mamahtāwi āpacecihcikana ka-wīcihkoyion ka-nēhiyawēyin
Using Technology to Improve Cree Communication Skills

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Kinanaskomitinan kahkiyaw – Thank you all for making this project possible.
Ayamihâwin (Cree Prayer)

nohtâwiynan
kisëmanito
wichihinân, mina
kanawêyiminân
anohc kâ-kîsikâk
niyanân ki-tawasimisak
nâpêwak, nâpēsisak
iskwêwak, iskwēsisak
ékwa kahkiyaw
kotakak ayisiyinowak
otâh askiy
ayhay
Introduction

Project Overview

“kispin ki-nohté néhiyawanáwáw, ta-néhiyawiyék pohko!!! – If you want to learn your language you need to use it!!!”

– Freda Ahenakew, Muskeg Lake First Nation

Since 2005, the Nehiyawewin-Cree Culture and Language Program (NCCLP) at Confederation Park Community School has offered bilingual/bicultural classes. In the 2014-15 school year, there were approximately 350 students enrolled in the NCCLP from prekindergarten to Grade 5; the classes have since been expanded to Grade 7.

Increasingly, research has demonstrated the value of exposing students to programs that view “the local language as a base from which to learn the deeper meanings of the local cultural knowledge, values, beliefs and practices” (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998, p. 4). Confederation Park Community School is working towards creating a culturally responsive environment of which the NCCLP is a part. The curriculum used in the NCCLP reflects Plains Cree culture, and the instruction is carried out by a supportive staff, along with traditional knowledge keepers.

In addition to recognizing the advantages of traditional culture, language, and practices, the teachers involved in this study realize the large and growing need for personal and technology skills development in an ever-changing world. With these realities in mind, this research study has addressed the question: How does technology influence student communication skills in Cree language learning? The goal of the project was to improve the communication skills of NCCLP students using and/or learning Cree as a second language with the help of technology.
Literature Review

This literature review addresses the current state of Aboriginal languages in Canada (including the factors which contributed to their decline), the challenges for both teachers and students in a second-language classroom, and the goal of having a common vision for language revival.

Aboriginal Language Decline

Cree, like other Aboriginal languages, once flourished. Detrimental effects of colonization have contributed to the decline of the Cree language by disrupting the manner in which language and culture have been disseminated to new generations. Systemic forms of oppression, seen in the intergenerational effects of residential schools and the child welfare system — to name just two examples — have contributed to the breakdown of family and community structures, and these, in turn, have contributed to the decline of Aboriginal languages. Researchers have noted that the “intergenerational trauma” caused by colonization has become “deeply embedded within the cultural identity of Indigenous peoples.” As a result, Aboriginal language transmission from generation to generation has drastically declined, “leaving a shrinking minority of the Indigenous population in Canada who are fluent in their mother tongues” (McIntosh et al., 2011, p. 183). A 2007 study entitled, “Aboriginal Languages in Canada: Emerging Trends and Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition,” used data retrieved from the national censes of 1996 and 2001 and found that, of approximately 50 distinct Aboriginal languages in Canada, only three — Cree, Inuktitut, and Ojibway — were considered to have population bases large enough to ensure the languages’ long-term survival (Norris, 2007, p. 27). This is particularly concerning because language has shown to be essential to cultural learning. According to “The Rainbow/Holistic Approach to Aboriginal Literacy,” language is not simply the way we communicate with each other, but provides a direct link to the way we see and interact with the world:

Language is our unique relationship to the Creator, our attitudes, beliefs, values, and fundamental notions of what is truth. Our languages are the cornerstones of who we are as a people. Without our languages, our cultures cannot survive. (Castellano et al., in George, 2003, p. 35)
This link between language survival and cultural sustainability has been recognized by multiple scholars and educators studying Aboriginal language instruction. McIntosh et al. agree with Mary Jane Norris that the “languages found within Indigenous cultures” represent the “history, traditions, and cultural identity” of Aboriginal peoples (McIntosh et al., 2011, p. 183). Given this clear relationship between language and cultural practices, programs like the NCCLP, which encourage and nurture Aboriginal language use in multiple settings, play an essential role in ensuring the sustainability of Indigenous cultures.

New Challenges to Language Renewal

Effects of colonization have not been the only factors contributing to the decline of Cree and other Aboriginal languages. In 2011, an article in the Canadian Journal of Education observed that Aboriginal languages face a new threat in the form of “the rising power and prevalence of English information technologies and by general dominance of English and French in modern Canadian society.” The authors further noted that “English is omnipresent, constantly accessed on the Internet, on television, and in music, making this language powerful enough to seep into the students’ everyday existence” (Usborne et al., 2011, p. 202).

