

Project 272

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# The Journey to Reclamation Through Oral Tradition

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# Table of Contents

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Acknowledgements ..... 1

Background ..... 2

Student Work ..... 4

Final Reflections ..... 6

Appendices ..... 7

# Acknowledgements

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

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 our Elders Tim and Lorette Peekeekoot for their insight and guidance throughout the project.

# Background

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One of the most important parts about learning to live off the land is to be able to prepare the food you are able to trap, hunt, or fish. The students learned how to clean and cook wild meat with our Elder Lorette. She taught them in a way that they used everything from the animal, wasting nothing. Lorette gave instructions in Cree and English and told stories about the animals.

Every week, the Land Based room had a traditional foods lunch sale where students helped our Elder prepare and cook food for the school. With hands-on learning, the Cree words and phrases were easier to retain. The Cree language is connected to the land in many ways, so it's natural to teach both at the same time to our youth.

One of the most important parts of this land-based learning project is being on the land. It is what the whole program was about in a way. Our Elder Tim relayed his knowledge of the land to the students in a classroom setting, then we all applied what we learned on the land. In recent months, we had the opportunity to go ice fishing, camping, and even hunting. As we were on the land practicing survival skills, our Elder Tim reminded us of the Cree words important to the task at hand. He often gave us the instructions in Cree, then in English.

During our time camping, we also had a chance to learn from the national park rangers about the local wildlife and unique wild buffalo that roam the national park and areas surrounding. After learning about the fish net, we took different classes on the lake and learned how to ice fish with a net.

The beat of the drum is a very important symbol for our people. It represents the first sound we hear as babies, the beat of our mother's heart in the womb. It also represents the heartbeat of our Mother Earth, and the song of every nation. The rhythm is what binds us together as people on our planet.

Mr. Keenatch often had drumming classes, sometimes on the hand drum, other times together on the powwow drum. He used the opportunity to share some Cree words and phrases regarding the drum, and its teachings. The powwow drum also helped the children develop team building skills, as they worked together to beat the drum in unison and on time.

"Canada's Aboriginal languages are many and diverse, and their importance to Indigenous people immense. 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.: Canadian Social Trends, Winter 1998, p. 8)

One of the strongest links we have as a nation is our ceremonies. They go as far back as our language, and they go hand in hand with our language. We had the opportunity to go to our Elder Tim's sweat lodge and participate in one of our oldest ceremonies. We learned the Cree words about the sweat. Our Elder prayed and sang songs in Cree.

A ceremony can be as simple as smudging with sweetgrass or sage. Our Elders made sure to explain the importance of our medicines, and where to find them. The students were taught the importance these medicines had for our ancestors.

The days we had crafting in the class were good opportunities for the students to learn a practical skill, but it was also a great time to share stories and teachings. While the students were busy with their projects, our Elders would share Cree stories/history.

The teachers also incorporated legends, stories, recollections, and information about customs such as name giving which not only helped teach the language, but also served to revive customs.

Traditional First Nations teaching through storytelling, legends, or ordinary stories, can enhance contemporary educational methods, not only in the teaching of First Nations languages, but also to preserve the encoded "cultural memory" within the stories.

**This executive summary is part of a video report that can be found here:**

**<https://youtu.be/DJeBSKBjUpA>**

# Student Work

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**Nikki Sasakamoose**

We cooked soup for the Elders and the teachers. I got to know a lot of our culture. Lorette taught me how to make a dancing dress for powwow's, so that was cool. But I had a lot while I was with Lorette. Because of Lorette, I know how to sew really good!

kaskikwâsowin  
(to sew)

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**Marshall Thomas**

We learn how to make dreamcatchers and how to cut the deer. Lorette showed us how to make bannock and make soup. Tim told us a story about how to survive in the bush for 3 days and how to pick sweetgrass. I learned how to play the drum and what it means.

wîhkaskwa  
(sweetgrass)

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**Kyron Peekeekoot**

Me, Tim and Fate went to go get medicine water for the sweat ceremony. We had a sweat in the sweat lodge. Tim taught us about the bear, maskwa. We went with Tim to go get supplies for the land based learning room. I remember putting the net into the lake to catch lots of fish. Tim also took us to the trap line to find muskrats that were trapped. We played drums. Tim showed us a lot of animals.

Nanaskimon  
(I am grateful)

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**Bodan Peekeekoot**

I learned about dreamcatchers. Dreamcatchers take all the bad spirits so we won't be given bad dreams. Bad spirits can't get through the hole. Tim taught me how to make grease bannock, moose meat, deer meat, rabbit soup, and prairie chicken soup. Tim taught us how to live in the wild and taught us how to make a teepee.

**Mīcimāpoy  
(soup)**

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**Jaryd Gunn**

I live in Ahtahkakoop First Nation, and I'm 12 years old. I like moose meat! Our tradition we learn every day is how to dance and learning Cree. It is important to learn off the land and to learn how to hunt on the land. We as First Nations, we make medicine from plants. We respect the Elders We can trade for things.

**Maskihkīy  
(medicine)**

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**Kreasha Isbister**

We learned to make moccasins in the Land Based Learning room, and also learned how to make drum sticks. Tim was also the one who showed us how to make a drum. Tim also told us stories about when he goes hunting. He told us that when a bird goes on a tree and a predator is near by, the bird will fly away, and that's how he knows a predator is near.

**Machi  
(Hunting)**

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# Final Reflections

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What is the impact on students to have Elders offer Cree teachings on language, culture, and tradition in the classroom?

We surveyed students from grades 4 to 6, and during the six-month period between the two surveys, we noticed positive numbers in a number of different areas. Such as:

- An increase in interest in practicing Cree traditions at home and outside of school.
- An increase in enjoyment learning Cree in the classroom.

In the survey, we asked the students to offer suggestions and comments about the Cree program in the school. Here is a selection of their thoughts and ideas:

- Offer Cree classes for kids after school.
- Listen to Cree songs and make our own.
- Learn some jokes in Cree.
- We learn faster when we play games and sing songs.
- More Elders.
- More tickets if we speak Cree (incentives).
- I love my Cree teacher.
- I like Cree better than gym.
- I love Cree.
- My uncles teach me Cree.

Judging from the surveys, having the Elders involved with the Cree program has had a very positive impact on the students. Going beyond the surveys, the memories the students have made experiencing Cree so closely tied with their traditions, will be memories they will always have. It is a fresh way to teach Cree in the curriculum, but conversely, for our people, this has always been the way to learn. From our first teachers – our Elders.

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**Ahtakakoop Cree Nation**

**“Let us not think of ourselves but of our children’s children. Let us show our wisdom by choosing the right path while we yet have a choice.”**

**-Ahtakakoop**

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# Appendices

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## Appendix 1:

See our full video report series on YouTube at: <https://youtu.be/DJeBSKBjUpA>



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