Reclaiming Our Cree Language Through Oral Tradition

Diane Peekeekoot, Charlotte Campbell, Emily Weenonis, Shaun Sasakamoose
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Team and Elders</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to the Research Project</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Overview</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Story of our Project</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous Languages in Canada</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Project: The Research Process</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context: The Land and Place</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Team and Participants</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Findings: Results and Lessons From the Project</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Ways of Teaching: Reconnecting to Traditional Pedagogy or</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ways of Teaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storytelling in the Classroom</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship, Relations and Relating to Each Other</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins and Identity</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customs</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality, Ceremony and Language</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconnecting to the Land</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Reflections From the Elder on Learning Language</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Reflections</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What We Learned About Language, Culture and Identity</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Challenges and Lessons</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Team

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Elders

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We would like to express our gratitude for the generosity of the Elders, staff, participants and students who participated in the study and for their willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue about their experiences with the Elder in the Cree Language Oral Tradition Program.

We would like to thank the Ahtahkakoop Education Board and Ahtahkakoop First Nation leadership for supporting the project and for giving us opportunities to engage students and Elders in a dialogue about their experiences in working with the Elder in the Cree Language Oral Tradition Program.

The Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching was instrumental in enabling this research to take place through their funding to support improvement of teacher practice.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge and thank Elder Barry Ahenakew for his insight and guidance throughout the research project, and the depth of his Indigenous knowledge, understandings and wisdom that he shared so generously.
Introduction to the Research Project

Elder: Barry Ahenakew

Words of Wisdom:
Kise manito ki miyikonaw pimatisiwin
kicheyitamok pimatisiwin
ki miyew kikawinawa askt
Opikiwin Ekwa opikinahawasowin
kicheyi Tamok
Opikiwin ekwa opikinahawasiwin
kwayask kakwey Pimatisik
Kwayask kakwey Opikik

God give us life, think of life as great!
God gave mother earth growth and raising of young.
Think of growth and the raising of young.
Try to live life right.
Try and grow in a good way!
Reclaiming our Cree Language through Oral Tradition

“Let us not think of ourselves but of our children’s children”
(Chief Ahtahkakoop August 21, 1876)

Vision Statement:
Empowering Our Children Through First Nation Education.
ka-miyahcik awāsisak sohksowin ohci nēhiyaw kiskinamākosowin
Mission Statement:
To Engage, Inspire, and Promote Lifelong Learning and Achievement in a Holistic Environment.
kakwē-kiskēyitaman ka-isi-pimāciwoyan nēhiyaw tāpwētamōwinihk

Core Values:

- Harnessing diversity to create a unified group.
- Honoring the gifts and spirit of self and others.

- Caring Community mamowihkamatōwin
- Respect kistēyihtōwin

- Independence wihcisōwin
- Integrity sōhkāhciwin

- Instilling confidence to create and achieve goals.
- Acting with honesty and equality in all that we do.
Project Overview

What began as a project to revitalize our traditional Cree language in our school became an incredible re-awakening and revitalization of our Cree culture, and formed new bonds with Elders in our community. What we learned was that through an invitation to our community, we could learn so much, not just about our language but also to reconnect to traditional ways of teaching, learning, and traditional wisdom and ways of being spiritual.

Through support and collaboration with Elders in our community, students at Ahtahkakoop First Nation had the opportunity to not just learn their traditional language, but to learn about culture, traditional stories, recollections and customs. An area of focus was a 30-level Cree class where Elders came to teach the language in the classroom.

This project couldn’t have happened without the Elders from our community and the entire student body who shared a vision of revitalizing our Cree language. We are so grateful for the wisdom and sharing from all of the Elders who took part in this project.

This project demonstrates how learning a traditional Indigenous language using traditional First Nations teaching methods is a tool not only for language learning, but also as a way to really connect with our culture. This project also explored how traditional language learning can come together with teaching through stories, and how important both language and culture are to one another: wholly interconnected with a unique way of understanding concepts, ways of knowing (epistemologies) and ways of learning (pedagogies).

The Story of our Project

This project came about from a shared vision among students, teachers, school leadership, Elders and the community to revitalize our Cree language and culture with the young people at our school. Students expressed the desire to learn their traditional Cree language in a survey, and teachers and leadership in our school and in our community have been concerned with the loss of the Cree language, fearing for its total loss as the traditional language of the First Nations community. There is high risk of Aboriginal language extinction many places around the world and Ahtahkakoop First Nation in Saskatchewan is no different. The effects of colonization from the policies, laws and practices, most specifically the policy and practice of the residential school system, have included a loss of Indigenous languages. Our students had expressed interest in getting to learn their
traditional Cree language with an Elder and this was the starting point of our project.

Initially, we were interested in the impacts we would have, as a First Nations school, to try and revitalize the Cree language with Cree Elder stories. We wanted to help students learn the Cree language, tradition and increase fluency, and we were interested in a collaborative process between teachers, staff, students, Elders and the community.

Our project began by inviting Elders to our school to share lunch as part of a culture day; the entire student body and several Elders from our community ended up taking part and spent the rest of the day together. For our community, this was really a first time in recent memory that Elders had been in our schools with our young people. It was the first step to bringing together generations, traditional knowledge, language and more that had been separate for some time.

Elders are an integral part of our community and having Elders as part of our educational program has proven to enhance our educational goals. Our goal was to inspire our students to take up the challenge of learning our language and continue this process throughout their life.

One of the foci of the project was to bring Elders into the Cree 30 class at our school. The students had the opportunity to not just learn their traditional language, but to learn through traditional stories, recollections and customs shared by a Cree Elder from the community. As educators, we saw student attendance, engagement and participation increase the days when the Elders came to class. They were seen asking questions, staying in the classroom, attentive and taking part.

With our goal to revitalize and increase knowledge and fluency of the Cree language, and to integrate the Cree language through oral tradition with traditional stories from Elders as part of learning the language, it was a first step to getting back to some traditional ways of teaching. We see this as one step to retain our Cree language.