In addition to this everyday bombardment, institutional and bureaucratic practices further demonstrate the requirement of English and/or French proficiency. While past colonial policies and practices enforced by governments and such institutions as residential schools actively prevented Aboriginal peoples from using their own languages, today this language marginalization is subtler. Accessing government and non-government services requires using English and/or French; this means that even Aboriginal people who have knowledge of their language are forced to operate in French or English throughout much of their day-to-day life. Ningwakwe Priscilla George says that this situation results in First Nations people being “passively bilingual,” and asserts that:

We [Aboriginal people] understand the spoken language; however, we have difficulty participating in an Aboriginal language conversation because the words are in our memory banks. Acquisition is not the issue with us; retrieval is. We just need to practice in retrieving those words faster and brushing up on the pronunciation. (p. 35)

This institutional emphasis on the nation’s two “official” languages extends to public education. As a system-wide requirement, students in Saskatoon Public Schools are tested using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System throughout the year to determine their English competency levels in reading and vocabulary. For the NCCLP and other Aboriginal language programs, however, no such common standards exist. While vocabulary lists can be compiled by accessing various sources such as the Greymorning Method (also known as the Accelerated Second Language Learning Method or ASLA) and the curriculum developed by the Onion Lake Cree Nation, among others, the lack of common standards for Cree further emphasizes the dominance of English and French — particularly English — in Canadian society.
Working Towards A Common Goal

The goal of language revival and sustainability requires a multi-pronged approach. At-home education alone is not enough. In-class instruction alone is not enough. As we work towards a common vision for language revival, what becomes clear is that the desire and motivation for linguistic and cultural teachings must come from the community in order to affect sustainable change (McAlpine & Herodier, 1994, p. 128). This community control is essential, given the dark history of residential schools forbidding children to speak their Aboriginal languages; many of these people were so traumatized by the experience that they never spoke their mother tongue again. In a section on language and culture, language rights, and government programs, the recently-released report from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada called on the federal government to enact an Aboriginal Languages Act to affirm the importance of Aboriginal languages and to ensure that programs which promote, teach, and sustain these languages receive adequate funding. However, this call to action is very clear on the guiding principles such an Act should have. One of these is that the “preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, pp. 156-157). We agree with this assertion and consider community and parental support to be essential to the success of the NCCLP. Knowledge of First Nations’ cultures and languages are held in the communities, and language programs must rely on this community knowledge to create their curriculum.

Cultural teachings stress the importance and value of community and family relationships, and demonstrate that to ensure student success, teaching Cree as a second language must be a priority for parents, communities, and governments. This is especially true as we work toward the common goal of engaging and retaining First Nations students in our schools. There are challenges to this teamed approach. Parents and guardians are sometimes reluctant to enrol their children in language programmes out of concern that an immersion or bilingual programme might negatively affect their children’s English skills. However, a study by Usborne et al., which examined both immersion and second-language instruction at a school in a Mi’kmaq community in Cape Breton, indicated that students’ English skills were not affected. The only difference found was in regard to their competency in the Mi’kmaq language: students in immersion — unsurprisingly — showed greater proficiency in their Aboriginal language than did those in the second-language classrooms (Usborne et al., 2011).

The greater challenges to teaching Aboriginal languages as a second language within a classroom setting stem from the difficult and all-too-common realities that originate with poverty, such as transiency (often due to the lack of affordable housing), family breakdown, and other issues faced by students and their families. As observed by the Canadian Council on Learning, these seemingly overwhelming issues directly affect students, disrupting their access to stable and consistent learning, and therefore lead to “lack of school readiness, absenteeism, and mobility, [and] affect the acquisition of important skills needed to be successful” (McIntosh et al., 2011, p. 183).

Prior to colonial interference, a child’s upbringing would be a community effort. The role of caregiver was not restricted to a child’s parents, but would include Elders and other community members; this ensured that a child’s upbringing and education included
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traditional cultural teachings. Teaching Aboriginal languages in the classroom reflects this holistic worldview by involving the school — as a part of the community — in children’s cultural education. Furthering this holistic approach, programs like the NCCLP incorporate vocabulary instruction with cultural protocols and practices both through teachers’ classroom instruction and through the guidance of Traditional Knowledge Keepers, combining traditional elements such as the Sharing Circle, with modern teaching methods like the use of iPads and other technology. Incorporating language and culture education together reinforces the value of First Nations’ cultures and traditions and, in turn, strengthens the self-worth and assuredness of Aboriginal students. Programs similar to NCCLP found that “incorporating [students’ Aboriginal] language and cultural beliefs in the development of leadership, social skills, and study skills resulted in increased academic success and sense of identity.” One program for Maori students in New Zealand noted that including these same “cultural values … into teaching practices led to increased student confidence, self-efficiency, and academic engagement” (McIntosh et al., 2011, p. 184). These findings echo those of other studies — including this one — which have found that cultural language instruction strengthens students’ self- and collective-esteem, and encourages psychological well-being by allowing and encouraging students to connect with their Aboriginal identities (Usborne et al., 2011, p. 212).
Methodology

Language is social. It is not something that can be defined and measured, although it can, of course, be documented and analyzed. It is endlessly developing and truly meaningful only in the context of some form of dialogue. (Yeoman, 2000, p. 127)

Introduction

This study recognizes that in order for language instruction to be effective, it must combine different learning techniques and strategies so that the language can be used in a variety of contexts. The focus of the study was to see how technology such as iPads could contribute to using Cree as a second language in grades 3/4 and 4/5 classrooms. This was done in conjunction with other language instruction methods. By diversifying the situations (cultural, traditional, technological, etc.) in which students use their second language, students in the NCCLP become familiar with and used to speaking Cree in multiple contexts. This, in turn, encourages retention and use in areas of life outside the classroom.

