



Manitoba Aboriginal Languages Strategy Survey

Highlights

2015-2016

MAALS



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Background

As cited in the Manitoba Aboriginal Languages Strategy (MALS) pamphlet [1], the purpose of MALS is to revitalize, retain, and promote Aboriginal languages in Manitoba. In order to determine what Aboriginal teachers teaching the Manitoba Aboriginal languages needed to enhance their language programs, the MALS initiative recruited an Aboriginal languages consultant to conduct a survey of nine Manitoba schools.

Introduction

This research report documents data obtained from northern and southern Manitoba First Nations schools offering First Nations language programming. One provincial school was also included in the research. The various language teacher participants and administrators included four Cree, one Dakota, one Dene, one Ojibwe-Cree, and two Ojibwe language schools.

Rationale

Current relevant research assists the MALS initiative in supporting Manitoba Aboriginal languages teachers to augment their Aboriginal language programming.

Methodology

The schools selected for the research represent the various Manitoba Aboriginal languages. As the Aboriginal Language Consultant for MALS, I visited and gathered data from eight First Nations schools and one provincial school. The purpose of the visits was to gather information on the Aboriginal languages program of each school.

The method used to collect the information was via survey and in-person discussions with the language staff. The goal was to determine what types of language programs currently exist, and what the community schools need to enhance their programs. The portion of the survey that involved community needs is the focus of this paper.

A literature review was completed to establish the state of Aboriginal languages in Manitoba. Current research was reviewed to discover the present state of research on language development.

Data collected from the surveys and the literature review were combined to formulate recommendations based on this information; the Recommendations section summarizes the resulting strategies for improvements. The results of the research collected and analyzed is documented in the conclusion.

Literature Review

Through the colonization process, a lot of Aboriginal people have lost their language. As cited in a curriculum document published by Manitoba Education and Youth (2003) titled *Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives into Curricula: A Resource for Curriculum Developers, Teachers, and Administrators* [2], assimilation of First Nation people was the main agenda of the Canadian government. The Canadian government aimed to assimilate Aboriginal children into white mainstream society. This was achieved by enacting a law to force Aboriginal children to attend residential schools run by missionaries. These missionaries required that Aboriginal children not speak their Aboriginal languages. Many children were punished for speaking their language. The fear that was instilled in the children resulted in many Aboriginal languages being lost.

Currently, there is an effort being made by Aboriginal peoples to revitalize Aboriginal languages. Many Aboriginal people seek out Aboriginal Elders to help with reviving the Aboriginal languages. Aboriginal Elders still have knowledge of the language. According to Sandy Bay First Nation, one role of Elders is to “preserve culture and language.” [3] The Elders can play an important role in the teaching and revival of the First Nation languages.

Community members who are fluent in their Aboriginal language can also contribute to the teaching and continuation of the language. As stated in the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre booklet *First Nations Languages: Why We Need Them – Language Immersion* [4], parents and community members have a role in preserving Aboriginal languages and cultures through practice at home and in school programming. The booklet also explains that the loss of First Nation languages has contributed to poor health in First Nation communities. The booklet states, “In order to restore healthy communities, we must restore our language.” [4]

Another factor that can safeguard Aboriginal languages is archiving. As suggested in The First Peoples’ Heritage and Cultural Council’s *Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages* [5], recording, documenting and archiving First Nations languages will help to sustain the First Nations languages.

Teaching Language

According to the Daily Montessori website, there are three areas of language development that are important to understand when teaching children an Aboriginal language. These are *language and the sensitive period*, *language and the critical period*, and *language and exposure* [6], and are explained below.

Language and the sensitive period

Developmental periods affect a child's ability to learn a language. When a child is young, it's easier for them to acquire a language. According to Montessori, "The sensitive period for language is from 7 months in utero up to 5.5 to 6 years of age. A second language is also learnt very easily at this time." [6] This research therefore concludes that if we want to teach a language, it's best to target the young age group. This coincides with the data collected in the MALS schools' surveys where by teachers recommended full immersion to teach the Aboriginal language.

Language and the critical period

Physiology influences a child's chances of obtaining a language. As cited in *Critical period* (Wikipedia) [7], the critical period refers to the first few years of life, at which time language develops easily. After age 5 and puberty, the acquisition of language would be much more difficult. The entry explains, "In developmental psychology and developmental biology, a critical period is a maturational stage in the lifespan of an organism during which the nervous system is especially sensitive to certain environmental stimuli. Researchers found that people who passed the 'critical period' would not acquire their first language fluently."

