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## Learning to Be A Nêhiyaw (Cree) Through Language

Belinda Daniels-Fiss <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Saskatoon Catholic School Board , Canada

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## PERSPECTIVES AND PROGRAM STUDIES

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# Learning to Be A *Nêhiyaw* (Cree) Through Language

Belinda Daniels-Fiss  
*Saskatoon Catholic School Board,*  
*Canada*

This article describes a journey and a rediscovery of what it meant and means to speak from a Cree worldview. The way I was raised created my identity as a *nêhiyaw* and to my having a Cree worldview; however, I lost these concepts when I started school and moved to the city. Later, in my adult years, I began re-learning my own history and language. Participating in a Cree immersion camp helped me to regain the Cree literacy that I had lost or forgotten. To understand the structure of the Cree language and philosophy, I looked to childhood memories and graduate-level classes that drew on Indigenous peoples' knowledge. Both memories and classes added to my Cree state of being, which resulted in my becoming a whole and complete *nêhiyaw*—"an exact person."

What does it mean to speak from a Cree worldview? This question was central to my master's degree research at the University of Saskatchewan's Indian and Northern Education Program. I sought, through the research, to learn more about my mother tongue, Cree, my knowledge of which was rooted in a learning process that had started when I was a young child but had been hampered by my grandparents' desire for me to learn English because they believed that I would benefit from it. Through research that also included journal writing and recollecting childhood memories, I found the answers to what constitutes a Cree vision and a Cree philosophy. I discovered that my grandparents' teachings had

been keys to my understanding of what it means to speak from a Cree worldview. Their teachings held the answers all along, a fact that had been overlooked or completely forgotten in my attempts to gain a “modern” education. By reflecting on my grandparents’ teachings and their meaning to me, I came to realize how they had shaped my worldview. My grandparents’ stories continue to be the basis of my *nêhiyaw*<sup>1</sup> foundation, my identity, and my Cree worldview.

My grandparents, who raised me, always spoke Cree to each other but English to me. We lived in a Cree environment. As a family, we participated in family and community cultural activities and celebrations including feasts, round dances, pow wows, and sweat lodges. Visiting the old people was routine. Sharing, respect, and patience were emphasized as primary values that were taught through modeling and learned through experience. Through this informal education process, Cree teachings and knowledge were passed on from one generation to the next. My grandmother (*ninôhkom*) humbly says that her teachings, her knowledge, and her wisdom come from “the Old Ones,” our ancestors (the *kêhtêyak*), and not from her specifically. Cree scholar Willie Ermine (1995) affirmed this: “Our Aboriginal languages and culture contain the accumulated knowledge of our ancestors, and it is critical that we examine the inherent concepts in our lexicons to develop understandings of the self in relation to existence” (p. 104).

Thus, even when *nimosôm* (my grandfather) left this world for the next, his teachings continue to live on. Knowing that, Aboriginal pedagogy is as equally viable and valuable as Eurocentric pedagogy has been empowering, enlightening, and emancipating. I have learned that we Cree have our own cognitive maps and, although these have been diminished by cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 1986) through schooling and colonization, the knowledge is still there, showing up and disappearing like clouds. Knowledge comes when we need it the most (Cajete, 2000), when we are actively searching for our own stories, answers, and pathways. According to a recent study conducted by Walter Nikkel (2006), Cree people find empowerment and a sense of purpose when they can contribute more directly to the curriculum and approaches used within their education: “A place of learning . . . should be a place where Aboriginal culture is practiced in its entirety, and where . . . self-esteem is the utmost concern” (p. 86). By examining my own understandings of Cree and developing a consciousness through immersion in the language, I have come to understand Cree pedagogy and epistemology.

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<sup>1</sup>In translation, “Cree.” Because this article is looking at Indigenous language, I use Indigenous terms for naming languages, places, and peoples. It should be noted that in the *nêhiyaw* language, the Roman standard orthography uses only lower case letters for all Cree words, regardless of conventions in English to capitalize names, places, and other proper nouns (see Okimâsis & Wolvengrey, ).