Vocabulary List

As stated above, there is no system-wide standard available from which instructors in the NCCLP can develop lessons for their students. As such, the teachers who participated in this study came together to create a common wordlist for their classrooms. Collaboration with colleagues was crucial to creating this vocabulary list to ensure that instruction in the NCCLP is consistent and builds from year to year. It is also key to ensuring measurable results. The list was created using the Standard Roman Orthography Plains Cree “Y” dialect. The list consisted of six basic commands (for Grade 3/4) or eight basic commands (for Grade 4/5) that were used on a daily basis. In addition to these commands, the vocabulary included three inanimate nouns, four seasons, four weather phrases, numbers one to 20, and seven kinship terms in the first, second, and third person. For reference, this list can be found in Appendix A.

These are combined-grades classrooms.
Pre-Test

Before beginning the action research for this study, a pre-test was performed in the first term to establish the students’ existing knowledge of the created wordlist. These results were then compared to data gathered afterwards to determine students’ overall improvement regarding their Cree communication skills. The pre-test was performed in two classrooms at different times. In both classrooms, six students were selected to be tested. Results of the pre-test showed that most of the chosen students had a good understanding of the vocabulary; this was not surprising, as many of them had been in the NCCLP for many years. Those who had recently joined the program had the most difficulty. Although this initial pre-test was very basic, focusing on wordlist recognition and comprehension, it can be easily adapted and serves a good starting point for gathering data in the classroom. For our purposes, the pre-test stressed the vocabulary from the collectively established word list and also reflected the phrases from the My Story project and the My Cree application.

Classroom Activities

General

Classroom activities to measure and improve communication skills included pronunciation modelling, repetition using strategies such as call and response, music, and relevant websites on which students identified pictures and actions using Cree words. In addition to these activities, students also used the My Cree application for iPad, listened to an instructor read aloud from a book entitled Niwechihaw — I Help, practiced the Basic Polite Conversation and Mahti Acimostowin — Tell Me a Story dialogues, participated in weekly sharing circles with traditional knowledge keepers or cultural resource teachers, and used the My Story application, also for iPad.

My Cree

The My Cree application for iPad uses Standard Roman Orthography “Y” dialect Plains Cree and includes basic recognition of seven vowels and 13 consonant sounds. My Cree divides words into categories such as animals, family/friends, food, greetings, seasons/weather, and activities, and distinguishes between animate and inanimate nouns. In addition to being a resource for many Cree words, it also acts as a pronunciation guide and demonstrates how Cree words are used in different phrases; this gives the user an idea of how grammar functions in the Cree language. Finally, it has the added benefit of including songs, which adds not only a contextual element, but a cultural one as well. Using this application in the classroom provided a basis of measurement for students’ comprehension. The phrases learned and perfected using the My Cree application were later applied by the students in the My Story application, also for iPad.

2 Some websites did not follow the Standard Roman Orthography Plains Cree “Y” dialect, though that was the dialect of instruction.
**Niwechihaw — I Help**

Over a period of time, the instructor read aloud to students from the book *Niwechihaw — I Help*, by Caitlin Dale Nicholson with Leona Morin-Neilson. Before beginning to read to the students, pre-lessons were conducted that included approximately 10 verbs used in the book. These verbs were reviewed in class with an explanation of the first-, second-, and third-person conjugations, including the gender-free distinction for the third-person conjugations.

After the pre-lessons the book was read aloud with the teacher stopping to have the students repeat the Cree orally with her. This modelling and recitation was repeated several times. The book prompted discussion about “wahkomakanak” (kinship relationships). For example, while “kohkom” technically means grandmother, it is not restricted to those who are blood relatives. One demonstration of this is how the students call Linda Young, the traditional knowledge keeper who leads their weekly sharing circle, Kohkom Linda. While Mrs. Young is not their biological grandmother, the students share a relationship and a comfort level with her which makes this kinship term appropriate. Also explained were dialect differences between some of the verbs in the book versus their meanings in the local Cree dialect. For example, in the book “otapihew” means he/she drives, whereas in Saskatoon and surrounding areas this word means he/she rides. The teacher replaced “otapihew” with “pamicikew” which means he/she drives in the local dialect. To reinforce the pre-lesson, students were asked to pick out the verbs from the list as they went through the book with the teacher.

Lessons using the *My Story* application in iPad picked up on these words and phrases as well as the importance of relationships and helping members of one’s community. In this way, both language and cultural lessons were extended from oral and written contexts to include a technological context as well.

**My Story**

Hayo Reinders notes the value of digital storytelling to the second language classroom, explaining that it is “[e]asy to use for both writing and speaking practice” and is “a good way to motivate students to use the language both inside and outside the classroom” (Reinders, 2011, p. 1). With this in mind, this study chose to use the *My Story* application in the classroom, enabling students to connect what was happening in their lives with their language instruction. The choice of the *My Story* application is also culturally appropriate, given the importance of stories and storytelling in many Aboriginal cultures, Cree included. The application further links students’ everyday lives to the use of the Cree language by having them tell stories of their own experiences. The *Cree Language and Culture 12-year Program Guide to Implementation Grade 4 to Grade 6* observes that “[s]tories can expand a student’s world. Storytelling is not just ancient legends and stories but present-day stories about daily events and activities” (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 7).

