

Stepping Stones

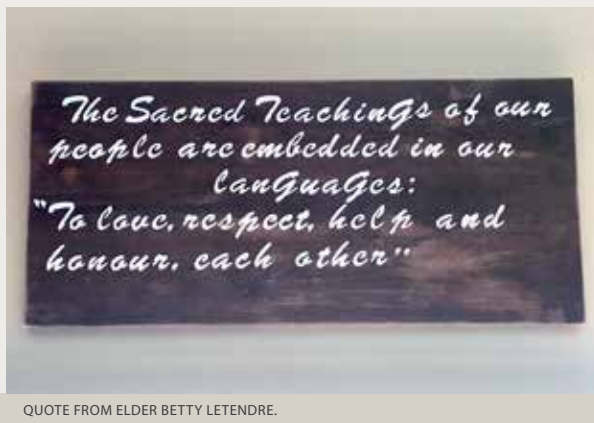


INDIGENOUS LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND REVITALIZATION

Planning your learning journey

How does awareness of Indigenous linguistic diversity and language revitalization advance the process of reconciliation?

Note: The terms Indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nations, Métis and Inuit are used interchangeably throughout this document, as various sources use different terminology.



FIRST STEPS



“Embodied in Aboriginal languages is our unique relationship to the Creator, our attitudes, beliefs, values and the fundamental notion of what is truth. Language is the principal means by which culture is accumulated, shared and transmitted from generation to generation. The key to identity and retention of culture is one’s ancestral language.”¹

– Late Elder Eli Taylor from the Sioux Valley First Nation

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE GROUPS AND DIVERSITY ACROSS ALBERTA

Diverse Indigenous languages have been spoken throughout present-day Alberta since time immemorial. There are five major language families spanning Alberta. The Algonquian language group includes Cree and Blackfoot, both of which have several dialects. Assiniboine and Nakoda are part of the Siouan language group. The Athapaskan language group includes Beaver, Chipewyan, Tsuut’ina and Dene Tha. [Michif](#), the language of the Métis, is a unique language spoken in Alberta. As well, other Indigenous languages are spoken by Indigenous Peoples in Alberta who originate from other parts of Canada.²





LANGUAGE AND WORLDVIEW

Culture and language are intrinsically linked; language is culture.³ Language provides access to authentic culture and transmits culture and values from generation to generation.⁴ Many Indigenous people feel that the survival of their cultures and societies can occur only if their people continue to speak their languages. “Indigenous languages provide fluent speakers with specific and ancient insights regarding wisdom, values, traditions, and cultural practices.”⁵ Indigenous peoples’ connection to the land, the importance of that relationship and world view itself are all imparted through language.⁶



WHAT CAUSES THE EXTINCTION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES?

Several factors have contributed to language loss within Indigenous communities. Historically, epidemics and conflicts led to declining populations, which in some cases decimated entire First Nations, such as the Beothuk, thereby rendering their language extinct.⁷

Government legislation and policies of forced assimilation have also contributed to Indigenous language extinction. The *Indian Act* (1876) stripped First Nations people of their political power, forced them to abide by various rules, and was intended to eradicate First Nations cultures through assimilation. Government-mandated residential schools existed in Canada from the 1840s to the 1990s and were also aimed at assimilation and cultural genocide. Indigenous languages were strictly banned within residential schools, and this was enforced by harsh physical, mental and emotional punishment.⁸

As a result of racism, systemic policies of assimilation and attempted cultural genocide, some Indigenous people have chosen not to pass on their language to their children and grandchildren. The shame associated with speaking one’s own Indigenous language, both in the residential school system and Canadian society at large, has left a lasting impact on language acquisition and retention. The impact of these factors and the gradual decline in fluent speakers as the population ages puts the survival of many Indigenous languages in a critical state.