## REFLECTIONS ON CREE LANGUAGE LEARNING

When learning Cree as an adult, I struggled (and at times I continue to struggle) with many aspects of the Cree language including its structure, lexicon, and worldview. The language is complex: multiple prefixes and suffixes, animate or less-animate gender distinctions, and no masculine or feminine genders as in English. I also wanted to learn the teachings that were transmitted within the language through the use of language. I sought to more deeply understand *nēhiyaw tâpîsînwawin* (the Cree maps or concepts) and to fluently communicate in *nēhiyawêwin*. I wanted to deepen my identity as a Cree woman and to pass the language on to my children, so that they would have what I did not. After several years of working on language recovery, I now know more about learning a language, and I speak more of my mother tongue, and this has been greatly gratifying. I am a *nēhiyaw*, and to be Cree is to speak my language. Defining who I am and who I was born to be, a *nēhiyaw*, is best done by my speaking the language that was given to my mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and countless generations spinning back in time. This was, and still is, my journey.

To understand how this Cree language was lost to my generation requires understanding why the previous generation encouraged the learning of English. When I was a child living on a Cree reserve in Saskatchewan, my grandparents spoke English to the youthS but Cree to each other. For the youthS to speak Cree among themselves was considered improper because it was believed in my community that learning was best conducted through Western education. My own language use reflected this belief, which caused a break in the continuity of the Cree language. I was raised with Cree cultural support, philosophy, customs, and teachings, but was denied the fluency of language that should have accompanied these naturally. For me, this resulted in some degree of identity loss, along with pain and sadness. I felt that I was not whole and complete. I also spoke a non-standard dialect of English, a product of socializing in a second-language community. As I grew older and had children of my own, I began to feel the need to understand my roots, that original part of myself, and the language that was my inheritance. I concluded that the only way to become a whole, complete person was to know my first language, and I realized that I would need to start from the beginning.

My grandparents were kind and caring people. Family meant everything to them. I remember *nimosôm* saying, "Family is what keeps us happy! Being together, helping one another out is what family is all about," and they demonstrated this by how they lived. When my mother wanted me to be raised by them, they accepted this, as they had for several others in my family. They treated everyone and everything with respect, including everything in the environment surrounding them. They always maintained a fresh and positive outlook. Even when things went wrong, *nimosôm* taught me not to take life too seriously

because, if we did, we would forget to laugh and dream. He taught me to achieve my goals, nothing more and nothing less. It was a simple teaching.

My grandfather (nimosôm) was not one to boast, nor did he want lavish or numerous possessions. He was happy with the basic necessities, a value now instilled in me. He did not like to waste anything; everything had a practical use in nimosôm's perspective. For example, food was never wasted and electricity use was carefully monitored. In keeping with the Cree way of life, he did not believe in putting money in the bank. Among the Cree, it is considered bad luck to refer to the future specifically or plan ahead, and this cultural belief is evident in our lexicon. Cree people believe they do not possess or "own" their lives, so what lies ahead is a mystery and not a cause for concern. Retirement did not concern nimosôm, and he put away no money for his later years. When I was a little girl imagining my future, I use to say I was going to be this or do that and marry so-and-so, but nimosôm would say, "Ahh . . . don't talk about a future you don't know of; you don't know if you will be here tomorrow!" I believe this was his way of telling me that only *kisê manitôw*, the Creator, was in control of my life.

I remember listening to the stories told around the kitchen table when we had company. I always listened, although the adults were speaking mainly in Cree, because the language always fascinated me. I was amazed that they could move so easily between two languages. Although most of the conversation was in Cree, my grandparents occasionally interjected English sentences, which at that point was the language I could most easily understand. Through this process, I managed to pick up a few words and phrases and was alerted to some aspects of "what was going on" by the speakers' tones and facial expressions.

What stopped me from speaking Cree as a child was that, when I tried, my family laughed at me. This was a direct transference of the ridicule and punishment that they had experienced in residential schools. In those schools, Cree children were forbidden to speak Cree. Only English was tolerated and allowed. These government-sponsored schools effectively obliterated the transmission of the Cree language in our community. As a result of those widespread historical practices and policies, the Cree language, as well as a wide range of beliefs and activities, are no longer known or practiced by the younger generations. Recent studies have documented the pain and sadness experienced by myself and countless others that stemmed from those assimilation practices. This long-term historical trauma has become known as "a disease of time," whereby "traumatic events become embedded in the collective, social memories of the population. Offspring are taught to share in the ancestral pain of their people and may have strong feelings of unresolved grief, persecution and distrust" (Sotero, 2006, p. 100).