The *My Story* application was introduced to the students by connecting the iPad to the data projector so everyone could see it. The students were shown how to do the necessary steps but, unsurprisingly, the majority were already comfortable with the iPad technology. Students were shown how to log in and how to import pictures or draw their own. The aim was for them to create a “story” that described how they have helped the people in their lives. They were instructed to use the following sentence frame from the story *Niwechihaw*
— I Help: “Niwichihaw (I help) ________.” They then filled in the blank with examples of those they have helped.

The My Story project combined several elements of other lessons. This resulted in students creating their stories from happenings in their own lives by using what they had learned from My Cree, Niwechihaw — I Help, as well as other contextual language lessons from both the classroom and the sharing circle. Students were prompted to think of ways in which they helped those around them through teacher-led questions such as: How do you help others? How do you help yourself in order to help others? They were encouraged to think of the Seven Habits, the Medicine Wheel, and the Tipi Teachings, and in this context consider how they could help themselves and others in the classroom, school, or community.

In a pre-lesson, students were shown several examples that other students had created with My Story. It was necessary to brainstorm with the students the ways in which they can be helpful and take on personal responsibility when using the verbs from the classroom read-aloud. Throughout this process teachers continued to practice the sentences orally with the students until they were comfortable saying the sentences on their own, with a partner, and/or with the teacher. After much practice, the students used the My Story application and recorded their personal sentences. Using the pre-established sentence frame above, students were told to think of someone they know personally — a family member, friend, school staff member, etc. — whom they have helped, and then fill in the Cree relationship term to finish the sentence. Once again, by emphasizing the relationship term, the students are not only learning Cree grammar and vocabulary, but also cultural values which emphasize helpful and respectful relationships. For example, when talking about helping Mrs. Young, they would say: “Niwichihaw Kohkom Linda” (I help Grandmother Linda). Another sentence created by a student, “kwayask nitapin” (“I listen, I sit properly”), demonstrates the cultural lessons learned from the traditional knowledge keepers and cultural resource teachers about appropriate behaviour within the sharing circle.

This project can also be altered to focus on what is happening in the classroom, school, or community at the time. For Earth Day students gave a My Story presentation to their school which focused on the ways in which they and others can be helpers to Mother Earth. One of the examples from this presentation was “nikanacicikan piko kihkway” (I clean by recycling). This is one way students can come to see the language they are learning and using as relevant to their everyday lives.

Sharing Circle

Sharing circles have been part of First Nations’ culture for generations. They would be used when people came together to meet, discuss, and make decisions. Their use in schools is a wonderful way of getting students to open up and share. The sharing circles in the NCCLP take place in a separate room — usually the cultural room or another classroom — and the environment is deliberately relaxing and calming. The sharing circle is always guided by a traditional knowledge keeper or cultural resource teacher who the students respect and who respects the students. As such, the practice brings people together and allows them to really get to know one another.
The sharing circle always has an item that is used to indicate who is allowed to talk. This item circulates and is usually a rock, a talking stick, or an eagle feather. In our sharing circles students learn cultural protocols from traditional knowledge keepers. They also strengthen their comfort levels and confidence in speaking and sharing with their fellow students, their teachers, and the traditional knowledge keepers. Students relate small details about their weekend activities, visits with family members, trips they took, favourite pets, and friendships. Sometimes students bring items to show their classmates — usually something that is very special to them. Sharing circles are also an opportunity to read to students or to circulate a book and have each student read from it.
Discussion And Results

Classroom Activities

The combination of classroom activities used in this research action successfully aided the instruction of the Cree language. The vocabulary list and the pre-test provided a base upon which to build using the My Cree and My Story applications, along with the book Niwechihaw — I Help. Each of these elements integrated with the others and was further supported by cultural discussions in the classroom and in sharing circles about protocols and relationships.

The use of technology was helpful in a variety of ways. In addition to providing yet another context in which to use the Cree language, students’ familiarity with technology boosted their confidence. This confidence then carried over to the Cree lessons.
By creating stories with the My Story application, students used the elements they had learned and improved upon through the My Cree application and the Niwechihaw — I Help story. On top of this, they were able to create a personal digital story in the Cree language, strengthening the links between their own lives, the language, and the broader world with its emphasis on technology.
Reflecting on the Whole

By combining technological resources with traditional classroom instruction and Plains Cree pedagogy, students were encouraged to use and speak Cree in multiple settings. Incorporating these various elements meant that language and cultural lessons were extended from oral and written contexts to include technological contexts as well. Using technology in this way helps to break down the societal implication that technology is reserved for the English or French (mostly English) languages and reinforces the idea that the Cree language has a place in the modern world.

Presenting the students’ final projects also places Cree language learning in the wider world. These projects were presented in several different formats. In the first instance, the end product was shown to parents after the parent-teacher conferences in March. This allowed parents the opportunity to view their child’s work, as well as the iPads and the My Cree application the students had been using. Later, the class presented a My Story presentation at a school assembly. The stories were modified to suit the day’s theme — Earth Day — with students giving examples of how they could help Mother Earth. It is important to use language in these other ways so that the students can see the language and the value lessons as relevant to their everyday lives. Presenting students’ work in Cree also helps to create parental and community support and involvement in the NCCLP, and continues to boost students’ confidence in their knowledge of Cree, as well as their technological skills.

