being cannot just be handed over to those who practice the modern measurement sciences like linguistics in the academic institutions. There needs to be Indigenous community led approaches to language learning that for the most part, are based on careful sharing of traditional sacred knowledge. The process of learning an Indigenous language needs to be controlled and directed by the language keepers for it is connected to the land and our territory and needs to be to be experienced in relationships and ceremony. Indigenous research is all-encompassing and ever present in every facet of our lives, it embodies our presence as Four-part beings and it carries in it our true epistemology –the nature of our reality, our ways of thinking and knowing. Indigenous research is ceremony (S.Wilson, 2003 pg 168).

The circle teaches us that the process of researching language learning must align with and reflect the natural Indigenous learning processes. Battiste and Henderson (2000) noted that social fragmentation happens when the knower is separated from the ways of knowing and the knowledge (pg 93-95). Our people have been fragmented. We have been separated from our own truth about who we are, why we are here and from the value and spirit of our own language. We have been separated from our traditional relationships, spirituality, culture, and our language as

noted in the accounts of the Residential school experience, the separation of our children from the Elders and their families, the enforced confinement to reserves, and the removal of our staple foods and hunting practices, our sacred birch bark scrolls, knowledge bundles, and ceremonial objects that were confiscated, destroyed and outlawed and replaced with the intrusions of foreign governments and religions. Any research methods that we were to use, therefore, would have to address and consider the impact and consequence of our colonization experience. Research becomes a process of healing and integrating.

When L.T. Smith (1999) addressed indigenous scholars she emphasized that any decolonizing research method would have to be about “centering our concepts (our truth) and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes”(pg 39). Leroy Little Bear at the Language of Spirit Conference (Aug. 2008, Albuquerque, NM) asked the question ‘How do you know if something is truth?’ The dialogue circle resulted in a collective response that: we know it is true if a) our belief holds up in a variety of circumstances and over a period of time; b) our intuitive sense and inner knowing confirms it; and c) we can say that we know ourselves and we know what is true”. For us, as Indigenous scholars, this means being able to make decisions about the research agenda and methodologies ourselves, guided by our ancestors, and our Elders rather than the conventions of modern academic research.

The Indigenous methodology of our research incorporated indigenous cosmology, worldview, epistemology, and ethical beliefs. Indigenous methodologies are holistic, relational, inter-relational and inter-dependent. Judy Atkinson (2001) stated that Indigenous research must be guided by the following principles:

- Aboriginal people themselves approve the research and the research methodologies
- A knowledge and consideration of community and the diversity and unique nature that each individual brings to community
- Ways of relating and acting within community with an understanding of the principles of reciprocity and responsibility
- Research participants must feel safe and be safe, including respecting issues of confidentiality
- A non-intrusive observation, or quietly aware watching
- A deep listening and hearing with more than the ears
- A reflective non-judgmental consideration of what is being seen and heard
- Having learnt from listening a purposeful plan to act with actions informed by learning, wisdom, and acquired knowledge;
- Responsibility to act with fidelity in relationship to what has been heard, observed and learnt
- An awareness and connection between logic of mind and the feelings of the heart
- Listening and observing the self as well as in relationship to others
- Acknowledgement that the researcher brings to the research his or her subjective self.

(Presentation notes from the Third Tri-annual Indigenous Scholars Conference, University of Alberta 2002).

There are some who say that in “the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics there is no method!” Gadamer, 1975; Rorty,1979 and yet while we could draw some parallels between

hermeneutics, phenomenology and grounded theory; with Indigenous Research, it does not hold true that in Indigenous Research there is “no method” as in fact the protocols and responsibilities that govern our lives also govern our research.

Some methods have inherent in them more relationship building and relational accountability than others; thus may be more attractive and suitable in an indigenous paradigm. Qualitative research and grounded theory are perhaps the more closely aligned methods that we have worked with in addition to our own methods, and these methods are determined by our epistemology, paradigms, and ontology of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing (Smith 2005).

## Questions

Elders have taught through stories for time immemorial, and in the story you don't always find the direct answer, or the answer you thought you were looking for, but you come to realize and trust that you will find the answer you need. So, our first learning was about learning how to learn, then, we could learn about language learning. We learned to take a story approach, to explore our own language learning journeys through story, to invite other learners to share the stories of their language learning journeys, and from those stories to craft another collective story that would be recognized by the participants as their voice – not necessarily their individual words and quotes, but in a vernacular that resonates with spirit and heart and relationships.

We set out our intention in our research to explore the following research questions:

- *What are the natural authentic Indigenous methods of transmitting language?*
- *What is the relationship between language learning and culture/ceremony?*
- *What does the knowledge contained in the structure of the language teach us about method?*
- *What barriers and supports exist for language learners/teachers in their context and relationship with the language?*

Indigenous research method requires relationships, subjectivity, connectedness, Indigenous research is personal. In ceremony we learn to let go of control and embrace the mystery, to allow knowledge to arrive in its own way. Once you tell the community you are doing language research, everything they share with you – stories, ceremonies, experiences, language, becomes part of the research.

## Data Collection

Our data search and collection of language learning stories included interviews of individual language journeys, multiple talking circles involving Elders, language learners, and language helpers, as well as a focus on our own language learning journeys.

Over the term of the project the following events formed the core of the research activities for the project:

April	2006	Project Launch, language gathering and circles
May	2006	Cultural Camp
November	2006	Pipe Ceremony on the land
May	2007	Learners circles/ language testing
May	2007	Cultural camp
January	2008	Language research circle with Elders, students and staff
April	2008	Language Conference/ Elders circle
April	2008	Student circles
May	2008	Cultural Camp
December	2008	Research data coding and analysis
January	2009	Doctoral and Staff Team language circle
May	2009	Cultural Camp
January	2010	Data review and interpretation
February	2010	Coding and Theming
March – June	2010	First Draft
July – Aug	2010	Review and Finalization

Throughout this term the researchers were also involved in numerous community events and regional and national projects and conferences with a language learning focus.

The initial proposal included a pre and post-test activity for participants in the linguistic model Cree language course, however, when the research team reviewed the results of the pre-tests with language learners, it was clear that these results did not provide the baseline anticipated in the research proposal, and required a redesign of the research approach. Reflective dialogue with Elders reminded us that the conventional measurement tools imported from another system will create an artificial tension, and directed us to the approaches that honour who we are – *wâhkôhtôwin* and *mâmawi-kiyokeyahk* – relations and visiting.