During interviews with teachers and an Elder, mid-way through the project a Cree Elder translated our project title, “Ē-kiwēyitotamāhk Kitāyisinēwinānāw” or “Reclaiming our culture through Cree language” into Cree. This Elder then told us that its English approximate meaning, from the Cree, would be “going back to our humanity … and humanity meaning all areas of our old people’s ways” (Video 5). When he shared this, it was a very powerful moment: perhaps in this way, we were starting to understand the magnitude of what we were doing in such a positive way.

This project follows on the work of other Indigenous educators and researchers, and upon a resurgence of interest in reclaiming, retaining and strengthening knowledge of Indigenous languages. Similar projects have been done in urban school system settings in Saskatchewan and with younger children in a northern Saskatchewan on-reserve school community. Other projects led the way with incorporating Elders into the schools and classrooms, and exploring ways to make this work successful. This project was unique for looking at Cree and culture, with sacred and traditional stories as a way to learn language and culture, and allowing Elders to lead language learning with high-school-aged youth in Saskatchewan.

During the project we witnessed an increase in cultural pride and a positive outlook on the students’ Cree identity, an increase in engagement and participation. Language and
culture go hand in hand, but so too do traditional ways of learning, teaching and supporting young people holistically. The positive impacts, growth of spirituality and cultural pride that emerged were not anticipated and led us to develop this project after its formal close.

With the success of our Grade 12 Cree classes, we have a positive example to move forward with. Plans have been put in place to match an Elder, a Kokum (grandmother) or Moshum (grandfather) into each classroom.
Indigenous Languages in Canada

Part of our motivation behind this project was concerns with the state of our traditional Cree language in our community.

The 2006 statistics we accessed at the beginning of the project showed that only about one-third of residents had any knowledge of the traditional language. More recent numbers from 2011 show a continued decline, each in the population of our community with Cree first learned (down to 15.1 percent from 30.9 in 2006), in the population with Cree spoken at home (down to 17.7 percent from around 29.1) and with the population with knowledge of the Cree language (down to 29.5 percent from 36.8 in 2006). The low numbers of speakers of Cree language from 2006 were certainly troubling and are yet comparatively lower five years later.¹

Across Canada, Indigenous language loss is striking. Almost 20 years ago the situation was considered quite insecure for Canadian Indigenous languages: “Of some 800,000 persons who claimed an Aboriginal identity in 1996, only 26 percent said an Aboriginal language was their mother tongue and even fewer spoke it at home” (Norris, M. J., 1998, p. 8). The statistics certainly have not improved since that time. The Assembly of First Nations and others have recently looked at the state of language “safety,” that is, the risk to extinction of Indigenous languages based on the number of speakers and level of fluency. Within Canada, only three Indigenous languages are expected to survive: Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitu (Fontaine, 2012, p. 3). Subsequent information from Statistics Canada in 1998 showed though that “two of the three Aboriginal linguistic groups in Canada that were previously considered ‘safe’ - Cree and Ojibway - have now shown a significant decline in the ‘population reporting an Aboriginal identity by mother tongue’ (National First Nations Language Strategy, 2007, p. 4).

¹ It is important to note, however, that the 2011 information came from the voluntary national household survey (NHS) which replaced the mandatory household census from 2006. The NHS generally had a lower response rate and this may have affected the dramatically lower percentages reported. Regardless, a concerted effort through the efforts of all stakeholders and funding agencies is necessary to address the erosion of Cree language and culture through oral traditions.
Reasons for erosion of traditional Indigenous languages are complex and include colonial government policies and practices which deliberately tried to destroy ties to culture and language. Norris suggests three main roots to Indigenous language loss in Canada: “forces of colonization … residential schools, the influence of dominant languages, and possibly the fact that Aboriginal languages are primarily oral” (Norris, 2009, p. 315). The banning of Indigenous languages from being spoken in residential schools in Canada is a significant factor which has been well documented (Norris, 1998, p. 8; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 61).

Work by UNESCO suggests that there are significant negative consequences to the loss of traditional languages: “Loss of language and culture is frequently accompanied by large human and social costs, including poverty, poor health, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence and suicide” (Fontaine, 2012, p. 5). Likewise, do positive benefits appear linked to mother-tongue language in classroom settings: “Mother tongue instruction is clearly tied to educational outcomes as outlined in many research studies internationally. … [T]here are many positive outcomes when primary school children receive instruction in their mother tongue” (Fontaine, 2012, p. 8).

As such, it is not surprising that Indigenous language preservation is a priority internationally. The United Nations’ Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) asserts the rights of maintaining traditional education and language. “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning” (AFN report, p. 4). It is part of a movement to reclaim culture and language that our work is situated in.

Language loss isn’t inevitable, however. Despite the losses, there is still much hope to reclaim and revive languages, as Norris suggests with effort and involvement of communities: “[T]he languages considered endangered are still spoken by enough people to make survival an outside possibility, given sufficient community interest and educational programs” (Norris, 1998, p. 9). The team’s concerns with traditional language loss in our community are not unique and communities across Canada and around the world have been engaged in revitalization projects and work.

Researchers and scholars such as Dr. Verna St. Denis have been champions of reviving our Aboriginal languages. One of her studies (Soleil, St. Denis, & Deer, 2006) looked at a majority non-Aboriginal school of educators and students and assessed some of the curriculum, Aboriginal content inclusion, racism and feelings of inclusion and exclusion, and perspectives of teachers, students, parents and Elders who were brought into the classroom. A series of recommendations for this school context are presented in this report, almost 10 years ago, and some progress is apparent.

Bringing Elders into the classroom has been of interest to many educators across the province. In Saskatchewan, there has been a movement towards integrating more Indigenous content culture and practices into the curriculum, and an interest in helping teachers bring Elders and traditional knowledge into classrooms. In 2001, Saskatchewan Education published Aboriginal Elders and Community Workers in Schools: A Guide for School Divisions and Their Partners on some best practices, demonstrating a push towards this work and work being done.
Other projects in the province have worked to bring Elders into the classroom as part of culture and language revitalization efforts. A project done in Cumberland House, a First Nations community in northern Saskatchewan, looked at language revival of Cree through integrating Elders into the classroom with a focus on younger grades. (McKay-Carriere, 2009), and showed successes and promise of this approach.

