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AUTHOR Fogwill, Lynn
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ABSTRACT

Six Aboriginal languages have been designated as official languages of the Northwest Territories (Canada) along with English and French. However, more than legislation is needed to support efforts to reclaim Aboriginal languages and culture. Both missionary schools and federally administered public schools (1940s-60s) disrupted the transmission of culture and language from one generation to the next. In the last decade, significant changes have occurred that return control of education to the community level and support development of curriculum and materials in Aboriginal languages. Although Inuktitut is considered a highly viable language across the Arctic, Dene languages are declining in use and need aggressive intervention to ensure their survival. Three types of interventions are particularly critical. First, a new school system must meet the cultural and linguistic needs of children. Such interventions have included Inuktitut immersion programs that incorporate learning experiences from an Inuit cultural perspective, and the Dene Kede curriculum developed under the guidance of elders. Second, adults, especially young adults, must have opportunities and reasons to recover their language and culture. Community-based language and literacy programs in Coral Harbour (Inuktitut), Hay River Reserve (Slavey), Lutsel K'e (Chipewyan Dene), and Rae-Edzo (Dogrib Dene) illustrate factors contributing to success or failure of such programs. Finally, flourishing languages must adapt to new circumstances and technologies. With this in mind, the territorial literacy office has initiated a series of workshops to develop writers and encourage development of a Northern Aboriginal-languages literature. (SV)

Chapter 16
LITERACY: A CRITICAL ELEMENT IN THE SURVIVAL OF ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES

Lynn Fogwill
Adult Education
Northwest Territories
Yellowknife, Canada

When I speak in my own language, I can go anywhere with it... I can express myself... my thinking... it means so much. In English, I have to flip through my file index of words... using the same words over and over again. My own language allows me to be like a mermaid in the sea; I can flip and twist and dive and breathe air and swim anywhere. (Fibbie Tatti. 1992)

No matter how many speakers there are of a particular language, no matter how small the nation, these people have the right to their language and to have it survive and be carried on.' ("You Took My Talk", 1990. Page 69)

A CULTURE ROOTED IN ORAL TRADITION

In Canada's Northwest Territories 57,000 people speak eight major different languages. Six of these languages, with a rich variation of regional dialects, are the ancient languages of the aboriginal people who form the majority of the population. The culture and language of the people was rooted in an oral tradition. Wisdom, knowledge, mores, survival skills and care of the land and the animals were passed from the elders to the children and youth through storytelling and the telling of legends and truths from the ancestors.

English and, to a lesser extent, French are also spoken. These languages came to the Territories with the non-native people who came for whaling,

trading, trapping, mining and to Christianize the population. English became the dominant language and culture of business and industry, of government, of the print and electronic media.

In 1990, the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories passed legislation which made the eight languages official. For the first time in a Canadian province or territory, aboriginal languages were recognized and given equal status with the two dominant languages of the country. Passing the Official Languages Act gave the highest political recognition to the desire and desperate need of aboriginal people to reclaim and revitalize their languages and their culture.

Their will to survive as a people pits their culture and language against the overpowering presence of a Southern, non-native, industrialized, urban culture and language. The traditional, land-based language and culture of the people competes with a dominant language and culture, epitomized by American television programs brought from Detroit, USA by satellite to the most isolated communities of 500 or fewer people.

The legislation is important but legislation alone cannot ensure that the languages and the culture will survive into the next century. Intensive strategies are necessary to support the people in their efforts to reclaim their language and culture and literacy is a critical element of any survival strategy.

BACKGROUND

The Northwest Territories (N.W.T.) includes most of the Northern part of Canada. It has an area of 3,376,698 square kilometres, forms approximately one-third of the total land mass of Canada, is about the size of India and encompasses three time zones.

The N.W.T. is the only jurisdiction in Canada in which aboriginal people form the majority of the population. Fifty-eight percent of the population is of aboriginal ancestry; 35% are Inuit (sometimes referred to by others as Eskimos), 16% are Dene (sometimes referred to by others as Indians), 7% are Metis.

The Territories has the youngest population in Canada as well as the highest birthrate, nearly three times the national average. Approximately 45% of the population is under 20 years of age, while only 2% is over 65.

The population of 57,000 is small compared to the land mass. People mostly live in 62 communities scattered across the land; although many people still spend some time in camps each year, living out on the land and following their traditional pursuits of hunting, fishing and trapping. Most of the communities are very small with fewer than 1000 people. There is one large city of 15,000, the capital Yellowknife, which has a majority non-native population.