The Indigenous research methods of looking, observing, listening, reflecting and checking in an iterative process allowed for full participation among all those involved in the language learning process. Appropriate protocols were employed, using tobacco and offerings, with more conventional release forms available as well authorizing audio video taping and pictures of individuals. The focus group sessions were translated, transcribed and preliminary analysis were completed through a group review process among the research team.

## **Data Interpretation**

These findings were then collectively reviewed and interpreted to identify obstacles and supports, common themes and indigenous interpretations to language learning. Each of the key elements over the past four years, were studied to identify trends, relationships, consistencies and

inconsistencies. This iterative process also allowed for implementation of key findings as the project proceeded, including support for local teachers and schools to introduce immersion language learning into their programming.

## **Research Team**

The term of the project exceeded the tenure of most undergraduate students, which allowed us to involve more individuals than originally anticipated, expanding student opportunity in all aspects of the project: planning, design, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and reporting. It also meant that there was no single undergraduate student that participated in all aspects of the project. The core research team involved throughout the project included the lead researcher and 5 graduate students who are members of the Indigenous community, the College community, and the language learning community – intrinsically insider-participant-observer-researchers – the role of knowledge keepers for time immemorial. The Indigenous ethic looks beyond the individual researcher or participant to the collective responsibility.

Voluntary participants included adult language learners in immersion as well as linguistic oriented courses, undergraduate and graduate students, adult learners on independent journeys, Elders, and programmers in K-12 and post-secondary institutions in Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec.

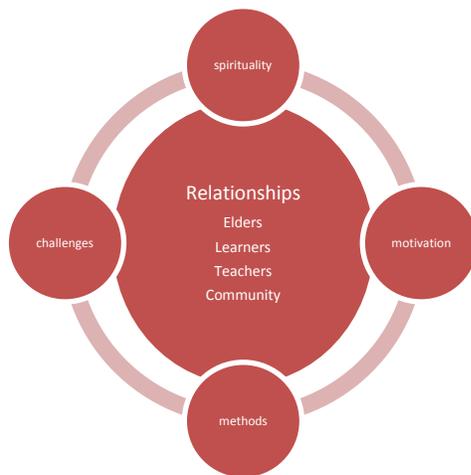
We have been schooled in what others tell us about research design and structure and protocol, and learned in this project that it really is about what our own people and knowledge traditions teach us about research, about how we come to knowledge. Our knowledge comes to us in dreams, in conversations, in ceremony, from people, from all our relations – all living things.

This project accomplished two major intentions: the practice of Indigenous research methodology informed by ceremony and traditional knowledge, and a thorough exploration of adult language learning in a Cree context.

## CHAPTER FOUR – FINDINGS

We share what we have learned the way our people have shared for time immemorial – as a story, a conversation, a collection of knowledge, interpretation, experience, intuition, a tapestry, a weaving of words and inspirations arising from those words. “The truth about stories is that is all we are,” (King, 2005) and in our stories we speak in a collective voice.

Our analysis of the data revealed four major categories: challenges, motivation, methods, and spirituality, with a central theme of relationships that wove through the entire experience. And within each category we identified major sub-themes that were shared across the groups. We recognize the relationships between these categories: that motivations can help us address and overcome the challenges, that spirituality is essential in method, that everything is interconnected through relationships.



### Challenges

Learners, Elders, and teachers expressed a variety of challenges defined by colonization, family and relationships, the pervasiveness of English, resourcing, systemic issues, and the uniqueness and complexity of the situation.

*Colonization (Where we came from, what we carry into this)*

Our Elders talk about blood memory, how the experiences of our ancestors live in us. We know that even if we never went to residential school and were punished for speaking our language, we are affected by those experiences. A vast majority of the challenges experienced/expressed by adult language learners are informed by the collective memory of colonization. We need to understand the colonial experience so that we can dismantle it and reveal that place where the memories of our languages live inside of us.

Our languages offer some insight into the place we find ourselves now with language learning for adults. One of our team members shared that “Another concept that our language carries that has great implications for how we conduct ourselves in this world is *‘pâstâhowin’*. That is, when you have violated a boundary, you cause an imbalance in your relationships with people, the land, and the animals. We understand that our actions affect the world around us, thus we are responsible.

Our parents and grandparents would tell us *ki-ohcinanâwâw*: your actions [that cause harm to another being] also involuntarily invite something upon yourself. *‘Ki-ohcinehâw’* means if the [imbalance] doesn’t happen to you it will happen to one of your children or grandchildren. We can also understand that the harmful actions of others can affect us: *e-ohcinihikawiyâhk osâm e-pâstkawiyahk* means all of us are experiencing the retribution because the actions of other peoples crossed a spiritual boundary against us. This is our context for understanding colonization and our separation from language and culture.

We learned from many that the loss of language is related to some traumatic event – being punished for speaking our language, being told by those we love not to use our language, being ridiculed for our accents, being separated from our families and communities, being singled out in public schools, our parents and grandparents not sharing the gift of language with us because of the punishment or embarrassment they experienced. This is evidenced by non-Indigenous learners who appear to grasp the language quickly and easily, perhaps because they do not carry the blood-memory of the trauma surrounding language loss and separation from culture and place.

We also recognize that as an adult learning your own language is a different learning experience than any other field of study – it is more personal, and our self-identity as a learner is challenged because of our emotional relationship with language the messages that we should not speak our language, the shame at not speaking our language, the grief that our parents did not teach us our language, one learner said, “I thought I could learn this as a subject, I would learn everything about it and I would know it, but it is more of a personal journey.”

The messages that our parents and grandparents received about our languages – that they have no place or value in the modern world, that our people are not smart, that learning our language will interfere with our ability to learn and use English, that our children will be disadvantaged if they speak their indigenous language, – these ideas continue to be barriers for adult language learners because they carry emotional contexts that can create energetic blocks for learning and expression. From our own experience as language learners, we came to understand the wholistic context of language learning – and that in our language learning journeys we need to acknowledge our feelings about not speaking the language. The complexity

of our emotional experience encompasses our family of origin and the manifestations of frustration, oppression, abuse, lateral violence, performance expectations/anxiety, learned helplessness, and learned dependency.