This research implies that we should begin language learning at an early age. The ages of five and under would be most successful. Therefore, if we are teaching an Aboriginal language to students after the age of 5 and puberty, the Aboriginal students would be less likely to retain the language.

Language and exposure

Studies show that language exposure increases the chances of acquiring a language. The more children are exposed to a language, the greater the chances are of adopting that language. We need to encourage parents and caregivers to speak to their children in their traditional language beginning in utero and at birth. We also need to encourage grandparents, extended family members, and community members to speak in their Aboriginal language as much as possible.

On the Children Learning Languages website, Janet Castrejón explains that, "small children have a unique ability to learn languages that, if not utilized, may be lost forever. Everyone knows that children learn languages much more quickly and efficiently than we adults do. Mere exposure is enough for a child to soak up a new language while we adults struggle in language classes. Children learn language inductively. They hear the language and are able to induce grammar rules. Most experts agree that language learning is easiest before the age of 7. The ability to learn languages declines further around puberty. Most experts agree

that there is a window of opportunity when the brain is most efficient at learning languages.” [8]

Language researchers suggest that teachers provide every opportunity for children to hear, speak, and be surrounded by a particular language. This in turn will help them to learn the language.

As indicated in the MALS Schools’ surveys, exposing Aboriginal students to an Aboriginal language requires a community effort to include Elders and land-based teaching. Lastly, Aboriginal language and culture go hand-in-hand when teaching the language.

School Findings

Cree

Mathias Colomb Cree Nation

Sakastew School (Pukatawagan)

Grades: K-8
9-12

Type of First Nation language program?

- Bilingual program
- Language as a subject course

What additional language staff would be required for your language program?

- **Community Resource People** – job responsibilities: Share, show how to fish, set traps and how to prepare the animals for food and clothing
- **Elders**

What other costs would be needed to enhance your First Nation language program?

- Purchase of Language Resources
- Elder/resource person honoraria
- Other: Smart Board and 45-minute classes

What other types of professional development training would be required for your language teachers?

- I would like to have linguistic course training

What other print and technological language resources would be needed?

- Books that are written in the Cree language

Opaskwayak Cree Nation

Joe A. Ross School (Opaskwayak)

Grades: N/K-4
N/K-6
5-8

Type of First Nation language program?

- Full immersion
- Language as a subject course

What additional language staff would be required for your language program?

- **Program Director** – job responsibilities: to guide and implement program
- **Resource Developer** – job responsibilities: to develop resources as needed
- **Educational Assistants** for each classroom – job responsibility: to assist with speaking the language
- Early Year language teacher / Nursery
- ECE 2 language Early Years / Nursery
- ECE 2 Cree language teacher (wages would be nice)

What other costs would be needed to enhance your First Nation language program?

- Curriculum development time
- Purchase of language resources
- Upgrade and expansion of school facilities
- Elder/resource person honoraria

What other types of professional development training would be required for your language teachers?

- Need translator
- Computer typing in syllabics
- Cree resources
- Funding for classroom supplies
- Curriculum development sessions
- PD Cree workshops

What other print and technological language resources would be needed?

- Books and craft things
- Sort and Feel books and toys – need new ones

Oscar Lathlin Collegiate (Opaskwayak)

Grades: 7–8
9–12

Type of First Nation language program?

- Language as a subject course
- 1 bilingual program (partial immersion)

What additional language staff would be required for your language program?

- **Curriculum Writer** – job responsibilities: identify and create smart goals for grade 8/9 courses (SICs)
- **Curriculum Developer** – job responsibilities: lesson plans

What other costs would be needed to enhance your First Nation language program?

- Curriculum development time
- Purchase of language resources
- Resource person honoraria (land based)
- Other: SRO (standard Roman orthography)

What other types of professional development training would be required for your language teachers?

- Language and culture (how Cree land-based and local history all merged together)
- Aboriginal culture

What other print and technological language resources would be needed?

- Computer: basic skills/word processing
- Desktop publishing
- Training:
 - Kindergarten - Grade 12 Aboriginal Languages and Culture (Manitoba Curriculum Framework of Outcomes)
 - Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives in Curriculum
 - Training Smart Board

Wapanohk Community School (Thompson)

Grades: K-8

Type of First Nation language program?

- Immersion
- Bilingual program

What additional language staff would be required for your language program?