The smaller communities, which are populated by mostly aboriginal people, have the highest unemployment rates (27%), the lowest rate of participation in the labour force (84%), a very limited economic and transportation infrastructure and

are dependent upon a domestic, traditional, subsistence economy. The few larger communities are much more developed, populated by mostly non-native people, experience very low rates of unemployment (7%) and have a dominant wage economy.

Only in the last 20 years has some measure of local control of government, politics and economic activity come to the Northwest Territories. Until the late 1960's the Territories were run by the central government from the Canadian capital of Ottawa. It was not until 1975 that there was an elected legislature that governed the Territories. Currently, the majority of the elected members of the Legislative Assembly are aboriginal people, as is the government (cabinet) which is elected by the members from amongst their own numbers.

The aboriginal people, through their political organizations, have fought for rights, for recognition and for compensation through the courts and a process of long, complicated land claims negotiations. Three land claims have been negotiated and settled by the Inuvialuit (the Inuit of the Western Arctic), the Inuit of the Eastern and Central Arctic and the Gwich'in — the Dene of the Mackenzie Delta in the Western Arctic. Two other claims, by two other Dene groups, are currently in negotiation. These land claims provide some measure of self government for the people within their settlement region, control over the use of the land and resources within their region, and cash settlements.

The Inuit land claim settlement provides for the division of the Northwest Territories into two regions. An Inuit homeland "Nunavut" will result, and the remainder of the existing Territories will become a new political entity. Major challenges in terms of constitutional development, methods of government and taking control of their political, social and economic destiny confront the aboriginal people in both of the proposed new territories.

The Inuit form a clear majority of the population in all their communities while the Dene are in fact an overall minority in the Mackenzie Valley region they occupy. The impact of Southern, non-native culture has had a more intense impact upon the Dene than upon the Inuit.

As a result of missionary activity, many of the traditional spiritual beliefs of both the Dene and the Inuit were lost. By the middle of the 19th century, the Dene had become dependent upon the fur trade for their livelihood. Whaling had an impact upon the Inuit but it did not create the same degree of economic dependence. In both cases traditional culture was changed, foreign diseases brought death, ancient family territories were disrupted, the traditional lifestyle was changed forever and entire aboriginal groups died out. In the last decade, the impact of the anti-fur movement in Europe has had a devastating impact upon the aboriginal people of the North, particularly the Inuit. For most communities and families, the fur trade was the only source of cash income and its disappearance has crippled their economies.

Similar to many indigenous people around the world, the results of a colonial period have left a legacy of many problems. Most communities in the N.W.T. are confronted with a complex of interrelated problems. The N.W.T. has one of the

highest rates of suicide in Canada, incidents of family violence are extremely high and alcohol, drug and solvent abuse are major problems confronting every community. There is a serious lack of adequate housing in most communities. Lack of employment and welfare dependence have a deeply negative impact upon aboriginal people, especially the large population of young people in the smaller communities.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF LANGUAGE & EDUCATION

For tens of thousands of years the Dene and Inuit occupied the land and developed a complex and highly successful society. Culture, beliefs and values were passed from one generation to the next through oral tradition. The language was rich in its power to describe, express and analyze.

Elders, parents and other family members were responsible for the education of the children and for passing the cultural traditions from one generation to the next. Children's education began at a very early age because they were included in the daily activities of the camp. Girls were taught to prepare skins and sew clothing by their mothers, grandmothers and aunts while the boys were taught to make tools for hunting and taught to hunt well by their fathers, grandfathers and uncles. As children achieved levels of competence they received respect from the members of the camp and became adults.

Schooling in the N.W.T. can be described in three historical phases; the mission period from the mid-1800's to 1950, the federal government period from the mid-1940's to 1970 and the territorial government period which began in 1967.

Formal schooling came to the North first with the missionaries, in the Mackenzie Valley of the Western Arctic as early as the mid-1800's and in the early 1940's in the Eastern Arctic. For the most part, the schools that were established were residential. Children were taken from their families to residential schools operated by either the Anglican or Roman Catholic church, often for as much as two thirds of the year.

In the residential schools they were immersed in a foreign language and culture and given a "basic education'. In the summers they were returned to their families and to the traditional camp life and culture. Frequently, in the residential schools, children were forbidden to speak their own language and their own culture was denigrated in the face of the Southern, "civilized" culture of the teachers.