The welfare dependency that was deliberately created by governments in the 1950's (with roots in the treaty making and ration time as well as in residential schools), has manifested as a pervasive dependency mentality that is witnessed in so many aspects of our lives including language learning. Too often, the victim internalizes the shame of the abuser and becomes ashamed of themselves or comes to identify with and emulate the abuser, even to the extent of putting down ourselves and our own people, of putting down our own language and knowledge.

The dependency, the shyness, the apathy, the fear of ridicule, are learned states of being that come from the colonial experience, we have learned to be subservient, not to speak out, not to raise our hand in class or volunteer our knowledge, not to question, not to put ourselves forward in case it calls attention to ourselves and we get abused or shamed. Colonization has created a crisis of disbelief – we don't believe in ourselves, our knowledge, our language, our institutions, our people. (Chisan, 2001). As one Elder said, "some people think our medicines don't work, they don't believe in it – does this affect our belief in ourselves, our languages?" They said, "if the [learners] are embarrassed, they won't be helped, it will be a barrier."

The way we view the world and ourselves is informed by our collective and shared memory. It informs our relationships with the world, our families, the people who share our territories, our ceremonies, our cultures, our languages. When we no longer have the language to interpret and carry those shared ancestral memories, we are left only with those that are remembered in new language.

An interesting paradox exists in the innate humour of Cree people. Cree people love to laugh, and we enjoy laughing at ourselves, but in language learning contexts that practice encounters our colonial experience with ridicule, especially in educational environments like residential and public schools – of having our cultures and languages mocked or scorned or dismissed as primitive, useless, immaterial, valueless, of being told we cannot learn, that we will never be good enough, – all this has left us sensitive and afraid to expose ourselves by making mistakes and being laughed at as we learn a language we feel we 'should' already know.

The indigenous model of learning – observation, practice, mastery, modeling – allows a learner to witness and then to privately practice their new knowledge until they feel confident they have mastered the skill, then to share it with others. To have pressure to perform before confidence has been achieved can create a barrier. The classroom environment can also be a barrier, re-creating an environment of trauma, triggering old learning experiences and teacher learner relationships. This is a unique challenge at Blue Quills which is housed in a former residential school, the place where so many were punished for speaking their language among other abuses.

There is a vicious cycle present in the colonial context – generations who were punished in residential school or ridiculed in public school for speaking their language often did not encourage their children to use the language, and often in fact discouraged them. And now,

those Elders are sometimes admonishing adults for not having their language, suggesting that they are less Indian when they don't speak Cree, creating another barrier to learning.

### ***Family and Relationships***

Language activists recognize that “children have nowhere to use language after school, in the community all you hear is English.” The problem is compounded when there are one or two or now even three generations in a family who do not speak Cree, and the Elders ask, “who do they speak to when their parents don't speak at home.” They also recognized “that people don't visit they way they used to,” and there is a sense of isolation, of not having anyone to talk with because there is so much intergenerational trauma (loss of parenting practices, communication skills), some learners don't have the relationships within their families to be able to ask for or offer Cree language help. Many language speakers regret now that they didn't teach their children Cree because their grandchildren now don't speak Cree.

Similar to the holocaust survivors and their children and grandchildren, we experience the intergenerational trauma of colonization. We heard about these effects when people talked about our Elders not responding in our language in the neighboring town, or about our Metis relatives who speak Cree but do not self-identify with their Cree ancestors, about the separations that have been created in our families and cultures. Another paradox exists in families where fluent speakers live in the household but adult learners appear stifled, perhaps out of fear of making mistakes or because they feel the expectations from the fluent speaker or because the relationship is strained in other contexts as a result of the colonial experience.

### ***Pervasiveness Of English***

Today the majority of public service offices answer their phones primarily in English, in many public meetings the few people who can speak Cree may begin in Cree and then justify switching to English for those in the meeting who are not able to speak Cree. The use of Cree within communities has diminished not only in the public sectors but in the privacy of our homes.

Even Elders surprise themselves when sometimes, that even when they are the only ones present, they find themselves speaking English. And Elders who thought they were fluent, realize how many words they have lost, – if you don't use the language, you lose it. One Elder said, “Now I can't remember half of the animal and plant names I knew as a child.”

Language Teachers and Elders teaching Cree to youth express concern about who the youth would speak to at home when their parents don't speak Cree at home. Elders acknowledge that “We did teach our children, but TV and radio over-ride our Cree. In today's society they all speak English so it is hard to use Cree.” Even grandparents, who have made a commitment to speak to their grandchildren in Cree, notice how strong the pull of the English language is even in their own homes.

## ***Resourcing***

Resourcing is a multi-faceted challenge. Students need resources to be able to study, teachers need support to create material resources, communities and institutions need money for curriculum development and program delivery.

For many adult students the challenges of childcare, transportation, housing, food, consume so much of their attention, that studying something as complex and emotionally engaging as language is a challenge. Some express it as “Maybe just coming to school today. No, no, just coming here sometimes. I just ask myself, what are you doing here, but after then you realize there is a purpose and what we are doing here, learning the language, trying to grow something.”

Even places like Blue Quills that started with no money but lots of belief and commitment, find that there is not enough in the way of financial resourcing to hire enough people, not enough time or resources to plan or evaluate effectively or adequately.

It is frustrating that there is no funding for people who simply want to learn the language just because it is theirs, and to preserve the knowledge it carries. Unfortunately getting funding support for learning Cree is attached to an intention to work as a teacher. We hear stories about how the Oblates supported their members for several years to live in Cree communities, and without the worry of work and how to provide for themselves they were free to learn the language.

To some, the time and space in a busy life to focus on language learning is a luxury not often available. Learners need time and patience for practice, as well as mental processing time – wait time during a conversation for the learner to retrieve language. And perhaps the biggest challenge to time for adult learners is the need to earn a livelihood to provide the financial support for their family.

## ***System/Systemic Issues***

The constructs of the education system also influence language learning. Schedules and the demands of course structure make contextual learning difficult. Many of our language teachers are trained in linguistic methods which are embedded with cultural constructs of the languages which created them. The linguistic approach employed by most university courses, is focused on learning about the language, not learning to use the language in context. Students say, “We are not here to learn linguistics, we are here to learn more Cree, to absorb more Cree, how to use it, and grading doesn’t help. Being able to write doesn’t help, it is the listening and the using.”