Another McDowell Foundation report entitled Asokan (The Bridge): Teachers’ Work with Elders (Goulet et al., 2009), took place in Regina schools to implement an Elders-in-residence program to schools with non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students, and provided recommendations for program establishment and reflections from teachers on the impact in the classroom. A follow-up report, OCHAPAN: Perspectives of Elders and Students on the Elders-in-Residence Program (2009), focused on Elder-student interactions, and found that stories are a useful teaching tool when sharing traditional knowledge (Fayant et al., 2010, p. 11). Their focus on urban schools off-reserve pointed to benefits for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students from having Elders share teachings and build relationships with students.

Benefits of bringing Elders into classrooms have been described more fully for schools of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, in terms of the ability to build cultural awareness and understanding, or to act as “cultural brokers” (Marker, 1998, p. 3).

We know that connecting generations seems to be the key to retaining vulnerable languages: “To survive, a language must be passed on from one generation to the next” (Norris, 1998, p. 10). The opportunity to integrate Elders and teachings in the classroom, we hoped, would promote the language learning with the assistance of Elders and keepers of the Language.
Our Project: The Research Process

Context: The Land and Place

The community of Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation is located in west-central Saskatchewan, part of Treaty 6 territory. Ahtahkakoop is a community of just over 1,000 residents at the time of the census in 2006. Our community is located near Shell Lake, Saskatchewan, in proximity to Prince Albert. The school in which we based this study serves the entire community and includes grades 7 to 12.

Part of the impetus for this project was findings from the 2006 census which showed the state of loss of our traditional Cree language in the community.

The Team and Participants

The project was a collaboration with community, educators, the entire student body and Elders from our community. Very much at the heart of the project was the involvement and participation of the 21 students enrolled in the Cree 30 class.

The school’s student body is grades 7 to 12 with a focus on Grade 12 students. Twenty-one students are enrolled in the Cree 30 course. The school is situated within the same building as the primary school and we were able to involve these students in some school-wide community days with the Elders as well.

Our group consisted of:

- Nine community Elders.
- Four fluent-speaking Cree teachers from divisions I–IV from our school division.
- One Cree-speaking advisor.
- Four community members.
- Four students who understand the Cree language but who are not fluent in speaking the Cree language.
... that drive to get our language back is it’s here, we need it, it’s something that needs to be re-ignited very quickly or else we are going to lose it. I often tell the kids ‘do we want to be dinosaurs with our language – something to be extinct’ and they’re afraid too. The best way to get that back – get that connection back – is through language. Many cultures throughout the world have lost their language and it shows – they’re lost. Same with us, our kids are lost here. (Video 5)

Methods

Our project began by inviting Elders to our schools. We shared what we wished to do with the project and we obtained consent for their participation following our local protocol and practices to have their involvement as full members of the team. There was an opening day where students shared tea with the Elders.

The project was set up at our school and ensured full involvement from all students. Our Cree teacher worked with her class/classroom, accompanied by the Elder or keeper of the language. The Cree language teacher also monitored and observed the classroom and was fully emerged in the learning.

We also filmed interviews with each of the teachers involved, and had an hour-long interview with one of the Elders who worked with our students.

One of the Elders was comfortable with having the classroom sessions recorded; therefore, these traditional oral stories and student participation were video-recorded, documented and archived for future use. This information has proven invaluable to promoting and revitalizing the Cree language which has been developed and shared with Ahtahkakoop School students.

Students wrote a biography describing the experience and what it meant to them (see appendix A).

The students were assessed using an informal oral test assessment. Anecdotal records were kept on students’ participation, and attendance records were kept, reviewed and analyzed. Feedback from the homeroom teachers, administration and community members were also incorporated. Classroom sessions were filmed with one Elder who was comfortable doing so and these will be used as a resource for future work.

The team discussed classroom observations, and reflected on the ways that Elders taught the students as examples of traditional ways of teaching. Discussions with the team and with the Elders helped shape our analysis and observations.

It is important to note that while we had some language lessons planned, we left the teaching content and methods of the Cree language classroom to the approach of the Elders. Sometimes lessons did not go as planned, but as educators we observed the ways that culture and traditional knowledge were being shared as a way of learning about traditional pedagogy.
Project Findings: Results and Lessons From the Project

Traditional Ways of Teaching: Reconnecting to Traditional Pedagogy or Ways of Teaching

This project about reclaiming our culture through learning Cree language was also about a traditional way of teaching: through stories, sacred stories and traditional teaching methods such as modeling Miller describes traditional Indigenous ways of learning, broadly, as “through storytelling and rested on a belief system that the eldest in the community had the wisdom to offer and they were to be listened to with respect” (Schissel & Wortherspoon, p. 40). Others have echoed the importance of stories and storytelling. Priscilla Settee (2013) states that “storytelling is an important aspect of Indigenous knowledge as it embodies life’s lessons and shows how knowledge is transmitted to all. Stories are the cornerstone of our cultures and need to be an essential part of learning to ensure cultural survival” (p. 56). Settee’s work describing Indigenous knowledge systems around the world raises its importance to our classrooms and the way we teach.

Traditional First Nations teaching methods reflect a holistic approach to human development. In the process, the individual makes choices and decisions with the guidance of immediate and extended family members (The Gift of Language and Culture Project, Instructional Curriculum, p. 20).

It was anticipated that our project would incorporate traditional First Nations teaching methods, such as having Elders and keepers of the language share teepee teachings while engaging in oral traditions.

The project enabled opportunities to interact with peers and adults in a traditional fashion. Community celebrations or activities were planned and attended by both the community and school population.

During the Elder classroom visits, the teachers and research team witnessed the traditional
methods of learning, or pedagogy, of learning through observation, discussion, practice and hands-on activities. Students experienced traditional teachings through stories of creation, and spirituality; of recollections; of our community’s history:

And they’re such, they’re so educated like in their own way. I learned so much. I learned more from doing this than all of my master’s and everything that I’ve ever done. This has taught me the most, like how to be a better educator and how to work and find what we need for our students. (Video 5)

The pedagogical approach to language and culture revitalization was through sharing of stories, recollections and wisdom of the Elder who came to the Cree 30 class with the students. The importance of the range of stories, not just sacred but also those of community history and personal reflections is part of the way of supporting and forming cultural identity.