The study’s emphasis on using Cree in various contexts reinforced the value of the Cree language, as well as the students’ Aboriginal heritage, and in turn their self-worth. These findings are similar to those of the research in New Zealand mentioned in the literature review (McIntosh et al., 2011, p. 184). Teachers noted that not only were students learning, but they were also enthusiastic about creating their stories in Cree using the My Story application; increased self-confidence was noted in several cases. These types of results are difficult to measure and, upon reflection, the multi-layered approach of technological and traditional classroom lessons seemed to be embodied in the students’ participation in the sharing circles. Therefore, we have included reflections from two teachers, Ms. Ben (Grade 3/4) and Ms. Tourangeau (Grade 4/5), in this section; we also provide interviews with Mrs. Young, the Traditional Knowledge Keeper, and Mr. Awasis, the Cultural Resource Teacher in Appendices B and C. In these reflections, the lessons students learned through the My Cree and My Story applications, as well as the Niwechihaw — I Help story, are seen to be put into practice as they participate in the sharing circles where they discuss relationships, learn protocols, and gain the confidence to speak phrases and words in Cree.

Ms. Tourangeau’s Reflection

The sharing circle was something that we took part in at least once a week. Kohkom Young already had a routine with the class. When we enter the Culture Room, the boys would automatically line up first. They would hear from either Mrs. Young or myself, “napesisak nikan,” which was “boys first.” This is a sign of respect for the role that boys and men have in traditional ceremonies. The girls would line up after the boys and they were expected to wear skirts. The skirts were placed and kept in a plastic container by the door for easy access. Upon entering the Culture Room, you can see the place where Kohkom would sit and the cushions were carefully placed in the circle. The boys would enter first and go
around the circle to sit to the right side of Kohkom while the girls would sit to the left of her. The girls have to sit properly. They would sit with the legs to one side and stretched outwards. The boys would sit cross-legged.

At the start of the sharing circle, Kohkom would ask me which two boys would be able to smudge with either sweetgrass or sage. I would select the boys and try to be fair about the selection, making sure everyone had a turn. One of the boys would smudge one half of the circle. Usually the girls would be first, and the other helper would smudge the boys’ half of the circle. As the second helper completed the circle, the smudge bowl would be given to Kohkom. Kohkom would then lead us in a prayer. ³ When Kohkom would pray to the Creator, the students would repeat the prayer with her.

Protocol during this time is recognized and taught so the students are aware of how to conduct and participate in the sharing circle. The role of the Traditional Knowledge Keeper is crucial to this process so that once the students have done this repeatedly throughout the years they will know what to expect. The role of the ostapawesak (the male helpers) are known to the boys. When they are able to help depends on their actions and behaviours. They are quite respectful as they smudge and many look forward to helping.

After the prayer Kohkom would remind the students that whatever is shared in the sharing circle they could not repeat to others when it was done. This is of the utmost importance because it allows each individual the peace of mind that they can share in confidence. As the rock was passed along the students were encouraged to practice mindfulness and reflect on their words. An example of what students quite often shared is to think of someone who might be going through a difficult time and offer a prayer. Quite often there were some real, deep, personal connections shared. Students come to school with real family issues that often involve family breakdown, dysfunction, or illness. Students were willing to share something that has been on their minds and when they talk about this it is a release for them. When the rock has been passed around the circle then the sharing circle topic might change. Kohkom might send the rock around again a second time to give students another opportunity to talk if they do decide to change their minds.

At the end of the sharing circle, Kohkom would ask if there was a word that I wanted them to say as we shake individual hands around the circle. The students would repeat the words quite a few times before the end of the circle. For example, we would say “ninanaskimon” (I am thankful) or “miyokisikanisik” (have a good day). Once we were done shaking hands then the students would line up to leave.

I really enjoy the sharing circle because it gives the students a chance to share their innermost feelings and some open up to do this when you least expect it. Sometimes the students who are sharing are the ones who are shy. When it is my turn to talk in the sharing circle then I would say it all in Cree and I would relate it to someone at home or in school who I am thinking about. The Educational Assistant would also do this.

The students wrote in their journals about what they thought about the circles. They wrote about their thoughts and opinions. The responses indicated that they felt that there was trust in the circle that allowed them to share openly. They liked that they were able to reflect on someone in their own families or even friends who needed a prayer because they were going through a difficult time. They also appreciated the atmosphere in the Culture

³ The prayer used in the sharing circle is the same one that is found at the beginning of this report.
Room. Many thought it was a calm, quiet setting where they could listen to the music in the background (chanting) and they enjoyed the aroma of sweetgrass.

**Ms. Ben’s Reflection**

Sharing circles are a way for students to communicate, to share, and to learn patience. They are a way of teaching a child to learn about values that they must follow on a daily basis in order for them to be successful in life. Sharing circles are a way for First Nations people, whenever they are gathered, to deal with an issue or a problem and to come to a positive conclusion in a manner where everyone has the option to share or pass.

In a class cultural setting it is always appropriate to enter the circle in a clockwise manner starting with the boys on one side and the girls on the other side. It is usually boys on the right and girls on the left. The circle begins with Elder Awasis having a boy and a girl going around with the smudge. The girl will take the sage and the girls will smudge, and the boy will have the boys smudge with the sweetgrass. Once the smudge is over the Elder Awasis will tell the students to put their heads down for a prayer and he will say a prayer that the students will all follow.