The messages and pressures of expectation, measurement, performance, learning style, or process that teachers communicate to students often unconsciously, based on their training,

assumptions or their own experience as students can also stifle adult learners. Learning in an organized classroom environment invites a tendency toward homogenization of method and pace, challenging learners who need more time or practice or context to learn the language.

Often there is more perceived demand than capacity to deliver, but the depth of the need creates a desire to accommodate the demand with inadequate resources. There is a need to do capacity building, to train fluent speakers in immersion methodology and linguistic terminology. Teachers are often frustrated because language learning is often tied to student funding, meaning the program and measures of success focus on classroom hours, assignments, and quantifiable performance rather than on the person and the collective language learning experience.

### *Uniqueness/Complexity*

There is a uniqueness and complexity to Indigenous languages that are the essence of their depth and richness. The paradox is that the language learning journey is complicated by this diversity in the languages and the dialects, as well as the nature of the learning experience: Language learning is not like any other field of study, it is more personal; it is entangled and enmeshed with family and cultural history, with emotional and spiritual dimensions. It is not an academic exercise. The tendency in teaching institutions towards homogenization of group pace and process can marginalize a fragile learner who is encountering the complexities of colonization at the same time. Others have been introduced to language learning in a mainstream University where the focus is on learning about the language, not learning to use the language. Some feel they are defending their dialect or caught between dialects, or notice that we sometimes put down other peoples' dialects.

Sometimes we get lost in our community programming in deciding where to start when we recognize that there are several age groups from middle aged to new-born, all with different needs. There is a challenge presented by fluent speakers who need to learn how to work with non-fluent language learners and how to stay in the language, resisting the tendency to switch to English for convenience. Sometimes fluent speakers appear frustrated with learners, perhaps not because of the learners but because of the sense of urgency. And the colonial fracturing and isolation experienced in families, sometimes leaves learner feeling that they do not have anyone to talk with.

There is also complexity in the language and its structure. English Grammar teaches individuals how to make a sentence and the sentence carries much of the meaning; for the Cree language meaning is embedded in the verbs, a verb becomes in a sense a small sentence. Many grammar oriented classes modeled on English grammar classes do not teach individuals how verbs are conjugated as a result learners often are overwhelmed. As a polysynthetic language with multiple dialects, Cree creates meaning and concepts in a much different fashion than English with its grammar and nouns and verbs and subjects and objects, requiring a different thinking model.

## Motivation

For learners and fluent speakers alike, there is a recognition that the language is about connection, creating a language community to restore *wâhkôhtowin* (relations), and connect to family. It is about connection to spirituality, a journey to our collective past and future, our history, our ancestors, our family. It reminds us of our responsibility as indigenous people, of our cultural identity, of our sense of inclusion, and a reconnection to our spirit and heart. Language helps us to understand Elders, to participate in ceremony. It connects us to land and to a shared consciousness, to a sense that the land is waking up the consciousness of the people. As people get older they are more interested in learning about their relatives and so language becomes a vehicle through which those connections can be learned because that is the language those people spoke.

The connection starts with self and becomes a healing experience as we connect to *wâhkôhtôwin*, to all our relations, to family, and extended family, to ancestors, to purpose, to identity, to spiritual and world relationships. Connection is achieving “wholeness as a human being: I didn’t have a sense of who I was when I came here, now I have a sense of who I am” There is a strong desire for healing from residential school and colonial traumas, to reclaim what was lost. Many see language as a vehicle to correct situations created by residential schools, by allowing people to reconnect with family, with knowledge, with spirit, with self.

Another common motivation among all groups is the strong desire and sense of responsibility to give something to the next generation, a sense of collective responsibility, a responsibility to link past and future generations. There is also awareness that the language carries our knowledge about ourselves and our world, about how we are related to one another, and how those relationships represent a connectedness.

For time immemorial, through the generations we have been taught that language is a gift and that we must “share the gift of language, language is gifted, must be passed on as a gift.” Some expressed that they are learning the language as an adult because they “Don’t want to be the weak link in the generations.” Others who have carried the language all their lives are committing to teach their children and grandchildren because they do not want to leave this world without leaving something here, they don’t want to take the language with them. One grandmother shared that she was invited by her daughter to speak only in Cree with her new grandson and noticed that her daughter, a new mother, was increasingly using language to talk to her son as well. There was no deliberate effort to teach her daughter, but the increased exposure to the language in a family setting and a motivation to ensure the newest generation receives the language has created opportunity for the middle generation.

There is a strong desire to do good for family, community, to give something back, to pass it along to children, grandchildren, or to recover lost childhood language. For others, there is an individual personal commitment, a desire to learn language for themselves and family, for future generations – so there will be someone there to teach their grandchildren and great-grandchildren to have somebody to talk to. Our ancestors have talked to us about our responsibility to the seventh generation, to understand that what we do in our lives will have an

effect on the seventh generation to follow, that the great-grandchildren of our great-grandchildren will live with the consequences of our choices.

We encountered a strong belief that indigenous institutions have a responsibility to preserve and protect the language and to develop it, to not let mainstream institutions and linguists own it. There is a sense that these institutions carry a responsibility to the language and to future generations. Community owned institutions are told that people will come, that learners want the language, if you build it they will come.

Our Elders said, don't let the universities take our languages, look what they did with native studies – they took our knowledge and are teaching stuff we don't recognize. This has supported the work of Blue Quills where we are guided by the vision of our ancestors, the ones who lived in these lands when Cree was the only language and the ones who exercised their responsibility in 1970 and took over this school, acknowledging our right and responsibility to educate our own. Their belief in our own capacity to do this has resulted in the launch the doctoral program in 2002 which allowed us to explore methods of language learning for adults then transfer that to programming.