The Government of Canada presently does not have an official policy to protect or recognize Indigenous languages, although this is a recommendation of the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 13⁹](#) and the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action 13 and 14¹⁰](#). Bill S-212, the *Aboriginal Languages of Canada Act*, first introduced in December 2015, “recognizes the right of the aboriginal peoples of Canada to use, preserve, revitalize and promote their languages and expresses the Government of Canada’s commitment to preserve, revitalize and promote aboriginal languages in Canada by protecting them and using them where appropriate.” As of September 2018, Bill S-212 had not yet been passed by the Senate.¹¹

Recruitment of certified Indigenous language teachers has presented challenges. The Federal Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures has made recommendations to support language revitalization, including a study of teacher recruitment, retention and training.¹² As well, the continual funding shortfalls for federally funded First Nations schools may limit their capacity to deliver Indigenous language programming.¹³

APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

The process of language revitalization can be approached using different methodologies. According to the First Peoples’ Cultural Council, the keys to language revitalization are collaboration with all communities, consultation with community stakeholders, and assessing and researching the language status.¹⁴ The Assembly of Native Educators in Alaska believes elders, parents, aspiring language learners, communities, community organizations, educators, schools, education agencies, linguists and media producers all have a role to play in language revitalization.¹⁵ Funding, personnel, time available and motivation are also important factors to consider.¹⁶

The Task Force on Aboriginal Languages has recommended culturally relevant education through immersion and second language programs, community involvement with a focus on elders and parents, and language training for teachers.¹⁷

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Prior to European contact there were approximately 300 Indigenous languages spoken; of these 70 are still spoken in Canada today. Statistics Canada 2016 census data showed that only 15.6 per cent of the Indigenous population reported being able to conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language.¹⁸

Linguistic experts predict that only three Indigenous languages—Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut—will survive this century. This is due to several factors, including few speakers relative to their associated population, fluent speakers tending to be older adults, most speakers being bilingual in French or English and the language not being taught to children.

PROMISING PRACTICES IN ALBERTA

In Alberta's education system, work is being done to help facilitate Indigenous language learning. Alberta Education's [First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework](#)¹⁹ commits to "[providing] First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners with access to culturally relevant learning opportunities," and support for Indigenous language learning falls within this mandate. According to Education Minister David Eggen, "studies show learning and having the ability to speak an Indigenous language increases academic success for students and strengthens the connection between Indigenous people and their culture."²⁰

In order to facilitate Indigenous language course development and instruction, Alberta Education has released a [First Nations, Métis and Inuit Language and Culture Twelve Year \(Kindergarten to Grade 12\) Template](#).²¹ It can be adapted to meet the needs of communities in order to construct locally developed courses aligned to local cultures and languages. As well, Blackfoot and Cree Language and Culture Twelve Year (K–12) programs of study are available to Alberta schools.

In addition, several provincial schools and First Nations–operated schools offer Indigenous language programs in order to facilitate language acquisition and revitalization.

RESOURCES

Elders and Knowledge Keepers play a central role in language revitalization. The knowledge they possess represents thousands of years of history and wisdom shared through oral traditions. For

more information on the protocols of working with an Elder, please consult the Alberta Teachers' Association Elder Protocol Stepping Stone.

In addition to those listed below, there are a number of other programs, resources and apps available that support Indigenous language revitalization.

Websites

- The Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park website includes a brief history of the Blackfoot language, syllabics and sign language. It also includes a Blackfoot dictionary with audio clips of the words and phrases being spoken in Blackfoot. www.blackfootcrossing.ca/language.html
- The Inuktitut Language Programme's goal is to preserve and protect the language of the Inuit and promote its use. www.avataq.qc.ca/en/Institute/Departments/Inuktitut-Language
- Learn Michif is a website that houses lessons and videos on the Michif language. www.learnmichif.com/
- Rocky Mountain Nakoda is an independent website intended to help communicate, standardize, maintain and accurately preserve the authentic ancestral İyāhé Nakoda for current and future generations. www.rockymountainnakoda.com
- The Tsuut'ina Gunaha Institute's vision is the full revitalization of the Tsuut'ina Gunaha in all forms, spoken and written, as a legacy to past, present and future Tsuut'ina People. <http://tsuutinanation.com/tsuutina-gunaha-institute/>

Apps

- ATC Cree, Piikani Paitakiyyssin, and Saisi Dene

NEXT STEPS



"Through language people are connected with their history, their ancestors and their land, and as a language declines, so too does the sense of identity of a people."²²

Given the fact that language and culture are inextricably woven, it is important for educators to be aware of the link between language, culture and identity for many Indigenous students. Language connects people to their families, history, ancestors, elders, knowledge keepers, stories and land.²³

Reconciliation means "establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada." The Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls upon the Government

of Canada to acknowledge that Aboriginal rights include language rights and enact policies to preserve Aboriginal languages.²⁴

Schools can play a vital role in Indigenous language revitalization. Individual classroom teachers can demonstrate respect for diverse Indigenous languages by engaging with local Indigenous language speakers. Building these relationships deepens awareness of the diversity of Indigenous languages and cultures, thereby advancing the process of reconciliation.