As a result of the residential schools language policy, my parents and grandparents felt that it was undesirable for me to know *nêhiyawêwin*. When I asked my grandparents why they had not pushed or urged or encouraged me to speak Cree, they said that the Cree language was not important and that it "would not

take me anywhere.” When I now recall these sentiments of my grandparents, I am saddened. Their culture by that time was almost entirely disempowered, and this was reflected in their low esteem for their own language. I later felt this inherited sense of inadequacy when I was an adolescent attending high school in the city.

### *nēhiyaw tapisînawin*: CREE MAPS AND DRAWINGS

Education has always been an inherent part of Cree social, cultural, and family life, an informal but persistent system whereby values were passed on continuously through life until one entered the spiritual world. This process or way of life is known as “traditional tribal education”:

Prior to European colonization (1600), Aboriginal peoples engaged in a manner of teaching, which suited their needs. Before the Eurocentric values associated with education were placed upon Aboriginal people, tribal education had specific techniques for teaching the young the necessary skills, knowledge, and wisdom to guide them in to adulthood. (Bazylak, 2002, p. 18)

Although diversity characterizes all First Nations in Canada, some common strands of understanding remain among First Nations (Cajete, 1994). First Nations’ philosophy holds that everything around us is sacred and that each experience is a truly learning moment. Everything is constantly changing, and one has to see the overall big scheme of things to understand the process (Little Bear, 2000). Historically, Indigenous people appreciated everything as a gift; nothing was taken for granted. The Cree medicine wheel represents this holistic awareness:

Prior to Colonization, Aboriginal systems of thought were incorporated into daily lives. It was the dominant mode of consciousness. Patterned into our unconscious through stories, rituals and humour and enacted in everyday experiences, Aboriginality was common to all members of North American Society. (Graveline, 1998, p. 51)

To lose language is to lose much more than the literacy of the spoken and written word used for communication in society. The loss of a language results in the loss of cultural literacy. Cultural literacy involves knowledge of tribal history, natural laws, and spirituality. The knowledge that encompasses tribal history includes stories, songs, and communal relationship; natural laws, the ability to read and feel the land, and knowledge of environmental technologies; and spirituality refers to knowledge of meditation and other processes to discover and develop the innerness, the peace, inside us. Paulsen (2003) observed that “Literacy is the means through which people articulate the expression of their consciousness and experience, in either written or oral form” (p. 25).

Our Indigenous communities have been weakened, but they are still here. The remnants of Cree history that have survived remain mainly in the stories and in the language. This is the knowledge I now seek. The concept of respect is key in the Cree language. Mutual respect is a prominent feature emphasized in speaking and teaching the language, as well as for observing or learning the language. Patience, a quality essential to learning any language, is another Cree teaching, and *ninôhkom* keeps reminding me of this virtue. Furthermore, we are taught that we must be willing to share our traditional knowledge and stories so that we can rebuild ourselves as First Nations' people.

### nêhiyawêwin: AN EXPRESSION OF THE CREE WORLDVIEW

According to First Nations' traditional knowledge, the "people of Turtle Island" have inhabited the regions now called Canada for hundreds of thousands of years. They lived their lives within the means of the environment, acknowledging its abundance and its worth. They called the land their mother, or Mother-earth. The Cree word for "land" is *okâwîmâwaskiy*, comprising *okâwîmâw* (mother) and *askiy* (land, country, earth, or world); and *okâwîmâwaskiy* provided everything people needed for their health and well-being, and the people thanked Mother-earth daily through prayer, rituals, and ceremonies using the language *kisê manitôw* gave to them. Their language, *nêhiyawêwin*, became known to the newcomers as Cree. Although the language is seen as a gift to the people from *kisê manitôw*, its lexicon comes from *okâwîmâwaskiy*. Just as land is sacred in the Cree culture, so too is the language. These two, the land and language, work in unison, creating an ever-deepening relation between the speaker and the environment.