> The experience of the child in school was that of being judged within an imposed culture; for example, putting up your hand to answer a question — within the Dene culture, you never draw attention to yourself. So the child is worried about two things at the same time, not just the answer to the question, but how to say it; am I saying it right? The child is being judged within a culture that conflicts with her own.
>
> (Fibbie Tatti, 1992)

At the best, children suffered from the strain of the terrible dichotomy

between these two worlds. At the worst, the time they spent with their families and with their people was too little and they lost their language and their culture. They returned home after completing their schooling, without the knowledge, skills and language that permitted them to participate in the life of their communities. The elders and the adults of the community had their traditional role of educator usurped and saw a schooling system, which alienated their children from them, take their place.

The federal government established public schools in the late 1940's and early 1950's and for the next several decades schooling was highly centralized, with an administration system far removed from the communities and the people it supposedly served. Although there continued to be residential schools, gradually schools were established in communities as a flurry of building ensued. This also resulted in a growing, non-native bureaucracy to administer the schools.

Families were encouraged to stay in the communities in order for their children to attend school. Eventually, most families chose to stay in a community, although it disrupted the traditional way of seasonal camp life. Even though children were now able to stay with their families and attend school, traditional lifestyle gave way to settlement life, the lessons taught were imported from the South and the language and the culture was no longer passed from elders to children.

Although control of education passed from the federal government to the government of the Territories in the mid-1960's, most of the teachers were still non-native people from Southern Canada. They often stayed only one or two years in a community and rarely developed a deep understanding of the culture and values of the children they taught and their families. Moreover, the curriculum and the teaching materials were from the non-native, urban culture of Southern Canada.

Very few children did well in the educational system and their parents were alienated from it. Many parents saw little in the schooling system to value and to support. If their children succeeded in the elementary school within their community, they then had to go far from home to a residential school for their secondary education. To a large extent, the schooling system resulted in a loss of language and a loss of culture for several generations of children, particularly among the Dene.

In 1982, the Legislative Assembly established a Special Committee on Education to inquire into problems and public concerns with the schooling system. The comments from parents and community leaders at public hearings with the Committee give eloquent testimony to the crisis in schooling that existed.

> The way 14-year-olds are treated in the traditional society and the way they are treated in the school is quite different. In the traditional society, they are treated as adults; in the school, they are not.
>
> (The) problem with kids dropping out is that they are caught in the middle. They cannot go out hunting, there are no jobs for them, they don't have an education.

Culturally, they are caught in the middle and can't support themselves either way.

But we recognize the world is changing, and the school, ideally, should give our children the skills to make their living in other ways. But it should not conflict with the traditional education parents and elders still want to give their children. It should not confuse children with values and a vision of the world that is foreign to their own. It should give them the tools to make a choice as to how they want to live.

We cannot afford to bury our language with our elders.

There is a need to have language retained. I can't even speak to my own children and be understood completely, and they cannot act as interpreters for me — and this disturbs me.

Learning: Tradition and Change in the Northwest Territories, 1982

The Special Committee recommended serious changes to the administration and delivery of schooling in the Territories. Most of the recommendations were intended to bring educational decision-making and control to the community level, to increase parental and local participation in education and to make the schooling system more responsive to the needs of individuals in the community.

In the last decade, a number of significant changes to the delivery of education programs have been made. Regional boards of education were established which took direction from community education councils. The fledgling teacher education training program was strengthened and de-centralized in order to support the recruitment of more aboriginal teachers for northern schools. Regional centres were established for each major language group to develop curriculum and materials in the aboriginal language and to support the teaching of the languages in the schools. However, major changes are slow to implement and the impact is difficult to measure.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Although there has been some progress towards community control of education, culturally-relevant curriculum and an increase of aboriginal teachers, the current literacy situation is still grim.

In the dominant language of English, the Northwest Territories has the highest rate of "functional illiteracy" in Canada. Using the UNESCO standard of measurement, 44% of the overall population has less than a grade nine completion. However, of aboriginal people 72% of adults have less than grade nine.

The numbers of aboriginal children who make it through school to graduation or grade ten are still significantly low. Although aboriginal children make up 72% of school enrolment, only 5% will graduate from grade 12. Whereas in Canada 30% of school-aged children and youth leave school before graduating, the rate in the Northwest Territories is approximately 80%.

The low English literacy levels amongst aboriginal youth and young adults

hinders their ability to access training and wage employment. Because youth are such a large component of the population, the picture in most communities shows many undereducated, unemployed youth. Often they use neither their mother tongue nor English well. In many communities they are called the "walk abouts" as they aimlessly pass their days. Although the English literacy situation amongst aboriginal people is a major concern, this paper is focused on the situation with the aboriginal languages.

The loss of language for aboriginal people is alarming. Overall, 16% of aboriginal adults over the age of 15 years speak their native language only, 60% speak their own language and English as well, while 24% speak English only.