Language is the vehicle which carries knowledge and learners acknowledge the importance of access to knowledge, legends, stories to carry the memory/ knowledge, of place, of a personal need to speak our inner knowledge. Some talked about knowledge we carry that we can't access or express until we have the language. Belief in our own knowledge, concerned about the traditional knowledge (land, hunting, healing, medicines...) that is carried in the language and isn't being passed on, to regain an understanding and role in ceremonies, to learn songs . One said, "I want to learn about ceremonies, how to lift pipe, there are big teachings in that." Some are motivated to develop our own dictionary that is entirely Cree, not Cree-English translations. And some, who are fluent orally, covet to learn to write in Cree, to be able to tell stories because the stories carry our knowledge, to have context for using the language, to understand humor and stories, to know what people are talking about, to get the jokes.

Through language learning we see the potential to restore our relationships, our knowledge, our languages, our peoples, our ceremonies, our medicines, ourselves, our governance, our shared collective experience. We have to look inside ourselves. Our masters are not in a university, they are in our communities, they are our Elders, they will always be the most reliable, authentic source of language.

## **Methods**

Across the groups there was a clear message that the language is best learned through immersion, land based activities, ceremony, song, and story. We need to be mindful of the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the language learning journey which manifest in relationship, as well as the importance of opportunities for speaking, listening, and writing.

Through immersion we satisfy that need to sometimes simply be around the language – to hear it, to feel it, to sense the rhythms and patterns. Learners in immersion hear and speak only

the target language – there is no translation or interpretation, the focus is on speaking and listening. The language learner and helper must communicate through language and movement, acting out meaning, using repetition and visuals, and contextual language.

Immersion can happen in a variety of contexts: land based, ceremonial, school based and home based. Immersion can also employ various methodologies and process to support individuals in understanding the Cree language without employing English. Immersion is about creating Cree language pathways in our brains so when we see something our brain thinks in Cree as opposed to first thinking in English then translating to Cree.

Acknowledging our relations, particularly our spiritual relations' is part of Cree thinking and so beginning the day, the class, the new enterprise or the journey requires ceremony. The traditional practice of smudging everyday creates a spiritual space for language learning. Through language, we also learn about Cree spirituality and how important it is to be active in spirituality, to have hope in your spirit and your native self. Ancestral teachings acknowledge the spirit of tobacco, and as the Elder's say, "tobacco will talk for me when I can't talk for myself." We use tobacco as an offering in ceremony to ask for spiritual help on our journey, as an offering to our language helpers for the gift they are sharing, and as an offering to the spirit of language to anchor our relationship.

Especially for the independent learners, ceremony is a key motivation as well as a method. Regular exposure to the language and immersion in a spiritual environment anchor the language to practice and invite an energy beyond the human into the relationship. During ceremonies such as sweats, dances, and pipe ceremonies, learners hear language in prayer, in song, in dialogue, in story. Our language learning is strengthened through prayer, dreams, and protocols. Beginning with ceremony strengthens our resolve to deal with difficult issues, opens our minds and hearts to new learnings and reminds us that we are not alone.

Land based learning is nature and relationship based – it is about *wâhkôhtowin*, all our relations, it is natural, it honours our relationship with our mother earth, creates the connection with 'mother tongue'. Our Elders tell us to teach outside the four walls, in the centre of the four directions, to use our trap lines for immersion camps, to use language in everyday living activities such as in hunting, snaring, fishing, gathering, cooking, eating, traveling, playing, ceremony, healing, gardening, cleaning, arts, building, and active living. These immersion and experiential methods anchor the learning in the whole being: spirit, heart, mind, body, – through activity and direct experience, we hold the knowledge within us. It also empowers the learner to become a teacher, to immediately share what they are learning with others by inviting them into the experience.

Learners complemented their learning by employing methods and processes which supports immersion learning from other sources such as: Language Acquisition Made Practical (LAMP, Tom Brewster, Betty Sue Brewster), Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA, developed by Stephen Greymorning), Master Apprentice Program (MAP – How to Keep Your Language Alive, Leanne Hinton, Matt Vera, Nancy Steele).

Learners talked about a diversity of activities that support their learning including: games, cards, play, art, drills, intuitive language use, animation, role playing, story-telling, visiting, reflective journaling, eating together, flash cards, and play. They also employed different media: audio and video tapes, TV programs, radio, newspaper, posters, and signs. Three Cree methods that bring more than just language to the learning process are *nikamowin* (singing), *âcimowin* (story telling) and *kiyokewin* (visiting).

Language lives in song – we need to know our songs, we need to hear our songs, we need to sing our songs. *e-nestomâwasohk* – first rhythms, vibrations is a practice that is returning to the homes as learners and teachers remember the nurturing they received in the songs sung by their parents and grandparents to put them to sleep or as they awoke. Songs carry knowledge; connection to spirit, and rhythm, song is voice and can allow healing to occur. Singing engages both sides of the brain, anchoring the learning in short term and long term memory. Singing is also less intimidating way to learn some terminology and a fun way to repetitively practice.

Teaching with stories, *e-naskwetoyâhk* – story-telling –when you approach Elders with a question or problem, they will often respond: “I will answer you with a story” and everyone takes the meaning they need from the story. There are different kinds of stories: *âcimowina*, (accounts of experience) *âtayôhkewina* (sacred teaching stories). Language learners are coming to realize traditional stories which were dismissed or belittled as myth actually contain a great deal of wisdom and teachings regarding appropriate behavior. Much like the Bible myth can viewed from various levels of knowledge depending upon the learners development and understanding.

Language is naturally transmitted orally through the generations. Some suggest that this collective effort to support language acquisition by adult learners – the missed generation – will require that fluent speakers be challenged to speak more Cree, to not revert to English for the convenience of communication. One speaker said “It is important that I Speak it all the time, even if the person is talking to me in English, I will talk to them in Cree even if they don’t understand. If they ask more questions, then I will speak to them in English.”

Speaking is imperative, being around new Cree speakers, trying to engage in conversation, using it everyday in conversation, sounding it out, and don’t worry about your accent. (MAP suggests that learners will own a word/phrase when they have heard and used it 20 times in each of 20 different contexts).

This old woman said her mother spoke French and English and Cree, but she had been told by her mother (the old woman’s grandmother) to never speak anything but Cree in the home, and that is why she and all her siblings speak Cree.

Listening is key. Learners are reminded to listen to elders when they speak, and to have the patience and the freedom to listen without facing an immediate expectation by themselves or others to speak. Learners are encouraged initially to put away the paper, to concentrate on observing, Hearing, doing in the mastery learning indigenous method – observe, practice, master, perform.