... he prayed by himself. And I asked him ‘where did he learn that?’ He said from Mr. Joseph. Those connections we made with the Elders when we brought them in to speak and tell those stories. That’s ours now; it’s in the book it’s in the CD. Those are memories that they’ll take forever. They might not remember what they did in science … . (Video 5)

I noticed that the students were really … impressed – wow you can speak the language, you know the history and then you can write the words - because I’m texting – I get texts from people who can speak Cree. (Video 4)

**Storytelling in the Classroom**

In the classroom, the Elders incorporated legends, stories, recollections and information about customs such as name-giving. This not only helps to teach the language but also serves to revive customs. Lanigan (1998) describes how stories can be integrated across the curriculum, but specifically mentions how stories can be pedagogical: “it is through cultural stories that children learn how they fit in their world” (p.107). She speaks of the work of another scholar, Verral (1988), who suggests, “it is these sacred stories of First Nations peoples that provide insight into relationships through the understanding and appreciation of life and culture, (Lanigan,1998 p.107).

Some of the content went outside of the teaching plan, but it resulted in a high level of student interest and engagement in what was being shared. During the [five consecutive] Cree classroom sessions with the Elder, we witnessed our students active, excited, and fully immersed in the learning. We reflected with this in an interview with one of the Elders with the project, how excited the kids were to have the Elders come back: “… they wanted more Cree speakers, not just a teacher, they wanted the Elders to come in and teach them words so that they can make that connection” (Video 4).

Students became less shy and were more willing to ask questions, about the stories, the customs and the language.
In discussions with the teachers, some of which were recorded as interviews, one of the Elders shared his perspectives on traditional ways of teaching and learning from his own recollections. He talked about as a boy having to sit and listen to stories: “when I was young … I would wonder what am I being made to sit here for.”

... We’re lacking in a lot of old history. These old sacred stories I’m talking about, I just take it for granted that people know them when I go someplace. And here they don’t; they’ve never heard of them. (Video 4)

“But that, the oral tradition and sacred stories, that there is meaning behind these stories, and that these have been lost” (Video 4). The Elder also shared that for many of these stories, it is about teaching good and proper behaviour, for people and for young people. “… There’s always meanings behind, reasons behind, the whole stories. It’s got – a lot of it is behaviour for young people – for people” (Video 4).

The Elder we interviewed also spoke about his approach: that speaking English to the students, and then explaining and writing out in Cree was much more effective than just an immersive approach, in part because of how disconnected the young people have been to the culture. “Some people say it’s not the way to do it, but you have to do it with the students because they are so disconnected with the past as they grew up. I’ve heard bits and pieces, if they’re lucky they’ve heard a bit more” (Video 4).

It’s encouragement; part of their schooling. And you’ve got to not just do it once – give them a word or two a day or three a day. You’ve got to come back and re-instill in them. (Video 4)

Understanding the students holistically was expressed in recognizing how the young people are wanting identity “It’s a lot of today’s – a lot of young people are wanting identity.” (Video 4)

The loss of community history was also apparent and is an interest to be reconnected with. The Elder spoke at length about the process of the treaties, and of Chief Ahtahkakoop and the suppression of traditional cultural practices:

Ahtahkakoop’s direct descendants are – his youngest boy left here because he wasn’t happy with the – Ahtahkakoop was trying to move into the future. He used his old ways all that time but now that treaty was here and the church, the school … so anyone wanting to do ceremonies, they burned a bunch of pipes and bundles … . (Video 4)

The church boss, I forget – must have been Hinds – with Indian affairs, they went around RCMP Indian affairs with houses, tee pees, and gathered bundles of sacred stuff …. (Video 4)

They’d go to the edge of the reserve over here where Chilo lives on the outskirts or whatever. And that’s where they’d do their dances. (Video 4)
Kinship, Relations and Relating to Each Other

One of the first days recorded was describing how to refer to your kin in Cree and how traditional family relations are thought of. The Elder taught the students that your father's brother is your “little father,” for example, and that respect underlies everything. Explaining the translation of your mother-in-law and father-in-law in English, he explained, is “out of respect.” The Elder shared why this is the term for this relation and traditional ways of relating to your kin this way:

... Nimanachi Makanak ... that means your in-laws. But that’s the word again with ... respect ... you always respect your in-laws. ... you always respect your in-laws. But your mother-in-law is directly ... you treat them with respect. And directly your husband’s mother ... and over here – Nisis – my father-in-law. And why that is, is because you have so much respect that you don’t really talk to your uncles so much, or your father-in-law because you have so much respect. You don’t talk to them, really, out of respect for them. For the man, likewise – doesn’t talk to his mother-in-law, out of respect. Even if they were to go into a teepee long ago with the mother I there, the son-in-law would ... just load the teepee. Out of respect. (Video 2A)

Our relationship, kinship, is in our history. Being respectful – always. (Video 2A)

The term “out of respect” to refer to in-laws, is both a way of describing relations, but also how to behave. He emphasized how the language is wholly respectful. It speaks to a loss and gap in teachings, which would have been passed down through families, and the Elders and teachers spoke about this.

Origins and Identity

Sharing where we come from as a people meant both sacred stories of creation (Video 1) and history of the community, treaties, the leaders and what happened. Some personal histories related to colonial government practices. One of the elders shared that his family did not allow him to attend residential schools, but that he heard stories.

Pride in identity was also shared and encouraged by the Elders. One of the first lessons shared in the classroom by one of the Elders was the meaning of Cree people in the traditional Cree language: “nehiyaw” which means “exact people, or person, perfect people” (Video 1, paraphrased). He tells the students they were chosen to be born here at Ahtahkakoop land (Video 1).

Customs

In the classroom sessions, student engagement increased during the times they met with the Elders, and students would ask questions about words, the language, stories and customs. One student specifically was interested in traditional Cree-naming customs and wanted to know how one of the Elders named his grandchildren. He is asked by a girl in
the class, “How do you name a kid with an Indian name? – If I wanted to name my baby … and didn’t have a dream?” (Video 2B).