Both Dene and Inuit elders, the traditional teachers, express deep concern that the children and youth are losing their language; that the language they speak is very poor and is mixed with English. The young people have lost the richness and complexity of their language and their ability to describe and communicate. Although 94% of Inuit 15 to 24 year olds speak their language, it is often a mixed Inuktitut and English with a great loss of words.

The Inuit have a more deeply entrenched history of writing their language; 77% can read their language and 74% can write it. Amongst the Dene only 16% can read their language and 11% can write it. The language of the Inuit can be classed as still vital and highly viable, with a remarkable degree of homogeneity of the language across the circumpolar world from Greenland to Alaska. There is a relatively wide array of publications available in Inuktitut as compared to the Dene languages.

Use of the Dene languages is declining. This is indicated by the fact that the percentage of 15 to 24 year olds (62%) who speak their language is substantially lower than the rate for older people (75%). Although some of the Dene languages still have relatively large number of speakers left, others are in difficulty. The number of speakers of Gwich'in, the language of the people in the Mackenzie Delta, remaining is dangerously small. Even those languages which are not so seriously endangered are in need of aggressive intervention to ensure their survival.

THE CHALLENGE

..language cannot be separated from the living culture from which it arises. The recognition of language is not just the recognition of a system of words, but of a unique perception of the world and of the peoples and societies which hold these perceptions. (The Report of the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages, 1986. Page 18.)

The overall challenge is to ensure that in the Northwest Territories aboriginal languages do not die out. The languages must survive in order to bridge the traditional and modern worlds that the people carry within themselves and confront in their daily lives.

According to the Canadian Assembly of First Nations, Inuktitut is a "flourishing" language in need of prevention strategies to ensure its health and survival and the Dene languages are "enduring" languages in need of expansion strategies to ensure their continued survival. (Towards Linguistic Justice For First Nations, 1990)

Within this overall challenge, there are three aspects that are particularly critical if the languages are to flourish. First, a new schooling system must provide an education that meets the cultural and linguistic needs of the children and their families in each community. The community school must become a part of the traditional passing of the culture and the language from one generation to the next.

Second, the damage and loss from the past must be undone. The adults, especially the young adults, must be provided with an opportunity and a reason to recover their language and culture. People need to see some value and to have the opportunity to integrate the traditions of the past with the life of the present and the future.

Third, the languages must not be relegated to languages of the past alone, because if they do they will die with the elders and their way of life. The languages must become the living languages of the present, as comfortable and as expressive with computer technology, medical terminology and legislative writing as they always have been with the knowledge and wisdom of the land.

EXPERIMENTS & ACTIONS TO MEET THE CHALLENGE

The aboriginal people of the north are reaching for and taking control of the political, economic and social forces in their society. This is most obvious in the changes of the last two decades. In the beginning of aboriginal dominance in the political apparatus of government, in the movement towards the settlement of land claims and the three successfully completed claims.

Within this context of political and socio-economic change, the people have demanded change in the schooling of their children. At times there has been a conscious recognition and other times an intuitive understanding that providing a more culturally relevant school program for children will not be enough. There must also be opportunities for adults to recover their language and their culture. There is also a deepening recognition that if the languages are not used in all aspects of everyday life, no amount of schooling or community programming will enable them survive.

Instinctively, there is an understanding that aboriginal languages and literacy must be an integral part of family life, school life, business life, political life, community life. Therefore, the use of aboriginal languages, oral and written, must be promoted, encouraged and ensured an ongoing, integral place in the life of the community.

Taking Back the Education of the Children

As the administration of the schooling system was decentralized, parents were able to develop some control over the education of their children. They believed that the school had a responsibility to teach the children the language and to incorporate the cultural strength of the community into the child's learning experiences.

Not all parents felt or feel this way. Many parents are so alienated from the school system that they do not care what is taught, how it is taught or whether their children attend. Many families are so troubled with violence and addictions, that education does not have a place in their daily lives. Some parents have learned their own school lessons all too well and believe that the best future for their children lies in them learning English well and becoming accomplished in all the skills required by modern Canadian society. They feel that learning the mother tongue and the traditional ways is not important and will hinder their children's chances of success.

In spite of these obstacles, parents have formed community education councils to run the schools and a growing number of Northern, aboriginal teachers have joined them in designing and implementing significant changes to how children are educated.

Initially, small interventions were tried. The elders were brought into the schools and the classrooms to teach the children traditional skills, to tell stories and make the mother tongue part of the school environment. Time was set aside in the school week for language lessons. The education councils designed land-based programs and the teachers took the children out to the bush or on to the tundra for a few days each year, so they could experience the lifestyle of their elders.