- **Cree Teacher** – job responsibilities: to teach grade 7 Cree
- **Cree Teacher** – job responsibilities: to teach grade 8 Cree
- Certified Language Teacher course – job responsibilities: to teach K-8 language
- **Elder who speaks Cree** – job responsibilities: support classroom teachers

What other costs would be needed to enhance your First Nation language program?

- Elder / resource person honoraria
- Other: Cree books at all levels

Dakota

Dakota Plains Wahpeton Nation

Mahpiya Hdega School (Edwin)

Grades: N / K-4
5-8

Type of First Nation language program?

- Other: throughout the day: not subject-based

What additional language staff would be required for your language program?

- **Educational Assistants** – job responsibilities: aid/assist language teacher
- **Full-time Early Years teacher** – job responsibilities: replace current teacher to allow her to teach language

What other costs would be needed to enhance your First Nation language program?

- Elder resource person/honoraria
- Other: funding for teacher wage
 - special funding for language instruction
 - funding for cultural activities

What other types of professional development training would be required for your language teachers?

- Lesson / unit plan development

What other print and technological language resources would be needed?

- Language program – Dakota - BYKI installed on all computers in school
- Funds for cultural education

Dene

Northlands Denesaline First Nation

Petit Casimir Memorial School (Lac Brochet)

Grades: N / K-4
5-8
9-12

Type of First Nation language program?

- Bilingual program
- Language as a subject course

What additional language staff would be required for your language program?

- **Elders** – job responsibilities: cultural teachings, language teaching, storytelling, crafts
- **Teacher Assistant** – job responsibilities: assist the language teacher in implementing the Dene language
- **Community Members** – job responsibilities: drum making, beading, drumming, tanning hide, teaching snowshoeing, cooking cultural foods

What other costs would be needed to enhance your First Nation language program?

- Curriculum development time
- Purchase of language resources
- Upgrade and expansion of school facilities
- Elder/resource person honoraria
- Other: culture and language camp
- Professional development funds

What other types of professional development training would be required for your language teachers?

- Attend conferences or workshops geared for Dene specifically in Saskatchewan or Northwest; Dene language conferences
- To participate in PAGC Saskatchewan conferences, NWT Dene language gatherings, summer Dene language course in Alberta
- The Dene language curriculum has been developed in the territories and are available
- Attend summer institute for Dene language in Alberta; send the Vice Principal also

What other print and technological language resources would be needed?

- Smart Board, tablets, iPads
- Laptop: need programs to be installed, install BYKI

Ojibwe

Lake Manitoba First Nation

Lake Manitoba School (Lake Manitoba)

Grades: N / K-4

Type of First Nation language program?

- Language as a subject course

What additional language staff would be required for your language program?

- **Industrial Arts Instructor** – job responsibilities: develop activities like woodworking to making signs in Ojibwe for display
- **Cultural Teacher** – job responsibilities: develop lesson plans and implement a cultural program full-time

What other costs would be needed to enhance your First Nation language program?

- Upgrade and expansion of school facilities
- Curriculum development time
- Purchase of language resources
- Elder
- Other: a classroom for Native language that is wheelchair-accessible

What other types of professional development training would be required for your language teachers?

- Professional development on curriculum development lesson/unit plans
- Making children's books made by our students. How to integrate Native Studies and cultural activities into the program
- Hire a person from our community to teach students about culture on a regular basis

Sagkeeng First Nation

Sagkeeng Anicinabe School (Pine Falls)

Grades: N / K-4
4-8

Type of First Nation language program?

- Bilingual program
- Language as a subject course

What additional language staff would be required for your language program?

- All staff should be part of teaching Ojibwe language and language should be priority
- All staff should learn the language, model the language; make it important, rather than a subject

What other costs would be needed to enhance your First Nation language program?

- Purchase of language resources
- Elder/resource person honoraria
- Other: land-based learning

What other types of professional development training would be required for your language teachers?

- More training with Smart Board
- Visits to other Aboriginal classes, schools or programs
- Immersion program, e.g., Mohawks immersion schools
- Visits to other language programs or classes: Cree in Saskatchewan, Mohawks immersion

What other print and technological language resources would be needed?

- Bison CD Rom
- iPads

Ojibwe-Cree

Wasagamack First Nation

George Knott School (Wasagamack)

Grades: N / K-4

Type of First Nation language program?

- Full immersion
- Language as a subject
- Bilingual program or partial immersion

What additional language staff would be required for your language program?