So why can’t we have our own names and be proud of it? You can have your Cree name, you can have your English name … but we have to move, have to transition to have our own names for our children and grandchildren. (Video 2B)

How did you get your kids’ names … I’ll tell you a story – stories. … Because I want to know. (Video 2B)

**Spirituality, Ceremony and Language**

One of the teachings from the Elder shared in the interview was how related practices, ceremony and the language are. He emphasized the difference in the type of Cree spoken; namely, that the words used in some ceremonies is an old Cree that regular speakers might not know about. However, that has a direct connection to the practice and ceremony. He described that with performing the dances comes the culture and the language.

... Thunderbird dance, and the Sundance ... the Sundance is recent, it's really recent – compared to all these other dances. But with these dances comes culture and the language ... just like for instance ... just like the Thunderbird dance – right there, there’s some words that you’ll never hear in plain Cree. (Video 4)

We saw the Elder model a kind of lived spirituality and familiarity with traditional customs. He shared with the students how he had a dream that predicted the birth of his daughter. “An old man with white braids came to me in my dream and had a little bundle, and that old man said to me in my dreams – and said – ‘this is my grandchild. I’m giving her to you – look after her’” (Video 2B).

**Reconnecting to the Land**

The land was described in terms of its history and connection to community, and for traditional kinds of practices. Elder Ahenakew spoke about learning place names, in nature, is the way they traditionally learned the language.

Through recollections and stories, and conversations with teachers, the Elder shared about the importance of being out in the land, and taking part in the way of life as a way to keep the language. Stewardship of the land, or rather, interconnectedness to the land, and traditional ways of understanding this relationship were shared through personal reflections and customs.
Additional Reflections From the Elder on Learning Language

In our shared discussions with one of the Elders, he shared other ideas for how to support language learning. He recommended learning language through music and drumming; music slows down the language and you can learn with little effort.

There's young people now that don't know how to speak their language, but because they sit at their drums, they know these words … then meanings … learning their language by the words songs. (Video 4)

He talked about ways to encourage our students to learn Cree: about learning just a word a day, will help bring back the language (Video 5) “a word a day, two, three words a day … you’ll have 3,656 words in a year, two years you’ll have double that.” (Video 4)
Final Reflections

It’s important to highlight how this project was really student-driven.

It was really simple. It wasn’t long because we thought the kids aren’t really going to say a whole lot with a long question here, so it was really short and concise and it captured those major concepts or components of the survey. (Video 5)

Based on the results of the take-home survey, on language spoken at home and the desire to bring in Elders, we moved forward with this project. We could see the excitement in the student engagement.

One thing the students noticed was the diversity of cultural beliefs within their own Cree community; the Elders who worked with the students would share different ways of understanding.

Students reflected on the course content and experience in biographies following the sessions with the Elder. Many discussed specific teachings and stories told by the classroom Elder. Most spoke positively about their language and culture, and the importance of retaining this.

What We Learned About Language, Culture and Identity

Part of the work of this project was also building learning as educators and building relationships with Elders in the community. Through learning these sacred stories, we are connecting with our culture.

In an interview between the team, including teachers and the Elder, he talks about young people wanting identity, and the impacts and intertwined effects of language and culture loss:

Kill the language, kill the people, kill the culture; they managed to do that, but slowly, slowly ... just with the plain language, the historical stories, sacred stories ... hold on to their language, hold on to their culture, hold on to the ... rights of the people, human rights and treaty rights. You need all of those, you have to have those. (Video 4)
The Elder’s reflections on language loss in the community and their interconnectedness to human rights are a powerful reminder to the role of the language and culture project.

Others have written about how language and culture relate. Cree scholar Willie Ermine (1998) in his work about Indigenous ways of understanding knowledge and ethics, writes about an interview with Elder Mary Ermine, his mother in kinship. One of the lessons he gleans from her is that language and identity are intertwined: “the ethos and how the language of the community needs to be transferred to the younger people as part of ethos continuity. Loss of language creates the danger of loss of identity” (Ermine, 1998, p. 21). Others, such as Norris (1998), have written on the significance of language to culture and worldview: “Language is one of the most tangible symbols of culture and group identity. It is not only a means of communication, but a link which connects people with their past and grounds their social, emotional and spiritual vitality … (Norris, M. J., 1998, p. 8). Our unanticipated findings with our students’ re-connection with their Cree identity fit in to these observations.

Project Challenges and Lessons

We observed that when students are engaged they ask questions about topics not planned. The Elder respects their ways of learning. Our Elders were our teachers years ago. It is an old method of learning and a traditional method incorporated by the Elders. An Elder is very knowledgeable about the old teaching methods and they were “student centred.” This is a prime example of differentiated instruction and hands-on learning, and is what we as a people need to go back to learning, practicing and engaging to help our Cree language survive.

One of the unexpected results from the project was the spiritual growth witnessed through opportunities for students to learn about sacred stories, and ask questions about their culture and identity. The sharing of traditional stories by our Elder has helped students to learn more about culture and identity. We have come to a conclusion that, without language, we have no culture.

There were some unexpected challenges too in our efforts and interest to revive both our Cree language and culture. One of these was how much spirituality is embedded in the language, and in bringing back customs and traditions. This came into some tension with the predominantly Christian community in our First Nation.

What we saw, though, was the student-centred way of teaching that the Elder modeled.
Closing

What began as a project to build traditional language skills and culture, grew and evolved in ways that were unexpected and wonderful. Part of the purpose of this work was to integrate Cree language and culture into the curriculum. During the project, this happened in the Cree 30 language class. There was a difference though in how the approach went from traditional language learning classes.

The students and the positive growth they showed in this work has inspired us to continue building Cree language through Elder involvement in the classroom.

This is not the first research project to engage with Elders as part of language and cultural practice, but our project was unique to our school and context, and to high school students learning Cree. It truly became a community and cultural-building exercise: “to once again regain our culture, our identity, and our language. We will rise as a strong and thriving nation, we will be proud people” (Elder quote from original report).

We hope that this project can inspire other educators, schools and communities to revitalize their own language and in doing so, revive customs, teachings, and traditional ways of learning and seeing the world.