The Elder will then pick a topic, like the Tipi Teachings. He will then discuss the importance and the meaning of the tipi, medicine wheel, culture, language, and behaviour. Sometimes he will tell a story connecting it to things happening around the world or to student behaviour in order to correct behaviour through the story. Other times the circle will lead to bead work, but always it connects to what they have learned in the circle. Sometimes the students will share and other times they will be asked a question that they will answer in turns, going around the circle.

The sharing circle uses an eagle feather, rock, and/or a talking stick for whenever someone is talking and only the one with the item gets to talk. There should be absolutely no interruptions when someone is sharing. They are always to be listened to respectfully until they are done sharing and the item is handed to the next person to speak. At the end the Elder will take the item and reflect on what was said, especially things of big importance.

In the sharing circle with Elder Young the students follow the same protocol as they do with Mr. Awasis, but in Mrs. Young’s circles they get to speak about a topic that she has chosen. When the circle is done she usually talks about things that are important for the young ladies, such as how to present themselves, how to respect themselves, and what duties were important in the past and what is important today.

In my classroom we have a sharing circle every Monday morning without a smudge due to fire safety in the classroom. I usually start off with a topic such as Mother’s Day and ask the students to talk about what they did with their mothers on the special day. I emphasize that if they’re staying with another caretaker then they should be sharing about them because they are just as important as their mother. We also talk about what they did over the weekend, their plans for the summer, what they thought about the book I just read, etc. I talk about the school values and connect them to the Tipi Teachings and classroom topics we discuss. Everyone has the opportunity to share or pass if they don’t want to share. The ones that come in a few minutes late will get to share at the end. There is emphasis on what they are not allowed to talk about in detail, such as their games that they play at home. They can say, “I played games,” but no more than that because it just takes up too much
time because they can go into so much detail. Sometimes the games are not appropriate and the others don’t need to hear it. Games they play are important, but they have to be games they play on the computer such as math games.

I find that the sharing circle really helps the students settle in on a Monday morning when some are usually pretty tired and need some motivation. It is such a great way to start communication skills such as listening, talking, and discussing — especially for the shy ones. Usually the environment will be quiet, hopefully with no noise and the lights dim, and the door left slightly closed so that those who come late can join. The items I use for talking are an eagle feather, rock, stuffed animal, talking stick, an item picked from outside that connects to Mother Nature, or maybe an item a student wants to share.

I always find the students so settled and wide awake once we are done the circle. The students always like to share, especially items they brought, information about a pet, a trip they went on, a birthday, Mother Earth, plants, rocks, and so much more. A circle is never ending. Students learn to share and it builds their self-confidence.

I have found that a sharing circle is a very important teaching tool.
References


Alberta Education. (2009). *Cree language and culture 12-year program guide to implementation Grade 4 to Grade 6*. Alberta: Alberta Education.


Appendices

Appendix A
Vocabulary List, Grade 5

Basic Commands:
- Pihitikwe (Come in)
- Astam (Come)
- Api (Sit)
- Pasiko (Rise)
- Nohte minihkwani nipiy? (May I have a drink of water?)
- Nohte waywistamason? (May I go to the washroom?)
- Ayamihcike (Read)
- Kiyamapi (Sit quietly)

Inanimate Nouns:
- wepahikan (Broom)
- iskwahtem (Door)
- tehtapiwin (Chair)

Seasons:
- pipon (Winter)
- miyoskamin (Spring)
- nipin (Summer)
- takwakin (Fall)

*Note that the macrons are missing here, as instructional focus at this level is on basic language skills.
Weather:
- Tansi isi wepan? (How is the weather?)
- Tansi isi kisikaw? (How is the weather?)
- Tansi isi kisikaw wapahki? (How is the weather tomorrow?)
- Tansi isi kisikaw awas wapahki? (How is the weather the day after tomorrow?)

Numbers:
- akihcikewina (Numbers)
- 1-20

Kinship Terms, Immediate (first and second person):
- nikawiy (my mother); kikawiy (your mother); okawiy (his/her mother)
- nohtawiy (my father); kohtawiy (your father); ohtawiy (his/her father)
- nistes (my older brother); kistes (your older brother); ostesa (his/her older brother)
- nimis (my older sister); kimis (your older sister); omisa (his/her older sister)
- nisimis (my younger brother/sister); kisimis (your younger brother/sister); osimisa (his/her younger brother/sister)
- nohkom (my grandmother); kohkom (your grandmother); ohkohma (his/her grandmother)
- nimosom (my grandfather); kimosom (your grandfather); omosoma (his/her grandfather)
Appendix B

Interview with Linda Young, Traditional Knowledge Keeper

Q: What purpose do sharing circles have?
LY: It depends on the reason for using a sharing circle. They can be used to resolve conflicts, to share one’s thoughts about a particular topic, to make a decision based on consensus. Sharing circles make it possible for everyone to have a voice — should they choose to share.

Q: What do the students learn in a sharing circle?
LY: At Confederation Park Community School, we use the sharing circle as a tool for teaching students to learn to speak Cree/nehiyawewin and share their deepest (or not so deep) thoughts in a safe and comfortable atmosphere.

Speaking Cree/nehiyawewin:
The sharing circle starts with the student introducing themselves in Cree — ‘niya oma’ nitisikasawin; saying “ayhay” when finished smudging; saying “ekosi” when they are done speaking; reciting a Cree prayer, sometimes we will sing a prayer in Cree; say a greeting in Cree — “miyo kisikanisi” — upon shaking hands; [and] instructions, welcome and sharing of teachings are done in Cree with translation.