The Board of Education for the Baffin region began immersion Inuktitut programs for elementary aged children and also determined that they would devote some part of the budget to publishing Inuktitut books for young children.

In 1989 the Baffin Board of Education took a further step and developed an integrated curriculum that was more than a language or cultural program added on to the main purpose of school. They believed that thinking and learning needs to take place in the mother tongue of the Inuit before it can occur effectively in a second language. *Piniaqtavut*[5] develops learning experiences for children from an Inuit perspective. Materials are developed by Inuit in Inuktitut and the content begins with the experiences of the child within the family, the community and the culture. The philosophical base incorporates Inuit relationship with the sky, the sea, the land and the community. Learning experiences include land-based classes and returning to the elders their traditional role of teacher.

Similar developments are gradually taking place with the Dene. After some years, it was obvious that teaching the language as a small part of the curriculum or having elders visit the school was not having enough of an impact.

The philosophy behind *Dene Kede*, a Dene curriculum, begins with the Dene story of creation which

> "tells us that as human beings, we are dependent on the land for survival and that continued survival requires not simply knowledge of, but respect for all things on earth. The purpose of this curriculum is to give this perspective back to our children. There is a need to root ourselves in tradition not for the sake of the past but for the sake of the future. Our children, with the gift of their culture, can work towards ensuring our future survival as well as the survival of humankind." (Dene Kede, 1992).

Dene Kede was developed under the guidance of a council of elders. This fact is absolutely critical to the curriculum's authenticity and to the respect and validity it will have in the Dene communities. It is currently being implemented in the schools of the Western Arctic. However, there are still obstacles to overcome. The majority of the teachers are still not aboriginal or from the North. Some have actively resisted the *Dene Kede* curriculum; questioning how will they test the students and questioning its value in the education of the children. Others cannot bring the cultural background necessary to teach the curriculum. Until the majority of teachers in the school system are from the North and are aboriginal it will not be possible for aboriginal people to fully have control of the education of their children.

There are further obstacles if the children do not have the language and culture reinforced in their families and community. There is a danger that their mother tongue will become just a subject taught in school unless it is a vital part of their everyday lives.

There are several generations of adults who are not fluent or literate in their own language. This is especially true amongst the Dene, but there is a noticeable loss of language amongst young Inuit adults as well. These adults and parents speak a mixed mother tongue and English language at home and in the community. It is not the rich, complex language of the elders. Moreover, the mother tongue is not used in places of business, of recreation, or in local government. More than recovering control of children's education is needed.

Undoing the Damage & the Loss

Community-based programs in aboriginal language and literacy development respond to the needs of adults to recover their language and rediscover the richness of their culture. Any project is developed and designed by people in a community to meet their particular needs, and then further developed and managed by a community-based organization, which is a political organization, an educational council, or sometimes a cultural organization.

Since 1989-90 there have been projects in nearly half the communities. Some have been very successfully in meeting the needs of the community, others have

faltered. The following vignettes provide a glimpse of some of these projects with some analysis of what factors have made them succeed or falter.

Coral Harbour

Coral Harbour is a very small Inuit community of 600 people on the coast of Hudson Bay. For the most part, the community is still very traditional in lifestyle but over the past four years, people in the community have organized a number of successful Inuktitut literacy projects. Each of the projects have interwoven with and supported the others, so that there is a sense that something whole and important is happening in the community.

Probably the most critical component of language and literacy activity in the community over the years has been the Elder's Writing Project. Elders from the community have been involved in writing and publishing books on the history, traditions and culture of the Community and its people. The publishing of the books caused many of the younger adults in the community to place a new value on being fluent and literate in their own language. The books written by the elders provided Inuktitut language materials for the school children in their own dialect and about something that was of intense interest to them, their own community.

A second component of the project, introduced a little later, brought Inuktitut language instruction into the adult (English language) academic upgrading program at the community college learning centre. Young adults, who were preparing for entry into the wage economy, received instruction in their own language, validating it as a language important for their adult work life. As part of their Inuktitut language program, these young adults worked with elders to write booklets on subjects that were of interest to the community. Thus more written material was made available in the language for the community to use. They researched the histories of the families who had settled in the community and developed family trees that linked them as a community and to other communities of Inuit.