We can and will revive our language by having people work together as a community, along with our Elders, our schools, our teachers and our students to once again regain our culture, our identity and our language. We will rise as a strong and thriving nation; we will be proud people!

Cree is Culture,
Respect yourself,
By respecting others,
Than you,
Respect yourself!
To understand your Cree language,
Is to understand humanity!
Elder Barry Ahenakew (December 8, 2014)
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Student Biographies

Brent Lawrence Ahenakew

My name is Brent Lawrence Ahenakew. I was born at the University Hospital in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. I’m a little person or what you can call a “dwarf.” I’m 18 years old from Ahtahkakoop First Nation. I’m currently in Grade 12 and hoping to graduate. I’m the youngest of four kids. I have one brother and two sisters. Their names are Jordan, Hannah and Hilary. In my life there are some struggles like trying to fit in a world that isn’t made for you but I’m making the most of it. I have the best loving, caring parents who I’m so blessed and thankful for. I’m happy for having good people in my life that helped me and believed in me. My favourite sports are hockey, soccer and volleyball.

On my own time I like to sing, travel to round dances and pow wows. I like learning who I am as a First Nation person, where I come from and learning about my own Cree culture. I have some family that know how to speak Cree well and I am learning my own language and practicing to speak it too!

What I have learned from Elder Barry Ahenakew during his presentations was how God flipped the earth and made all living things such as man and women, animals and plants. He said the first man walked the earth for one whole year then later started discovering animals and understanding them. The man wanted what the animals had, he wanted a wife and kids so he looked up into the sky and started asking for what the animals had. Then God answered him and made women and told him he will give him women as long as they take care of the earth.

My goals in life are to live life to the fullest and be proud of the things I have accomplished in the now and in the future.
Cole Devin Ahenakew

My name is Cole Ahenakew. I’m from Ahtahkakoop First Nation. I’m 17 years old and was born in Saskatoon. I’m very proud to say that I’m graduating this year and my parents Eric Ahenakew and Ruth (Dorothy) Ahenakew have been very supportive throughout the years I’ve been attending here. I have one brother and two sisters. Their names are Destiny, Shaquille and Jolene. I am one of the middle children in the family and do not care much for attention, but enjoy the company of having my family around. I have joined athletics inside and outside of school. I have also made the Celtic team in Prince Albert. During the summer I gave it a shot at the Native American Indigenous Games and made it but due to a serious muscle tear I could not attend and became very determined to succeed in my future goals; I also took the high interest of becoming a boxer. I started boxing when I was 14 years old and won my first golden gloves trophy in my division. After my incident with my muscle injury I started boxing again and I’m now going for the golden gloves championship once again in Prince Albert with high hopes and I am determined to take home the trophy in my division once again.

In my family’s culture we speak Cree, we had not taken much interest in the language and my grandma is the one person who I know of who speaks the language fluently and my parents do not speak it. Over time they began to understand it. My dad tries to keep the culture in us by taking me to sweats in the summer and teaching us how to make sweet grass. On the days off of work he often makes dream catchers and sells them to stores in the cities. Like I said my family does not take much interest in the culture like we used to, but we still try keep it in the family as much as we can.

During the presentations I learned the creation story in a different perspective and in the native way everything began differently.

Daphne Starblanket

Hi, my name is Daphne Cole Starblanket. I am currently 19 years old. My favourite color is black, you may have noticed. I love music and art like drawing and painting. I love spending time with my family and my love, Chad.

I am also attending high school Grade 12 at the moment. After I’m finished school I would like to become an early childhood educator or a professional cook. The reason why I had chosen these two careers is because I think that they would become very helpful to me in the future.

I am from the Ahtahkakoop First Nation reserve. I was born in Prince Albert, Victoria Hospital. My parents are Wanda Starblanket and Ronald Moccasin. I have six siblings; my three older siblings are: Ronald, Phyllis and Sarah. My three younger siblings are Miranda, Clint and our youngest little sister is Dorothy. And my lovely grandparents are Allan and Dorothy Starblanket.

I come from a huge family!
Brooklyn Rayleen Genereaux

My name is Brooklyn Raeleen Genereaux. I was born in Prince Albert hospital. I am the daughter of (deceased) Dorothy Genereaux and Aubrey Bird. My mom’s parents are Rosalie Genereaux and Gordon Genereaux, my dad’s parents are Olive Bird and George Bird. I have eight siblings all together and I am the third oldest. I’ve lived in Ahtahkakoop First Nation all my life and my beliefs are mainly set on my Cree culture.

During the presentation of Elder Barry Ahenakew I became interested in the creation story and how everything came to life. I have learnt that the world was flipped long time ago, and the first man roamed the earth for over a year and realized he was able to communicate with the animals. He realized that all the animals he had spoken to had their own companion and he did not. So he begged to the Creator that he was alone and wanted someone to spend his time with. The Creator took a part of his left rib and grabbed some dust, and he made a woman companion for the man who was alone. After all that happened, they ended up eating a berry from the good and bad tree. Right from there everything went bad and the first death came into play. First Nations people have been ruled over by the white man ways. The First Nation’s people had this land first, then suddenly they had no choice but to sign over the land. When all that was happening we started to lose our Cree culture, our buffalo and our identity. A lot of our people today are traumatized and try not to even talk about our Cree culture because it left a scar on them.

I think that it is important to listen to the stories and elders because we are losing our way of life. Elders will be gone (passed on) and we will hand what we have learnt down to the next generation.

Devin Wade Bailey

My name is Devin Bailey; I am 21 years old. I was born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. My favorite hobbies since grade 5 or 6 were trying to play good hockey. So my goal was to learn how to play the game right by a young age. By the age of 14 years old I was so good I always played on the ice because my team needed me to score the goals. From about 16 to 17 years old I started learning to have fun with other sports like soccer and broomball.

During Elder Barry Ahenakew’s presentation I learned about the teepee teachings and all the meanings of the poles. I learned how the creator made man and woman and about our Cree culture and our own history of how it was back then. It was something really good for us to know. My personal goal is to be the chief of Ahtahkakoop First Nation. It is something to look forward to. If I try when I am older I could make a lot of changes for our community. Someone like me could make a change for the better and for our youth now.