In the beginning, Indigenous languages were solely oral; but as other needs evolved, other ways of communicating emerged such as sign language, mnemonic systems, and (more recently) writing systems. Some of these writing practices include petroglyphs, petrographs, wampum belts, hide paintings, and syllabics. In Cree history, the Creator gave a syllabary system to an Old One in the early 1800s. This syllabary system was said to have come from the spirit world as a gift. The story was recounted by Fine-Day (1979, cited in Mandelbaum, 1979), who was born before 1854:

A Wood Cree named Badger-Call died and then became alive again. While he was dead he was given the characters of the syllabary and was told that with them he could write Cree. Strike-Him-on-the-Head learned his writing from Badger-Call. He made a feast and announced that he would teach it to any- one who wanted to learn. This is how I learned it. Badger-Call also taught the writing to the missionaries. When the writing was given to Badger-Call he was told "they



[the missionaries] will change the script and will say that the writing belongs to them. But only those who know Cree will be able to read it. That is how we know that the writing does not belong to the white, for it can be read only by those who know the Cree language.” (p. 180)

Badger-Call’s (or “Calling Badger’s”) original name was *omistanaskoyo*, and his vision and work in the area of language is still remembered by the Cree people. According to Dickason (1997), this writing system spread throughout the Cree nation, “so that by the end of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth the Cree had one of the highest literacy rates in the world” (p. 215). Despite this known capability, at the time of treaty signing, “officials expected Amerindians to sign an X, even though some signees could write in syllabics. When Cree chiefs prepared their acceptance speeches for Treaty Nine, they used syllabics” (p. 215).

The Cree syllabic system is intriguing because the four main symbols represent the four cardinal directions indicated by the medicine wheel. Also, some Old Ones and other *nĕhiyawak* have told me that each symbol represents a powerful spirit and a relationship. The syllabic system is held as a sacred entity, and a particular protocol is required both for the use of the system and when seeking knowledge through using it. The people saw that having a writing system was an advantage; it was a sacred tool given by the Creator to Badger-Call, who knew the syllabic system would ultimately save the Cree language because he foresaw a time when the Cree people would “lose their talk” (lose their ability to speak Cree). For this reason, the gift of syllabics was sent from the spirit world, and we were to share it among ourselves.

I have been told that it takes only half a day to learn the Cree syllabic system. The actual syllabary system is based on Cree’s 17-letter sound system, consisting of 10 consonants and 7 vowels. According to Wolvengrey (2001)

The alternative to the alphabetic SRO (Standard Roman Orthography) are the Cree Syllabics or *cahkipĕhikana*, also known by the common, first-learned symbol sequence or *pĕpipopa*. This system is primarily a syllabary in which a single symbol represents a syllable or sequence of consonant plus vowel e.g. ▼ = pe, ▲ = pi, etc. (p. xx)

Harvey (2003) pointed out that

... one character is a full syllable, and an abjad (like Hebrew or Arabic)—one character is a consonant. This alone would not be so remarkable. What is unique about [Cree] Syllabics is the relationship between vowel and character rotation. This puts [Cree] Syllabics in a classification of its own. (p. 2)

For those learning to speak Cree, this syllabary system will help in the pronunciation of Cree words. Whereas English is a noun-based system, Cree is

a verb-based system established on a varied verb structure learned specifically through modalities of experience.

Spirituality is inherent in the land and language of the nêhiyawak; nêhiyawêwin is not merely words, but also represents ancient ways of knowing. Spirituality can be understood as a way of living: of goodness in doing, feeling, thinking, and communicating. These ways are practiced through ceremonies, as Ermine (1995) illustrated:

The tribal ceremonies display with vivid multidimensional clarity the entries and pathways into this inner world of exciting mystery that has been touched by only the few who have become explorers of sacred knowing. Rituals and ceremonies are corporeal sacred acts that give rise to holy manifestations in the metaphysical world. Conversely, it is the metaphysical that constructs meaning in the corporeal. Continuation of rituals and ceremonies will enable the children of those early spiritual explorers to advance the synthesized understanding of inner space. (p. 106)

### OUR LINGUISTIC MORPHOLOGY IS PART OF THE LAND

Cree words stem from the elements of the environment, a way of living based on community relationships. This is how we understand our ways of knowing:

Basically, the lexicons are created reflecting the type of environment people live in to describe understanding and experiences of the people. These experiences with the ecology formed lexicons to name the world, understanding of events, and relationships to the natural and supernatural existence. (Swan, 2001, p. 98)

To illustrate how the language works, a Cree journalist, Ken Noskiye (2002), stated that “everything made by the Creator is alive and anything made by man is dead. An example: A tree is alive but when it gets cut down and made into a rocking chair it has no spirit” (p. 7). One year later, Noskiye (2003) went on to say:

*mistoos*, a tree, is referred to as a singular person. If I were to be talking with a Cree speaker and I spoke of a tree, I would point to that tree as third person. And if it were a forest I was talking about, then I would refer to them as a group of living spirits. (p. 21)

Solomon Ratt (2001), a Cree linguist, described his philosophy of teaching and learning as derived from the Cree word for teaching one another, *kiskino-hamâtowin*, meaning a communal happening or event involving the people, the earth, and creator. The term suggests that our faith is embedded in the word

along with nurturing and working together at maximum potential. This idea of teaching one another is an action, *kiskinohamâto*, which means to teach with the affix *-win* turning into a noun. This noun, *kiskinohamâtowin*, is a part of our *nĕhiyaw* philosophy.

A Cree informant for studies conducted by Kouritzin (1999) uncovered his connection to his language as follows:

The soul or the spirit, the Cree spirit, is sustained by the earth which is sustained by the language of the earth. It speaks to you, the trees, the animals, the putting of all those things together, makes a language, and that's where language emits from, everything in Cree comes from the earth; the earth first, spirituality was second; the Cree third and I am fourth. That's how I imagined it. (pp. 213–214)

#### HOW LITERATURE ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION CAN BE APPLIED TO RECLAMATION OF *nĕhiyawĕwin*

Although, at present, the literature on the topic of Cree language is sparse, this situation is changing as emerging First Nations academics and professionals are realizing that First Nations' languages are diminishing and that they must take immediate action to offset the powerful domination of English media and monolingual culture. According to Mary Jane Norris (2001), "the decline in mother tongue population has been offset to some degree by the fact that many Aboriginal people have learned an Aboriginal language as a second language" (p. 19). Furthermore, increasing numbers of Cree-speaking scholars are writing both *with* or *about* the Cree language. The movement toward teaching the Cree language as a subject has generated innovative ways of teaching and retaining a language in a short amount of time through second-language methodologies and immersion programs.

Other initiatives are underway. Both the James Bay Cree Nation and the Samson Cree Nation are initiating grassroots programming to awaken their Cree spirits. The goals of the Samson Cree "are multifaceted as it is a reflection of our origin, culture, history and social experience; we try to design and integrate the traditional and cultural components into our classes focusing on fluency, and comprehension" (Crier, 2005, p. 5). Also significant is that the Canadian Council on Learning in partnership with the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Center (University of Saskatchewan) are working together for the restoration and revitalization of Indigenous languages through a program wherein information is gathered and shared with other language stakeholders.

First Nations language teachers, methodologists, and linguistics specialists are now working together to form effective methods for the teaching of Indigenous languages to second-language learners, as well as programs that encourage

and enable retention. Dr. Freda Ahenakew (1987), Cree-speaking educator and linguist, stated:

In teaching a language, we usually deal with one area at a time. In fact, we can only present one minute “piece” of language structure at any time. Minimal units of language teaching are organized in a step-by-step procedure—but in reality a speaker uses all of them at once. (p. 1)

Very broadly, the speaking of Cree has been greatly eroded by colonization, by imposed Christianity, and by Eurocentric styles and methods of education. With regard to the latter, the literature on second-language acquisition tends to be highly theoretical when addressing topics such as how one learns a language. That approach fails to address the fundamental contexts of First Nations’ language—namely, thought reclamation and meaningful living through nature, in a simple existence, and with appreciation for what *kisê manitow* has created for all living creatures.

In the literature on language learning, one concept is that learning is most effectively accomplished through using a natural process. According to Krashen and Terrell (1988), a natural approach is one based on instruction that follows instinctual, natural progression of language use; creates low anxiety; and stresses a positive attitude. Krashen and Terrell emphasized the following:

The most important and useful theoretical point is the acquisition-learning distinction, the hypothesis that adult language students have two distinct ways of developing skills and knowledge in a second language. Simply, acquiring a language is “pick it up,” i.e., developing ability in a language by using it in natural, communicative situations . . . adults also can acquire: they do not usually do it quite as well as children, but it appears that language acquisition is the central, most important means for gaining linguistic skills even for an adult. (p. 18)

### BRINGING THEORY AND PROCESS TOGETHER TO SPEAK CREE: CREE LANGUAGE CAMPS

As a university student, I was grateful for the opportunity to explore my native language in my master’s program, and I took every opportunity to develop the associated language skills. I examined aspects of language learning and acquisition, literacy, and the use of Cree in drama. I took advantage of all possible learning opportunities, including two 5-day Cree immersion language camps during two consecutive summers. With the help of fluent Cree instructors and in a Cree context, I began a journey to discover what to that point had always been a mystery to me, that thing that Gregory Cajete (1994) referred to as “the place that the Indians talk about” (p. 42). I sought to understand more deeply

how “language is an expression of the spirit because it contains the power to move people and to express human thought and feeling” (p. 42).