Cultural Teachings:
Students follow basic sharing circle guidelines such as only the person who is holding the stone/stick/feather can speak, [and] others in the circle practice respect by listening mindfully and not asking questions or interrupting the person who is speaking.

The sharing circle format follows the first three tipi pole teachings. These teachings encourage students to be respectful around Elders, [and in] ceremonies (Pipe Ceremonies, Feasts). [Here are the Tipi Pole Teachings as explained by Elder Mary Lee:

Obedience/nahihtamowin means accepting guidance and wisdom from outside of ourselves, using our ears before our mouth. We learn by listening to traditional stories, by listening to our parents or guardians, our fellow students and our teachers. We learn by their behaviours and reminders so that we know what is right and what is wrong.

Respect/manachihtowin means giving honour to our Elders and fellow students, to the strangers that come to visit our community, and to all of life. We must honour the basic rights of all others.

Humility/tapahteyimowin. We are not above or below others in the circle of life. We feel humbled when we understand our relationship with Creation. We are so small compared to the majestic expanse of Creation, just a “strand in the web of life.” Understanding this helps us to respect and value life.

5 This description of the Tipi Pole Teachings comes from Elder Mary Lee’s website “Four Directions Teachings” found at http://www.fourdirectionsteachings.com/transcripts/cree.html. Mary Lee is an Elder at Oskayak High School in Saskatoon, SK, and is a well-known and highly respected figure, especially for her efforts in encouraging retention and use of Cree language and culture.
Q: What do you find when doing sharing circles with students?
LY: I have found over the year that as the comfort level increases in the circle the students are more confident in speaking Cree and in sharing. Students pay attention to each other’s responsibilities and behaviour in the Culture Room and will remind each other of being respectful. Students will ask for a sharing circle if one was missed.

Q: Ideally, how many times should sharing circles be used? How often do they actually occur?
LY: At Confederation Park Community School we have nine Cree classrooms; seven of the nine classrooms have regular sharing circles for one period each week.

Ideally, to support speaking Cree, one period per week for a sharing circle in the Culture Room and a classroom sharing circle/check-in every day would be better.

Sharing circles in the classroom are different than a sharing circle in the Culture Room. A classroom sharing circle would be facilitated by the teacher, whereas in the Culture Room it is facilitated by a Knowledge Keeper and/or a Cultural Support Teacher. Besides speaking Cree, the emphasis in the Culture Room is on cultural/ceremonial competency via smudging, teachings about the role of oskapewisak (helpers), entering a ceremonial space based on the teachings of the Sacred Circle and learning about male and female protocols (Plains Cree) specifically around feasts and pipe ceremonies and expectations in terms of respectful behaviour around Elders and ceremony.

Q: Do you think the sharing circles help students balance themselves?
LY: Absolutely!

The teachers remind the students to enter the Culture Room space in a quiet manner which often slows down their high energy. Some teachers will teach students how to self-regulate when they get impatient.

Focusing on respect around smudging, Elder presence, talking stick/stone must be held with both hands so they aren’t playing with it like a toy and being mindful of passing the “talking tool” respectfully helps the students to remain focused.

Consistency and ambience in the Culture Room is key. Light is diffused, flute music is played in the background (same music in the last five years), and mats are placed in a circle on the floor.

The sharing circles give the students a strong sense of identity and a home place.

Q: Do you think there is anything that should be added or changed in the way the sharing circle is currently being conducted?
LY: Forty minutes gets used up pretty fast with students having to walk from their classroom to the Culture Room so a longer period would be ideal. Once the circle is finished the extended time would allow for some sharing of stories in Cree or reading stories in Cree.

Change is always good, especially change that supports language and cultural competency outcomes. Any changes in how the sharing circles are being conducted should be done between the teachers and the Knowledge Keeper.
A full-time Knowledge Keeper who supports the nehiyawewin program would be better to support the students’ learning.

A Culture Room that is specifically used for sharing circles would be ideal.
Appendix C

Interview with Wally Awasis, Cultural Resource Teacher

Q: What purpose do sharing circles have?
WA: Sharing circles are a unique small-group discussion process in which participants (including the leader) share their feelings, experiences, and insights in response to specific assigned topics. Sharing circles are loosely structured, and participants are expected to adhere to rules that promote the goals of the process while assuring co-operation, effective communication, trust, and confidentiality.

Sharing circles, also called “talking circles,” come from the traditions of Indigenous people of North America. Circle processes are based upon equality between participants and the principle of sharing power with each other instead of having power over one another.

Circles are characterized by the use of a talking piece such as a rock, talking stick, feather, etc., which regulates communication. Both talking and listening are important in the circle because mutual understanding lays the groundwork for deeper, more meaningful discussion. Only participants holding the talking piece can talk. Participants who do not have the talking piece get to listen and reflect on what the person with the talking piece says. The talking piece is a meaningful and symbolic object that the facilitator, also called the “circle keeper,” brings to the circle. The circle keeper often incorporates an explanation of the meaning of the talking piece into the circle activities. Receiving the talking piece is an invitation to share with the group and helps ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to share at their own pace and in their own way without interruptions. Participants share what they want, can remain silent during their turn, or pass by giving the talking piece to the next person. The talking piece is passed clockwise around the circle with each participant having a turn to share their authentic personal stories and have them respectfully heard and acknowledged without judgment, condemnation, or advice (unless advice is solicited).