“Life is too short to worry about stupid things. Have fun. Fall in love. Regret nothing, and Don’t let people Bring You Down.”
Lorissa Thomas

My name is Lorissa Thomas; I am 17 years old. I was born in Spiritwood, Saskatchewan. I am the fourth oldest of all 12 of my siblings. I live on the Ahtahkakoop First Nation reserve with my parents Dionne and Howard Thomas. I am enrolled at the Ahtahkakoop high school and I am currently in Grade 12.

During the time Elder Barry Ahenakew was presenting I learned about how the earth and the first man came about. I learned about the teepee teaching and how all the poles have a meaning to them. I learned about the very first death and how that had happened. I learned a lot during his presentations and I enjoyed it.

My personal goal when I graduate is to get out of this reserve, move to Saskatoon and get a higher education!

“You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take. So like Nike, Just Do It. Accomplish all that you can and don’t back down!”

Constance Chickosis

I’m 21 years old I and live in Sandy Lake. I was blessed with two beautiful children. Demarkus Kayne Luther Ahenakew is 18 months and Miya Faith Irene Ahenakew is four months old. I’m currently attending Grade 12 and plan to attend university.

When I was younger my kokum raised me very traditional. I attended sundances, feasts, horse dances, round dances, pow wows and always went to sweats. I learned so much about our culture from so many Elders.

I learned to have respect for Elders, not just Elders, but everybody. I went to a sweat with an Elder and 10 other kids and we all got our Cree names and our colours.

My Cree name is Lying Eagles and my colours are blue and whites and that was the best experience I had.

Nikkita Shaquille Chickosis

My name is Nikkita Chickosis. I’m from Red Pheasant First Nation. I’m the fourth oldest out of my family. My late mother is Edna Johnson my dad is Garry Frenchman. My dad is from Thunder Child First Nation and my mom is from Red Pheasant First Nation.

I lost my identity for a while when I was growing up; never forget your identity. It’s so important to you.

Having kinship in your life is a basic need. I have kinship in my family and we love each other.
Crystal Sarphwassum

My name is Crystal Sarphwassum. I am 17 years old and am currently living on the Ahtahkakoop First Nation reserve. I was born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan to my mother Sandra Sarphwassum and my father Warren Gunn. I was raised semi-traditional for the majority of my childhood, but I never had a good understanding of traditional ways. My personal goals are to be more respectful towards everyone around me.

During Elder Barry Ahenakew’s presentation I had learned a lot about the background history of tradition and culture. I had learned that you’re supposed to have different types of respect towards different people. Some words of wisdom are that you should have respect for everyone around you and that we are all the same so don’t think that you are better than anyone. Language and culture are important to learn in order to keep the culture alive and the traditions for generations to come.

Tanner Ahenakew

My name is Tanner Ahenakew and I am 20 years old. I was born in Shellbrook, Saskatchewan. I live on the Ahtahkakoop First Nation. I am currently a student and attend school at the Ahtahkakoop High School. When I graduate from high school I plan on going to university to get a degree in music.

My family consists of my grandparents, Burton and Gloria Ahenakew, Andrew and Darlene Bird and my parents, Ben Ahenakew and Lori Bird. My brothers and sisters are: Wade Little, Brett Little, Tasha Bird, Tonya Bird, Tamra Bird and Tess McAdam.

The presentations have taught me about the importance of kinship and respect, the importance of my identity and the importance of the teepee teachings.

Neeko Bird

My name is Neeko Bird. I am 18 years old and I am currently living on the Ahtahkakoop First Nation. I was born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. My parents are Brett Bird and Marylin Sasakamoose. My personal goals were to respect all my Elders and everyone around me. I also want to be a role model for youth by completing my Grade 12 education.

Barry Ahenakew inspired me to further my education and he also gave me knowledge of the Nehiyaw people. I learned a lot about my background history and my culture. The most important part is respect. We are supposed to respect in different ways to different things and people. Some words of wisdom are you should respect everyone around you and that we are all the same, no one is better than another person. Language and culture are important to learn, in order to keep our culture alive. We need to keep our traditions alive for generations and generations to come.
Kylee Drew Peekeekoot

My name is Kylee Drew Peekeekoot. I am a 17-year-old, athletic, smart, Grade 12 student living on the Ahtahkakoop First Nation. I was born in the Victoria Hospital to two amazing people I am lucky enough to call my parents. I am currently living on the reserve and I will be graduating in June.

I have a very loving, close-knit family. I live with my parents and my two siblings on a farm close to the east side of the reserve. My mom, Dianne, is working at the school as a mentor. My dad, Dallas, currently isn’t working but he keeps busy with the cattle on the farm. My two younger siblings, Dallyn and Krissa, are both still enrolled in school.

I found Barry Ahenakew’s presentation interesting and informative. From the presentation, I learnt new Cree words that I didn’t know before and I have a better understanding about the teepee teachings and the creation story.

Some of my goals are finishing high school, finding a job for the summer and attending university or college. I am not sure what I want to get into yet, but I know I will be moving to Saskatoon and going to school there. As nervous as I am, I am also excited to be starting a new life on my own.

Autumn Aston Raine Andrews

Hello, my name us Autumn Aston Rayne Andrews. I am from Sturgeon Lake First Nation. I am now 17 years old and in Grade 11. I currently live in Ahtahkakoop First Nation with my mother. She is employed at the school as an elementary teacher. I plan on graduating at Ahtahkakoop High School and pursuing a career in law, but I am not 100 percent sure what I am want to be when I am done school. My mother is Ramona Badger and my father’s name is Bradley George Crane. I have two younger brothers and their names are Bradson, Crain and Anton Andrew.
Caitlyn Badger

My name is Caitlyn Badger originally from Mistawasis First Nation, residing in Ahtahkakoop First Nation. I was born at the Victoria Hospital In Prince Albert. My parents are Carol Little and Dwayne Badger (deceased). I have two beautiful daughters named Kayleigh and Karter. I also have three siblings: one brother and two sisters.