Increasingly, media resources are available to support language learning. Locally, Osakado Radio broadcasts current events in the language. Regional radio broadcaster CFWE and national television station APTN offer several programs in Cree; Art Napoleon has produced children's Cree programming and Brian MacDonald has produced children's songs which are also appropriate tools for adults; there are 7<sup>th</sup> Fire video series, shadow puppet videos, Misinipiy broadcasting, clay animation, Muskeg productions, and Carl Quinn and Sandy Scofield are writing, performing, and recording Contemporary Cree songs.

Although learners are initially encouraged to concentrate on listening and speaking, later in their journeys writing in syllabics and then in standard roman orthography can support deeper and perhaps accelerated learning. One student shared that "writing letters in syllabics to my dad and reading his responses helped me learn quickly." Elders suggest that by learning syllabics it will be easier to understand the language; they remind us that the syllabics are spirited, and that traditional medicines are sometimes applied with a syllabic.

Once learners have a solid base of language, the study of morphology deepens their understanding: through the exploration of roots and stems, phonology, morphology, syntax, structure, conjugation, patterns, a grammatical understanding follows initial learning. This allows deeper learning of meaning and structure by breaking down the word, learning about the morphemes – the smaller units of meaning, there are so many meanings in one word. The learners most satisfied with their progress, pursue multiple avenues of learning: ceremony, song, story, contextual dialogue, repetition, play, speaking, listening, and writing.

In Cree you don't learn sentences in the way you do in English with discreet parts of speech and a single right way. In Cree the word is the sentence, and learning how to put the pieces of meaning together in a way that describes the activity, who is involved, how they relate to each other and the action, and all that can change with the context of the speaker. Rather than building sentences, fluent speakers create words that contain the meaning of the whole experience. When the language is taught conceptually, learners are empowered to put those bits of meaning together into a word to accurately express their whole experience.

Many spoke of their experience learning through linguistic models in mainstream universities where they learned about the language – how it is structured, but they never learned to use the language, to speak it, to have context. As with anything, practice and repetition is important, and talking practice in addition to hearing, is important. There seems to be most of a generation who are able to understand the language, but do not speak it.

Creating a learning environment requires a Cree heart, a Cree mind, and a respect for language and for speakers and learners so they feel valued. A supportive process embodies patience, reciprocity, humility, love, care, desire, commitment, laughter, and humor, appreciation to helpers, celebrations of language, and of learners.

Self awareness of learner needs and learning styles is essential. Learners need permission to practice, to risk, to overcome fear, to make mistakes, and learn through mistakes. They also need challenge, and an invitation to grow. Learners find freedom in being allowed to be as a child, to play with the language, to progress through their life-long learning. Language learning

can be supported and complemented by workplace and social use, by creating language spaces, for example, a Cree café, to make it relevant to the modern world.

As much as the intergenerational trauma of colonization can be a challenge or barrier to learning, the opportunity, support, and commitment to engage in personal growth work, emotional work, around language learning as well as general life issues can dismantle those barriers. This can be accomplished through ceremony, talk or wholistic therapies. One promising method that addresses several layers of healing is *wewepisowin*, the traditional swing used for babies. Adult versions are now available and allow for a deep spiritual emotional maternal connection healing nurturing experience.

Learning happens in the four dimensions: spiritual, emotional, mental, physical, and is compromised by stress so balance and personal strategies for managing stress are key. Relationship – everything is connected, everything is relationship: *ewâhkôhtomehkokaki* – when you are in the Cree language you have the capacity to speak of the reality of your relatedness to everything, that you cannot do in English, *ewako wâhkôhtowin*. Learners and speakers need to invest the time for building relationships through visiting and *mâmawohkamâtohk* – the imperative to work together, help one another. Learning is enhanced by having Elders and fluent Cree speakers around, and in supportive relationships they won't get mad at you. It is relationship in the sense of *wâhkôhtowin*/kinship, it is personal and interpersonal. Using kinship terms to define the language learning relationship creates connections and responsibilities.

Language learning naturally starts from home, with a deliberate effort to teach in the family. In Cree culture, grandparents help raise children. To promote language development in the communities, to create a language community, all of the generations need to be involved: Elders, children, parents, grandparents – can't skip a generation. When adult students are invited to bring their children, it enhances relationships and ensures continuity among the generations. Everyone needs motivation, encouragement, role-models. Home and school, adults and children, community all working together creates a wholeness around and through language.

The language teaches respect for self, for others, for knowledge, for nature, and understanding of the real facts of life, of behavior, and a belief in ourselves. It is important to understand that the language is a gift, and we all have a responsibility to teach and to learn.

## **Spirituality**

In every dialogue during the research process, the centrality of ceremony was acknowledged by Elders, learners, and teachers. We learn roles and responsibilities in ceremony, in facilitating student participation, and helping them find their way. Elders teach the ceremonial approach and protocols to learn and invite the language. We learn that we have to ask for things in the right way, in relationship, respecting the spirit of what we are asking. We need ceremony to help us with healing, to break through the blocks, – our music, our songs speak to and through our spirit, the rhythm helps us with memory.

You've got to go on that spiritual journey to find yourself. Just keep in contact with the language, this way, once you get it, it will never be taken away from you, that's how strong it is. We must "believe in ourselves, we were given a way of life, a way of worship, every people were given that, once we know that our minds will open" to learning, to language.

An old man foretold that this is our language, be proud when we see Creator, or Creator will ask 'Why are you not using the language I gave you, are you embarrassed of it?' Inviting the Elders to help with language is revitalizing their energy and the language as they talk with one another to find words and concepts and the teachings that go with them. It is our (Elders' and grandparents') responsibility to teach.

It is all there, everything is in the language, all the knowledge about who we are, how we relate, You have that knowledge it is stored in your mind and when you need it, it will come up, you might not know you know until the time comes. One word in Cree explains a whole story, one story could take all night in the old days.

The importance of prayer, I was driving here praying today that things would go well and orderly here, that we would work together, that something would be revealed that would help our people.

"We don't sell our stuff, we have to earn it and have to fast for it, it won't work if we sell it (like medicines)." *E-tâpwemakan maskihkiy* – the medicine speaks the truth, Indian culture teaches truth learned through life. We lost a lot of words about different kinds of medicine we use, but there are many medicines we have been gifted with but there are still many others that we have not yet been given.