Talking circles can be used for discussion, problem solving, and/or decision making. The basic purpose of a talking circle is to create a safe, non-judgmental place where each participant has the opportunity to contribute to the discussion of difficult and/or important issues. The intent is to provide a safe place for connection and dialogue, meaning that all participants are open to being influenced by what happens during the process and do not enter the process hoping to persuade others or expecting a specific outcome. This can be hard for teachers to come to terms with when they are used to directing class, lecturing, or being the sole content expert. Respecting the talking piece helps teachers give the floor to the students. It also equalizes opportunities to contribute among students.

Q: What do you find when doing sharing circles with students?
WA: I have found that talking circles are more successful when the participants have trust with each other. Taking time to share stories, build relationships, explore values, and create guidelines for participation helps everyone feel physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe in the circle and creates a foundation for courageous acts of sharing. Courageous acts of sharing often involve potentially stigmatizing information and can range from problems that are interfering with school work to not understanding the material to an unpopular point of view to identifying racism in the classroom to traumatizing personal experiences to just being willing to share at all. From using
talking circles I have learned that when students are encouraged to be full human beings in the Culture Room instead of just students, courageous acts of sharing often profoundly impact the circle and can deepen the trust that makes all kind of wonderful things possible.

Values and guidelines for behavior in the talking circle are important. In my experience, students participate more fully in talking circles when they see the connection between the practices of the circle and values such as equality, dignity, and understanding. The talking circle is based on the assumption that we all have wisdom to share and can learn from one another. Part of the circle keeper's role is to be fully transparent about the circle's purposes, processes and activities. The circle keeper asks questions, creates activities, and models the quality and length of answers that will help the circle serve its purposes of connection, exploration, and problem-solving without coercion or hidden agendas.

Q: What do the students learn in a sharing circle?
WA: When circles are successful, participants are willing to follow communication and behavioural guidelines in ways that support these values, beliefs, and activities because they trust the circle keeper and the other participants. I have learned that, especially in new circles, the circle keeper's willingness to be open, vulnerable, and transparent enhances the quality of the circle. When I develop my questions I think about the kind of stories or ideas I would like to share to help participants understand my perspective and what kind of ideas and experiences I would like to learn from the other participants, and then I create questions and activities that will facilitate the opportunity to share those stories and ideas. I also remain open to what happens in the circle and adapt to the flow instead of pushing to fulfil my intentions. Mindfulness of the group's contributions, interests, experiences, and desires helps me keep the circle dynamic and well.

Q: Do you think the circles help students balance themselves?
WA: I ask participants to talk from their own point of view. Talking circles are about dignity and respect given and received by all. Talking from one's own point of view is important especially by teachers who are used to talking as "the authority," it reinforces power sharing and helps create the safety needed for everyone to share what they know (or don't know).

Symbolism, ceremonies, and rituals are important elements of talking circles because they facilitate shared meaning-making and help support the intention to create a safe space for human connection. The circle keeper helps guide the circle, preparing for the circle and keeping integrity with the process. If participants talk out of turn, have side conversations, or otherwise disregard the guidelines, as the circle keeper I gently remind them of the guidelines and help them get on track or make new guidelines they are willing to follow. As the circle keeper, I also prepare for the circle, choosing the focus of the circle, choosing materials for the opening and closing, ensuring the joint creation of guidelines for the circle, developing questions and activities to prompt the circle participants, and modeling the quality and length of responses desired. As the circle keeper, I also summarize the discussion, draw connections between experiences, point out divergent ideas, express appreciation for those who have shared particularly relevant or meaningful contributions, and adapt questions and activities to fulfil the circle's purposes while honouring the contributions of its participants.
Some topics that talking circles can be used to explore include specific content-related topics, asking participants what they have learned regarding the topic, what they would like to learn and why, what they struggle with learning, what some of the barriers are to their learning, what their reactions are to a particular article or video, etc. Talking circles can explore classroom tensions, resistance to reading or studying or practicing, effective study habits, application of course concepts and skills outside of the classroom, how students interpret or have accomplished different learning objectives, how students have overcome a learning challenge, what education or the course means to the students, or even student dreams for their career or success in life. Talking circles can also be used to make decisions regarding class policies and procedures, materials to cover, learning goals, the course calendar, grading rubrics and evaluation. I find talking circles to be very versatile. Of course, the number of students and the amount of time available for a talking circle can constrain one's options, but imagination, creativity, and great questions can overcome a lot.

Q: Ideally, how many times should they be used? How often do they actually occur?

WA: Sharing circles should ideally be used once or twice a week. I usually like to have a sharing circle after the weekend or holidays to help students unwind and talk about their experiences. I also use sharing circles at the end of the week to allow students to share how their school week went. I try not to do all talking circles as I like to also do other teachings such as tipi teachings, cultural teachings, drumming, singing, dancing, and story-telling, legends, cultural protocols, etc. I also like to teach arts and crafts such as beading, drum-making, sewing etc.

Q: Do you think there is anything that should be added or changed in the way the sharing circle is currently being conducted?

WA: I personally don't know how others conduct or use their sharing circles. I think it is up to the facilitator to decide how effective or not their sharing circles are working. I use them when I think it will benefit and enhance student learning.