One component of the language and literacy work in the community that has had an immense impact has been the use of the community radio station which is controlled by the people in the community. Nearly everyone listens to it daily. The radio has been used to stimulate discussion on language issues; everything from how many different dialects are spoken in the homes of the community to what are the things people want to see written in the books and whether they should develop their community dictionary (they did). The radio was also used for fun things like telling stories and holding language quizzes and contests. Use of the radio had a major impact in promoting the importance and value of the language in modern society. Last year more than 100 people regularly participated in the radio language programs.

For a period of time in 1990 and 1991, the momentum slowed. There were no

people who could or would get involved to coordinate the projects, so things stopped for a while. By late 1991, people came forward again and the projects re-started. In very small communities, this is not uncommon. There are a limited number of people who can provide leadership because of the harsh demands of the Northern traditional lifestyle and meeting the many needs of frequently troubled communities. In another community an entire literacy project came to a stop because nearly every woman in the community was engaged in making special craft items for the 1992 EXPO in Spain. They had an opportunity to earn some wages for a period of some months and all else became second priority.

In Coral Harbour, the strength of the ongoing projects has been the consistent support and involvement of the elders and the sheer perseverance of a handful of individuals who would not give up. The creativity of the projects in using community radio and publishing meaningful materials ensured that language, oral and written, was deeply rooted in the life of the community.

Hay River Reserve

In Hay River Reserve, which is a very small South Slavey community of 200 people near Great Slave Lake in the Western Arctic, there are a couple of exciting projects meeting with some success and some problems. From 1990 until the spring of 1992 there was a very innovative Slavey literacy project in the community. The project was initiated by the commitment of one woman, deeply concerned about the loss of the Slavey language. She did the community research, convinced the Band Council to support her, prepared the funding proposals and put the program together. There were three main components: first, introducing a Slavey language component into the College English upgrading program; secondly, student-created projects that re-introduced written Slavey into community life; and thirdly, a desk-top publishing venture to create and publish Slavey language printed materials.

The adult students involved in the project first worked with the instructor to improve their oral skills in their language and to learn to read and write it. Once they were confident of their language abilities, they consulted with people in the community, particularly the elders, in order to design projects for themselves that also would be meaningful for the community. Some of the students mapped the traditional hunting and fishing areas of the community with the traditional Slavey names, which had been replaced with English names. A large map was put up in the Band Council office and small maps that could be carried in the pocket were given to every member of the community. Reclaiming the names of places was very important to the community and especially the elders.

The students also produced regular newsletters in Slavey and distributed them to every resident. The newsletter became an important part of community life. Some of the students chose to produce some simple books in Slavey for their own children and for the school. Others interviewed every member of the

community and produced a calendar in Slavey, in which every person's birthday was listed.

At the same time as this project was happening, the Band Council was close to achieving a dream of many years. An alcohol and drug treatment centre was under construction in the community. People who seek treatment must either go to the capital, Yellowknife, or to Southern Canada and the political leaders of the community fought for years to build a facility in the region that they would control. As the construction of the building began, the leadership began to plan how the centre would operate. They are determined that the centre will be managed and staffed by people from the community and have put training programs in place so that personnel will be ready when the building is ready.

They also believe that treatment programs are most effective if they provide the spiritual and cultural basis that leads to the healing of the whole person, and they decided that the treatment centre must operate in the Slavey language and initiated a project to develop Slavey terminology for the addictions treatment and counselling field. This work is now nearly completed and when the centre opens in the summer 1993, all counselling, all patient records, all documents will be in the Slavey language.

However, the other project has come to a halt. The woman who was the single driving force behind the project accepted a job teaching in the nearby high school. She is still teaching Slavey, but the project she started in the community has ceased without her. In part, this is because there are very few people sufficiently fluent and literate in the language who could take over her role in the project. It is also because, as in other small communities, when a committed leader turns to another project, there is often no one immediately available who will pick up the work. Hay River Reserve has a group of committed people working towards a sober, healthy community in control of its own destiny. Speaking, reading and writing their language is part of working towards that reality; but if the people in the community are going to continue in their language and cultural recovery work, more language resource people are needed.

Lutsel K'e

Lutsel K'e is a small Chipewyan Dene community of 250. Like Hay River Reserve, in recent years the political leaders, the Chief and Band Council, have also placed great emphasis, at least verbally, on developing a sober and healthy community as well as developing the Chipewyan language, particularly in its written form. The Band Council aggressively developed a project and sought government funding for a Chipewyan literacy program for the community.

Initially, a pilot project was developed to train two local women to be the teachers and to develop a learning program and materials that would meet the needs of the community. There were one or two long community meetings to

discuss the project.