- Early years language teacher
- Full-time language instructor

What other costs would be needed to enhance your First Nation language program?

- Elder resource person/honoraria
- Upgrade and expansion of school facilities
- Curriculum development plan
- Purchase of language resources
- Language Ojibwe-Cree resources: posters, stencils, worksheets

What other types of professional development training would be required for your language teachers?

- Training in Smart Board and computers
- Intensive literacy program for Ojibwe-Cree language for all teachers
- More of the conferences for our Ojibwe-Cree language
- More workshops on instructional activities and getting more resources for the lessons
- Setting up the budget for work in Ojibwe-Cree

What other print and technological language resources would be needed?

- Printer, Xerox machine
- Audio visuals
- Story books for early years
- Pictures of the people of Island Lake demonstrating preparation of food (wild food) and medicine.

Without adequate funding the following recommendations cannot be implemented.

Recommendations

The results of the surveys indicate the following:

1. Whether the First Nation language program is a bilingual or immersion language as a subject, it would appear that more language teachers and support staff would be needed.
2. In addition, ongoing training in computer and Smart Board use would be helpful.
3. Continued access to resources for teaching language and professional development opportunities is also recommended.
4. The ideal First Nations language program would be full immersion, where all activities and instruction in specific grades are conducted in the First Nations language.
5. The Elders who are the knowledge keepers also play an important role with regard to culture. They can teach future generations about the importance of culture, offer cultural teachings, and conduct ceremonies.
6. There is also a need to access community members who have been taught traditional ways of living off the land. Their skills may include hunting, fishing, trapping, beading, quilting, and making moccasins and mukluks. These community members can help with passing on the traditional ways to the next generation.
7. Getting Elders and community members involved in the teaching of the language will strengthen and enhance the culture and language of the community.

Conclusion

Some Aboriginal language schools are already following the recommendations suggested in this research report. Two First Nations schools are focusing on full Aboriginal language immersion beginning in the early years. The First Nations language teachers are involving Elders and fluent community members in the language teaching. Some communities are also using Elders in the teaching of the Aboriginal cultural activities. Furthermore, some First Nations are accessing community members who have knowledge in traditional ways of living.

The Elders and traditional community members can pass on their knowledge to future generations. These First Nations are currently enhancing and strengthening the language and culture of their communities. It's my hope that more First Nations will join them.

References

- [1] Manitoba Aboriginal Languages Strategy pamphlet (2015). Manitoba Aboriginal Languages Strategy.
- [2] Manitoba Education and Youth (2003). *Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives into Curricula*. Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Education and Youth.
- [3] Retrieved from <http://www.sandybayfirstnation.com/council-of-elders.html>.
- [4] Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre (2012). *First Nations Languages: Why We Need Them – Language Immersion*. Retrieved from <http://www.mfnerc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Immersion-Language-Booklet.pdf>.
- [5] The First Peoples' Heritage and Cultural Council (2010). *Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages*. Retrieved from <http://www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/2010-report-on-the-status-of-bc-first-nations-languages.pdf>.
- [6] Retrieved from <http://www.dailymontessori.com/sensitive-periods/sensitive-period-for-language>.
- [7] Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_period.
- [8] Retrieved from http://www.childrenlearninglanguages.com/Bilingualism_and_Multilingualism/Early_exposure.html.

Schools Surveyed

First Nation	School	Address
Dakota Plains Wahpeton Nation	Mahpiya Hdega School	Box 100 Edwin, MB R0H 0G0
Lake Manitoba First Nation	Lake Manitoba School	Box 1249 Lake Manitoba, MB R0C 3K0
Mathias Colomb Cree Nation	Sakastew School	Box 319 Pukatawagan, MB R0B 1G0
Northlands Denesaline First Nation	Petit Casimir Memorial School	Box 60 Lac Brochet, MB R0B 2E0
Opaskwayak Cree Nation	Joe A. Ross School	Box 10160 Opaskwayak, MB R0B 2J0
	Oscar Lathlin Collegiate	Box 10400 Opaskwayak, MB R0B 2J0
Sagkeeng First Nation	Sagkeeng Anicinabe School	Box 5 Pine Falls, MB R0E 1M0
Wasagamack First Nation	George Knott School	Box 82 Wasagamack, MB R0B 1Z0
School District of Mystery Lake (Cree language program)	Wapanohk Community School	453 Princeton Drive Thompson, MB R8N 1W8