Continuing Your Learning Journey

- How does language revitalization promote student engagement and belonging in school?
- How can your professional practices show respect and appreciation for the languages of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit?

NOTES

¹ *Towards a New Beginning, A Foundational Report For A Strategy to Revitalize First Nations, Inuit and Métis Languages and Culture.* http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/pch/CH4-96-2005-eng.pdf

² "About, Languages" Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI), University of Alberta website. www.ualberta.ca/canadian-indigenous-languages-and-literacy-development-institute/about/languages

³ *Linguistic Ideologies of Native American Language Revitalization: Doing the Lost Language Ghost Dance.* David Leedom Shaul. Springer, 2014.

⁴ *We Are Our Language: Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community.* Barbara A Meek. University of Arizona Press, 2010.

⁵ "Why are Aboriginal Perspectives in the Curriculum?" Dwayne Donald, University of Alberta. <https://sites.ualberta.ca/~cjackson/EDEL335/aboriginaperspectives.htm>

⁶ *Towards a New Beginning: A Foundational Report For A Strategy To Revitalize First Nation, Inuit and Métis Languages and Cultures.* A Report to the Minister of Canadian Heritage by The Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, June 2005. p. 22-24. http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/pch/CH4-96-2005-eng.pdf

⁷ "Shawnadithit: Last of the Beothuk," Canadian Encyclopedia. www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/shawnadithit-last-of-the-beothuk-feature/

⁸ *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future.* Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, pp 1–6 and 83–87. www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec_Summary_2015_05_31_web_o.pdf

⁹ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html

¹⁰ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action.* www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

¹¹ Senate Public Bill S-212, the *Aboriginal Languages Act of Canada.* www.parl.ca/LegisInfo/BillDetails.aspx?billId=8064056&Language=E&Mode=1

¹² *Towards a New Beginning. A Foundation Report For A Strategy to Revitalize First Nations, Inuit and Métis Languages and Culture.* A Report to the Minister of Canadian Heritage by The Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, June 2005. http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/pch/CH4-96-2005-eng.pdf

¹³ Federal Spending on Primary and Secondary Education on First Nations Reserves. www.pbodpb.gc.ca/web/default/files/files/Publications/First_Nations_Education_EN.pdf

¹⁴ FPHLCC Language Authority and Planning Concept, November 5–6, 2009. www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/LAP_Concept_diagram.pdf

¹⁵ Guidelines for Strengthening Indigenous Languages. Assembly of Alaska Native Educators. February 2001. <http://ankn.uaf.edu/publications/language.html>

¹⁶ Shaul, *Linguistic Ideologies of Native American Language Revitalization.*

¹⁷ *Towards a New Beginning*, p vi.

¹⁸ The Aboriginal Languages of First Nations People, Métis and Inuit, Census of Population, 2016. Statistics Canada. www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016022/98-200-x2016022-eng.pdf

¹⁹ *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework.* Alberta Learning, February 2002. <https://education.alberta.ca/media/482255/first-nations-metis-and-inuit-policy-framework-2002.pdf>

²⁰ "Alberta government putting money towards helping Indigenous languages." *Global News*, July 25, 2017. <https://globalnews.ca/news/3622389/alberta-government-putting-money-towards-helping-indigenous-languages/>

²¹ (FNMI) Language and Culture Twelve-Year (Kindergarten to Grade 12) Template. Alberta Education 2010. <https://education.alberta.ca/media/1626270/language-culture-12y-template.pdf>

²² *Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages 2010.* First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council, p 7. www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/2010-report-on-the-status-of-bc-first-nations-languages.pdf

²³ *Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages 2010.*

²⁴ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action.*

*Note: All websites were accessed and verified at the time of publication.



Stepping Stones is a publication of the Alberta Teachers' Association **Walking Together Project** intended to support certificated teachers on their learning journey to meet the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Foundational Knowledge competency in the *Teaching Quality Standard*.

Walking Together would like to acknowledge the contributions of First Nations, Métis and Inuit community members within Alberta in developing these resources.

For additional resources and information on Walking Together, visit www.teachers.ab.ca.

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Walking Together

EDUCATION FOR RECONCILIATION