And our language is medicine. One Elder shared how the syllabics were gifted to a Cree man and he shared this gift with his people, and then shared them with a missionary. We learned that these syllabics are used as medicine, in healing ceremonies, and are in sacred bundles.

Our Elders teach us *mâmawohkamâtowin* – work together, understand the collectivity of the journey – it involves everyone, it is not an individual learner, all the relationships inform the experience, it takes a whole community to learn Cree. The language teaches us about the interdependency of learning: *kiskinowâpahtihiwewin* (teaching by example), *kiskinwahamâkewin* (lessons instruction), *kiskinwahamâsowin* (self-instruction), *kiskinwahamâkosiwin* (being a student), *kiskinwahamâtowin* (teaching teach other) – the language of learning is to show, to help, reciprocity.

Our language carries our spirituality. We learn to listen in that spiritual way, we learn that we are related to all living things, that they are our relatives, that we are dependent on our relations for life, that *wâhkôhtôwin* is more than the relations among humans. Spirituality becomes a lived reality rather than an abstract concept.

## Relationships

We are all related. We are related to everything. Everything is alive. These concepts are embedded in the structure of our languages, languages that are verb based, relationship oriented. In our languages we learn that we do not refer to people by name, we refer to them by kinship relationship. “One fluent speaker asked me how I was related to someone. I said, ‘in the Cree kinship way, he is my grandfather because he and my maternal grandfather have a common great-grandfather and are the same generation.’ This person said, ‘if he is your grand-father then you are my grand-daughter also, because that man is my cousin,’ so now when we encounter one another we use those family terms: *nimosôm, nôsisim.*” We are reminded that “The most important thing is for the person to feel related to the language and how the people are related to each other.”

We also acknowledge our relatives the animals, the plants, the rocks, and our languages, and understand that we must treat them with the same kind of respect we hold for humans. “We are related to the language and the language is related to us. Language is alive, that which is alive is spirited, language as our relative, a respected honored relative. Language is creative, it allows the capacity to continue to name our changing world, to create new words. *Kipîkiskwewinaw e-pimâtisimikan* it is alive and everywhere, to see an elder create a word right there and right now, a word that has never been expressed before illustrates the power of the language. Speaking the language breathes life into the world – we call the world into being with our languages and our ceremonies.”

In our relationships we also notice our emotional relationship with language learning, the triggers and motivations and challenges and self-concept. This is also informed by the dynamics of the relationships between language learners and helpers – the behaviours and expectations we each carry have a powerful impact on our language learning. Within our family of origin we recognize the central role of mothers and grandparents as nurturers and teachers. Sometimes we “Build new relationships beyond immediate family, building new language family”

The language learning relationships in classroom settings are also influenced by the western teacher/learner model and the physical environment. A language program also requires relationships with and the support of communities and leadership as well. *mâmawohkamâtowin.*

There is an inherent paradox, with older generations having a concern that the young people don't want to learn, and children not brought up in native way feeling lost. Some Elders have said that it is not our languages that are lost, it is our people who are lost. They also tell us that it is through the language that we will find our way, that we will understand and restore our relationships, our roles, our responsibilities.

## CHAPTER FIVE – SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Blue Quills First Nations College has been developing a research protocol and pathway based on Cree world-view and the philosophy of *wâhkôhtôwin* – our kinship relationships and the basis for our Indigenous language, culture and traditional beliefs. We are accountable to our learning community, our larger community and to the participants of this project and as such our research was ceremony- a respected knowing that all things are related and connected. We participated in ceremony throughout our research journey acknowledging our responsibility and inviting our ancestors to guide us. We wanted to strengthen our bond in the research team and share in the learning and spiritual growth. As our research unfolded, the ceremonies and our spiritual strength as a community supported our research team and participants. “Our relationships with the Natural world and each other are paramount in guiding our behavior. In the Cree language the words that describe education (teaching and learning) express it as a relationship that is formed of giving and receiving, that is focused on growing (together) and that empathizes the process rather than (only) the content” (Chisan, 2001, p.17). And so the following context must be considered by everyone involved in all language revitalization initiatives.

Our collective research was not just about the language. It is about the people, it is about their history and experience with learning through indigenous methods as well as through western methods, it is about emotion and spirit, it is about indigenous knowledge and philosophy and paradigm, a collective responsibility, *mâdawokamatowin* – *working together*.

We learned from what participants talked about, but also from what was not talked about. Every conversation made reference to the importance of ceremony, song, story, culture, social context, ways of being, land, and being in the language, but there was very little talk about the structured lessons, books and materials, conjugations, grammar, structure, or testing and grades.

It was observed that Ceremony is essential encompassing song, story, prayer, spirituality, and relationships. Our language is culture, culture is language, and that culture is embedded in the language and language is learned in the context of culture - one of many reasons participants expressed for learning. People want to learn the language because it contains the essential knowledge for life and they want to have something to pass on to the next generation. It is understood by many to be very important because it is their responsibility, their agreement to their ancestors and as a healing from colonization, isolation and assimilation.

Relationships are key for building trust and community learning. Relationship building is an active process, and requires visiting – listening, sharing and helping while visiting. Once relationships are established with respect and protocols are in place, the sharing of oral traditions, the teachings, and stories in the language. This knowledge must be held locally and used in context at the time of learning in direct relationship. The learning experience is compromised by

the loss of confidence in the ability to learn, a consequence of poor teachers who could not teach English as a second language to Cree speakers. The residential school experience has interrupted the natural teaching flow of language in the families so a new context needs to be created to help support the language relationships between the learner and the teacher. Cree culture embodies an oral and a literate tradition –and because we have lost our ability to articulate clearly in both languages, we need to be immersed in the Cree language to develop and renew the indigenous ways of knowing, the blood memory and practice in the language.