Learning a language is a long process that requires a nurturing support system. It was for this reason that I decided to use a Cree immersion camp as primary research for my master’s project. The camp was specifically intended to provide a safe space for language learning in a Cree framework. I was motivated to attend my first Cree camp by my love for the language. I wanted to learn Cree in an authentic environment. There were a total of 9 participants, and the Cree language was spoken as much as possible throughout the camp. During that first camp we learned the words and phrases for the various emotions, body parts, and senses. We also were taught Cree songs, and we participated in a sweat lodge and other cultural activities.

The Cree language camp provided a natural context for authentic learning and promoted Cree philosophy as much as possible. We camped out for 5 days with two Cree teachers. We went to bed when the birds stopped singing and awoke with them. We sang and prayed every morning in Cree, thankful for having been given another day. We heard and learned to tell stories in the Cree language. We walked through ancient grounds; we picked berries, sage, sweetgrass, and mint; we fished, and we dried deer meat; we pounded chokecherries, cooked over a fire, swam in the lake to cool off, made jewelry, and told stories by the campfire. We spoke as much as possible in Cree.

That first camp helped me realize what I wanted to gain from a second camp, which was to gather research for my master’s project in education. I knew that I would need instructors with knowledge of second-language acquisition and teaching methodologies—as it turned out, the two instructors also were of Cree ancestry. For both myself and other participants, this camp helped build an understanding of Cree pedagogy and epistemology, and I came to understand the connection between philosophy, language, and nature.

These camps provided an excellent way for me and the others to re-learn and reclaim our Cree mother tongue. This kind of experiential Cree learning cannot come from anywhere other than from the Cree themselves. My Cree-speaking abilities improved after the camps because, while there, I could make mistakes without being ridiculed. I gained new vocabulary and a deepened world, and being outside in a low stress environment made the learning easy. Finally, being with others who wanted to learn Cree provided a comforting source of mutual encouragement and inspiration. When speaking Cree today, my speech and my voice no longer feel strained or awkward.

## CONCLUSION

Language and land are inextricably bound together in the Cree way of life. Spirituality encircles language and land together. By coming to know and

understand the language, I find the intention to discover where I fit in this world and to explore my connections to Cree values, traditions, and customs. I have a language with which to talk to ancestors, as well as to pray and to communicate with all living creatures. The language provides a way back to the spirit world. I have re-learned to view the world from nêhiyaw eyes. I can think and speak from a Cree worldview (*nika-pikiskwêyân nêhiyawêyân okâwîmâwaskiy ôhci*).

For Indigenous peoples, starting from the beginning means finding “the place that Indians talk about,” which involves both being with the land and interacting through language. It also means being a part of traditional customs and rituals because these help us to become complete and allow for wellness and balance. The Old Ones are and have always been our teachers; they need to be part of the circle that infuses the connection with our children. Together, the Old Ones and *oskâpêwisak* (helpers of the Cree) can create a whole and complete child who was meant to be born a nêhiyaw, an exact person—*kahkiyaw niwâhkômâkanak hiy hiy* (all my relations).

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Belinda Daniels-Fiss (*kakiyosĕw*) is from Sturgeon Lake First Nation, SK. She has been teaching for 9 years in Saskatoon. Belinda currently teaches at *Oskâyak* (formerly Joe Duquette) High School, which is an Aboriginal school that focuses on Cree teachings and values. Belinda is the teacher of the Cree Language Academy and the Program Leader for the kindergarten and early learning immersion program. In the summer, she coordinates and facilitates language camps for all ages. Belinda completed a master's degree in education ("My Journey of Learning to Speak Cree") in 2005, and has her own consulting business specializing in second languages and decolonizing Aboriginal education. She is married with three children.