Many of the elders were very disturbed about the new orthography writing system and wanted a return to the old syllabic writing system that they knew and could use. This is an issue in many of the Dene communities; the elders still use the old writing system taught by the missionaries while the children are learning the new system developed by Dene educators and linguists. The new writing system is here to stay but it causes splits in communities and separates the elders from the children.

The project in Lutsel K'e faltered very early and never took hold in the community. The difficulties began in the pilot phase. The trainer came from outside the community and used a whole language, language experience approach to teaching literacy. The women who were being trained wanted to be taught and to teach in the very prescribed way that they remembered from their own schooling. From the beginning they made it very clear they would not use any of the methods they were being taught and they felt the pilot project was a failure and a waste of their time.

Once the project itself started, there was one teacher who organized the teaching program, but there were no students. Although the Chief and Band Councillors had committed themselves and the staff to participate in the program, to be role models for the community, they never did. Too many other demands occupied their time.

A few students came for a short time but they stopped attending. The teacher was experiencing personal problems at the time and lost her enthusiasm and commitment for the project. At the end, the only person who came for classes was the non-native adult education instructor who wanted to learn the language.

Rae-Edzo

Rae-Edzo is the largest Dogrib Dene community in the Western Arctic with a population of 1500 people. Many people in the community are fluent in their language but very few can read and write it. The community is the centre of Dogrib politics, economic activity, social and cultural life.

About a year ago a number of employers in Rae-Edzo came together to discuss the use of the Dogrib language in the workplace. They formed a committee to further explore the interest in Dogrib workplace language and literacy programs. The committee represents the band council, the community economic development agency, the hamlet council, the parish council, the friendship centre and the government offices.

They conducted a needs assessment to determine the interest, commitment and support of employers and employees for Dogrib language use in the workplace. Twenty-two of the 26 employers in the community were supportive and response from employees was enthusiastic. Since most of the residents of

the community are Dogrib speakers, people believed it was important to provide services in the language of the community. They noted that most workers in the offices spoke to each other in Dogrib when they were talking about personal or social matters, but many would switch to English when the subject matter was work-related. The staff at the nursing station believed they should be keeping patient records in Dogrib. Meetings of the Band Council or the Hamlet Council should be available in Dogrib as well as English.

The needs assessment and subsequent report is a model currently being shared with other communities. The committee has now launched a Dogrib literacy program, establishing a model whereby employees have time off from work one afternoon a week to go to class and give one evening of their personal time for class.

The program has two goals. The first is to simply offer Dogrib language development and literacy classes for employees in the community. The second is to develop and standardize Dogrib terminology for modern office use and to share that standardized terminology with the other Dogrib communities. For example, the Dogrib (or any aboriginal) language does not have a word for fax machine or photocopier or computer. The language provides rich words and expressions for all the things of the traditional culture and lifestyle. Now, the people are developing and agreeing on the words to describe the modern work environment they also inhabit.

The project so far appears to be very successful. There are a number of critical factors in the success of the project. The Dogrib language and culture in Rae-Edzo is very strong and there are quite a few resource people to share the roles of teaching and developing terminology. Dogrib people are a significant part of most workplaces generating a high degree of agreement on the importance of providing services in their language and ensuring their language is used in the workplace. There is a strong tradition of political leadership within the Dene Nation as a whole that comes from the Dogrib communities. But most importantly, the project came about because those involved felt it was necessary and important and they were committed to participating.

Using the Languages in New Ways

Flourishing languages change constantly and adapt to new circumstances and new technologies. As oral tradition languages adapt to the changing circumstances of the modern North, they must become more than an expression of the past and of traditional culture. As aboriginal people take control of the political, economic, service and governmental sectors they will bring their languages into the workplace, whether the work is providing government services, expediting mining exploration, providing patient care or developing models of aboriginal self-government.

Because the aboriginal languages of the Northwest Territories have only

recently developed as written languages, there is not a heritage of literature or written discourse. Creating a written literature is part of re-creating the languages within a new context for ancient cultures.

In the last decade there has been a great deal of effort put into recording the stories, legends, knowledge and truths of the elders who are the carriers of the history. These oral traditions projects have documented traditional medicine, traditional place names, traditional scientific knowledge and much more. Some of the stories have been illustrated and published for children for use in the schools. But there has not yet emerged a strong aboriginal language literature. There is a distinct danger that if the only written materials are stories and legends from the past, that the language and the culture will exist only in the past.

In the last year, the Literacy Office has initiated a series of workshops to develop writers as one action to encourage the development of a Northern, aboriginal languages literature.