The resources for language learning program development and implementation, the financing support for students and long term resource availability needs to be ensured to enable more participation from families and individuals with little or limited resources. The methodology and teaching methods that are used need to support and grow from the language structure, and be delivered in an immersion context as opposed to adopting the current English language learning linguistic approaches. The learning experience needs to include discussions on decolonization and healing from trauma, grief and loss, emotional impacts, the collective loss of language, culture, family, land, ceremony all need to be examined. Healing – emotional processing, the healing of the family, building relationships – needs to happen throughout, retelling the story, hearing our truth, the history, how we got to here, and what has happened to our language. By using the healing power of the circle, with ceremony – using the natural methods of ceremony, visiting, and healthy relationship building, helps heal individuals and the collective spirit. The primary focus is and needs to be first and foremost on the language and the ancillary activities of understanding decolonization, and the emotional processing that unravels with the self awareness process.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Programmers***

need to support the learners to map and govern their own journey, providing the tools and the processes, with positive encouragement, that learners can use to pursue their own language learning experience. Caution is important around externally applied comparative and competitive expectations: eg. if someone else could do it, you can. Learners may need help to connect to language speakers and to understand the cultural protocols in relationship building. It is important that basic cultural protocols be employed in learning environments, and that learners are assisted in connecting with other opportunities for ceremony and spiritual activities.

Programming must acknowledge the influences of colonization, the fracturing of families over time, relationships with language, culture, ceremony, health, and that there is enough time available to listen, to address issues arising from language learning and around colonialism, and self-care.

Cree is a poly-synthetic language and its brilliance is in the ability to create meaning by constructing words rather than the English practice of combining words into sentences. We heard stories about Elders who were able to construct new words as they spoke to convey precise

meaning. Learners need the opportunity to move beyond memorization of words and sentence structure – the standard practice in English language learning – and to appreciate and employ the magic of the language and the importance of learning how to construct verbs. This can be supported by morphology based programming.

The schedules and the demands of course structures make contextual learning difficult, inviting programmers to create opportunities for spontaneous learning and land based and daily language learning activity where people can have access to each other on a regular basis. This presents an opportunity to build language communities – networks of learners, programmers, Elders, and language speakers that are committed to language revitalization and who understand immersion philosophies and practices, providing opportunities for learners to hear and speak the language.

In the area of capacity building, there's a need to support more people to become fluent speakers, and to work with current fluent speakers to help them understand how to teach in an immersion context. Programmers need to organize regular professional development and orientation to language learning for Elders and fluent speakers, exposing them to the experience or learning a new language using the traditional models and methods used for teaching Cree.

Caution must be exercised in translating language lessons or texts from English, because the contexts and cultural meanings are so different. Often when using translated materials or activities, fluent speakers will say – “we wouldn't say or do that”. And while it might be useful to understand the second-language learner's needs and second-language learning methods, it is important to recognize that while some learners may not have 'spoken' Cree previously, they have often been exposed to the language, and have a spiritual and emotional relationship with Cree that most second language learners do not carry.

Regional groups can work together to establish an Elders and fluent speakers advisory committee to guide the program and lexicon development like some of the other successful committees (Blackfoot Eminent Scholars, University of Hawai'i Hilo Lexicon Committee, Gift of Language Conference, La Ronge, Saskatchewan).

### ***Policy Makers***

must find ways to directly and financially support programmers and learners, as well as support for curriculum and resource material development. Further support is necessary through community language declarations supported by funds to allow employees to learn the language and develop resources to support language use in the workplace. There is also a need to address the privilege of language in the community – especially in the hiring, the professional development and the workplace processes.

Sustainable funding must be created for participants to learn Cree because they are interested for their own individual and collective reasons, but also because it is important to language survival in the future. Making the financial support available over a one to two year term so that learners can engage in a daily process of learning in an immersion environment that is not tied to a grade or measurement of performance will signal a true commitment to the future

of the language. There need to be funds created for community based training programs for both the fluent speakers and indigenous language teachers, and spaces created for language learning, community language activities, outside the classroom, and with ceremony.

Equity in pay and support structures for Cree language teachers in the school system so they are seen valued and privileged as much as the other teachers they work with, will elevate the language in the community.

### ***Learners***

must engage in multiple contexts and methods of learning, putting themselves in the language with other people, to listen, to feel, to speak, as well as to address the personal relationship with language, with the spirit of the language, with ceremony, with colonization, and learning the local ceremonial protocols.

Others have achieved fluency by participating in an intensive language program for one year followed by a year of immersing themselves in a language environment through work or volunteer community service. Learners must be prepared to commit the time needed to growing in the language and to building close relationships with fluent speakers, participating in the larger language community: communicate outside class – go to ceremonies, go for and host a meal, initiate visiting, invite learners and at least two fluent speakers so the speakers can talk to each other in the language while the learners contribute as they can, but are also immersed in listening actively. While the direct personal relationship is essential to language learning, support can be found through computer technology: explore chat groups, blogs, Cree programs on-line etc.

Learners must make a commitment and decision to use the language in all contexts, initiating a daily practice including listening to the language, speaking or writing thoughts, and some sort of active regular communication. Engaging in a continuous personal reflection and emotional processing like journaling, talking circles, and ceremony will help learners open multiple channels of awareness to support their language learning journey.

### ***Researchers***

must first commit to Indigenous research methodologies which are embodied in Indigenous learning methodologies. Funds must be committed to support Indigenous researchers and to support fluent speakers in developing immersion context-based programs.

Future research agendas might explore how wholistic health influences the language learning experience, the relationship between the loss of the Cree language and the reduced literacy and poor comprehension and skill in English, exploring the links between low self esteems, confidence and systemic oppression. It is important to understand the lack of recognition by language teachers of the ESL context for Cree speakers, as well as the intergenerational transmission of, and the relationship with English. Further research might address the link with the peoples' experience learning English in residential and public schools,

acknowledging that they did not teach their children the language to protect them from similar pain, shame and punishment.

Research is required to develop a culturally appropriate curriculum and literary resources, including the creation or collecting of a Cree literature and a language library. Local researchers could create a data bank of speakers and resources to respond to different needs and situations. Research into how children learn Cree in a natural immersion family environment – how do they learn to construct and use the language will support the development of quality programming.

There is a need to do research in developing a morphology based immersion program that teaches adults how to conjugate verbs as it is the verb in a sentence that carries the bulk of the syntax in the Cree language as opposed to the sentence in English. There is also a need to develop immersion curriculum for children that focuses on how to build a verb rather than how to build a sentence.

Most importantly, all research must belong to the people in the community and not to non-Indigenous institutions. The Cree language must be owned, directed and supported by the people especially all the research and program/curriculum development.

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