During Barry Ahenakew's presentation I have learnt that there are 15 tipi poles that each represent a virtue in life. How 13 of the poles each represented each moon of the year during each month even though there is only 12 months and the two being the flaps. He taught us students that the first man who walked the earth was named Askiwiyan. The body was made up of three parts which was the body (miyaw), spirit (achak) and the brain (miyitip). Barry had taught us a lot about the way it went long ago from getting food, walking from place to place, the thunderbirds being the lightening and thunder, how snakes were made, betrayal, loneliness, loving and how family was made for the first man.

Importance of our language is that our language and culture are connected with each other which is inseparable. Without the language, the culture won’t remain and will disappear with the language. Words mean more in our Cree language than English and also have more meanings to it than just one. The generation now barely knows the Cree language which we should as we are the ones who the Elders are depending on to retain the Cree language as to why we should learn and listen to keep it going.

My personal goals this year are to be the best mother I can be to the two beautiful daughters I was blessed with, to be and stay strong as well as positive throughout everything even though it’s hard at times. One of my big goals this year is to graduate high school! Also to get my oldest daughter into dancing at powwows, to accomplish more than I think I can and taking a trip somewhere far. Smallest yet the biggest goal this year would definitely have to be being the best mother and to raise my daughters with their father, putting aside everything for their sake and making their life better than ours with more happiness and joy in their everyday life.
Isabelle Araine Ahenakew

My name is Isabelle Ahenakew and I am a Jehovah's Witness which is a great pleasure being known by. My favourite type of recreation is reading and writing stories of fanfictions on Watt pad and my favorite colour is orange, because orange is such a bright cheery colour!

I have learned many things from the presentation of Elder Barry Ahenakew: the value of speaking Cree and it brings back a part of our traditions. I have learned the origins of our people, but I do not necessarily have to believe every single thing. I have learned many Cree words which I greatly appreciate because I want to learn Cree words which will greatly inspire me to help speak Cree to those in the ministry and the importance of identity.

The importance of culture and language is to be happy for who we are as a person and people. I really enjoy listening to those who speak in Cree, and hopefully I will learn to really understand most of what is said. I am very glad to be a Plains Native because it brings back the world of which we are and that we shouldn't be forgotten. Language is culture and culture is language, so I am striving to learn to speak Cree. There are so many things that make up our culture and I am glad to be part of it.

My personal goal is to be a regular pioneer in the ministry and to live in Prince Albert to further the Cree group or Cree congregation and learn to speak and hear Cree.

My words of wisdom are: “Please do not do drugs or alcohol.”

Jessica Chantel Bird

My name is Jessica Chantel Bird. I was born at St. Paul's hospital in Saskatoon. I am 20 years old and attend Ahtahkakoop school. I'm going to graduate this year. I lived in Ahtahkakoop First Nation all my life. I have a handsome baby boy who is 16 months old. His name is Rickell George Bird.

What I have learned in the sessions of Barry Ahenakew's presentations was about the beginning of the world. He told me that the earth was flipped 48 million years ago, and how the creator made man with just the body and spirit, and a little while later he made the brain. The man roamed the earth for over a year and realized he was able to communicate with the animals. He realized that all the animals he had spoken to had their own companion and he didn’t. So he begged to the Creator that he was alone and wanted someone to spend his time with. The Creator took a part of his left rib and grabbed some dust, and he made a woman companion for the man who was alone.
Jonathan McAdam

My name is Jonathon McAdam, I am 18 years old and I was raised in Ahtahkakoop First Nation and Prince Albert. I live with my grandpa Henry Little; it’s just the two of us. I help my grandpa out with work from time to time when he needs it because he is getting old, and I know work is going to be hard for him pretty soon and I know I’m going to have to take his place making money so that’s why I’m planning on finishing school this year.

I’ve learned a lot from presentations, they always have visitors here at Ahtahkakoop School coming here to give presentations they give us a little taste of how it feels to be successful so we can chase it and achieve success.

The importance of culture and language is language is arguably the most important component of culture because much of the rest of it is normally transmitted orally. It is impossible to understand the deep meanings of another culture without knowing its language well. Language is an important part of our lives. It is a uniquely human gift which lets us communicate and differentiates us from others. But language is much more than just a means of communication. It is also an inseparable part of our culture. When the culture changes, so does the language.

My personal goals are to graduate and finish high school and get a good-paying job to buy a house and a car for a better future and hopefully change my life for the better.

“Happiness and freedom begin with a clear understanding of one’s principle. Some things are within your control. And some things are not.” – Epictetus
Miranda Badger

My name is Miranda Mae Badger. I am 17 years old and I was born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan at Victoria Hospital. I am registered in Mistawasis First Nations, and currently living in Ahtahkakoop First Nation. My parents are Carol Little and deceased Dwayne Badger. I have two older sisters, named Teala Ahenakew and Caitlyn Badger. I have one brother, his name is Scott Ahenakew. My siblings are older than me. I also have three nieces and nephews.

On Barry Ahenakew’s presentation I learnt why there were 13 tipi poles, because there are 13 full moons each year. Each tipi pole represents the full moons of the year. Now there are 15 tipi poles about virtues in life. He taught students how there became more people on this earth. How they took a piece of the first guy on earth’s rib bone to make another human being, so they can make a family and so on.

The importance of our language and culture is to not losing our rights of treaty and to carry on our culture and language so we don’t lose it in the future. Once it’s lost we won’t be able to get our language and culture back. That’s why our generation should carry it down to the next generation. When Elders try teaching you our language and Cree, you should listen.

My personal goals are: to graduate this year; go to the University of Saskatchewan; take the social work course; and to dance traditional at powwows, to dance for the people. Those are my goals so far and to make my family proud!!

“Take pride in how far you have come & have faith in how far you can go!”
Appendix B: **Traditional Languages**

On First Nation website, citing Statistics Canada 2006 – original report.

**Current Statistics by 2006 Statistics Canada Census**

- 2006 Population: 1,101
- 2001 Population: 1,099
- Population Increase: 0.2%
- Land Area (square km): 177.10
- Population Density (per square km): 6.2
- Total Private Dwellings: 321
- Total Population 15 years and older: 705
- Knowledge of Aboriginal Language: 37.4%

Language characteristics: Ahtahkakoop
### Languages characteristics

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** This refers to knowledge of the official language(s).

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** Date Modified: 2014-08-26**