In any workshop there must be three to four speakers of a language in order for them to work together, writing, reading their work to each other, brainstorming, editing and re-writing. Each workshop usually brings together three language groups at once. The language of interaction within the workshop is English — the common language between the participants as well as the language of the instructor. Each group of people participate in two workshops separated in time by several months to allow for reflection and ongoing writing. By the end of 1993 workshops in every language will be completed.

The first book of writings from these workshops will soon be published and several more will result. They will be an important addition to the small number of books in aboriginal languages.

Most of the participants are those who have written a lot in their language, transcribing stories from the elders, writing word and picture books for children and documenting traditional knowledge and skills. These have been language survival activities. Many of the participants have exclaimed that they have never thought of themselves as "writers" until they experienced the writing workshops. For the first time they are deciding to write, in their language, poems, stories, books that come from their own experience and their own imagination.

In addition to creating experiences that enable these people to begin writing freely, the workshops provides them with the models and experiences to deliver future workshops in their own regions for others. In the future, there will be support for more workshops delivered by the original participants to develop more writers.

One of the greatest obstacles will continue to be the difficulties in getting aboriginal languages materials published. The North American recession is creating enormous difficulties for Canadian publishers, but even in the best of times they were not interested in publishing aboriginal languages books. There is too small a population and market for such books and publishing them is not cost-effective. One Northern publisher has, in partnership with some of the

regional boards of education, published books for children in the aboriginal languages.

Perhaps the single most important and difficult challenge facing the aboriginal people of the North is to create a viable publishing venture to publish books in their languages.

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF LITERACY

> The message we received in school was that our language was not important. It was not taught. English was important and we were taught to speak and read and write English. So, to read and write a language makes it important. Reading and writing my language validates its importance and that is the point of literacy. (Fibbie Tatti. 1992)

The experiences of the people of the Northwest Territories indicate that there are three important roles for literacy in the survival and re-vitalization of the aboriginal languages of the North. The first is validating the contemporary value of the languages; the second is preserving the traditions of the past for future generations; the third is re-creating the languages within a changing society.

The act of using a written form of an aboriginal language begins to undo the damage of the past by validating its value as a language within the society, alongside the dominant language, English. Written material — books, stories, newspapers — in aboriginal languages counters the message from the past that only English is important and has value because it is written and people are taught to read and write it.

The elders tell us that writing the language, writing down the stories, the history, the knowledge, the wisdom, the traditions, is the preserving role of literacy. It is necessary to prevent the culture and the language from disappearing. Writing the language allows the people to reach back to the people of thousands of years ago and to also reach forward to the people of the future. They have said that the wisdom, the culture, the traditions of the past can no longer be passed to the next generation through oral means alone. As the elders pass from us, we lose the experiences of the last generation to live totally the traditional lifestyle. If we tell their lessons and their stories in writing, that experience is not lost for us or for our children and their children.

In addition to the validating and preserving role of literacy, there is the critical role of creating a changing language, an adapting language, a literature of a changing culture. In the face of an overwhelming English language culture, the aboriginal languages cannot afford to use the English words for fax machine or computer or pneumonia. Terminology must be developed that brings technology or foreign concepts and words within the language and culture of aboriginal people. In the face of newspapers, magazines and books in English, aboriginal languages literature and publishing is essential. There is little point in people learning to read and write their language unless there is material to

read and a publisher for the writing. The languages will flourish when they are used, orally and in written form, in every facet of community life; to keep patient records at the community nursing station, keeping records of Band Council meetings, to mark buildings and streets with signs as well as in the personal communications between individuals and within families.

The aboriginal people of the North are involved in actions that address these three roles. The work in the schools, to take back the education of the children, is a major action to validate the language and the culture of the people, to preserve the traditional role of the elders and the adults as the teachers of the children and to create a school system that reflects the culture, both past and present. Until most of the teachers are from that culture and until the children experience their language and culture in the home and in the community as well as the school, the goal will not be reached.

Community-based literacy projects also serve to validate the language and the culture of the aboriginal people alongside the dominant English language and culture. At their best, these projects provide actions and products that not only preserve the past for the present and future generations; they also provide materials and information that are important and useful to the people and create new uses for the language in the daily life and work of the community. The projects work well when the whole community is involved, but the elders are especially important. Even then, the projects are often fragile and operate on shaky ground because there are no longer enough people fluent as well as literate in the language. If one person leaves the community, falls ill, has a baby or takes a salaried job an entire project can falter.

New ventures in writing and publishing books are the challenge of the future. If children can participate in an education that reflects their heritage and culture; if the language is a changing, living, adapting part of the daily life of the community, then creating aboriginal languages literature will complete the circle.

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