

**LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION IN NORTHERN MANITOBA:  
A STUDY OF AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CREE BILINGUAL PROGRAM**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis concerns a study of an immersion-style Cree language program in an elementary school in northern Manitoba. Using a collaborative action research model, students' language proficiency, attitudes and academic performance as well as parent and teacher interviews were analyzed to assess the effectiveness of the program and to explore the program's correspondence to community needs and expectations. Findings showed that while students were acquiring Cree vocabulary, their ability to communicate in Cree was very limited and they were not able to converse. Findings also showed that Cree Program students had generally positive attitudes toward Cree language and culture, and that the increased time devoted to Cree had no demonstrable negative effects on their academic performance in other subject areas. Adult interviews demonstrated clearly that community adults had both high hopes and realistic assessments of the program and of students' performance, and, perhaps most importantly, in light of the sad history of Aboriginal education in Canada, parents expressed a strong commitment to the Cree Program and appeared very engaged in their children's education.

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## CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

### Purpose of Study

Language and culture are intensely intertwined. When a culture thrives, it bodes well for the language; when a language dies, the culture is weakened. In Aboriginal communities, it is common for Elders to lament the decline of ancestral language use among the young, and it is not only the erosion of language skills that they fear but also the loss of a set of values, a way of seeing the world, a sense of peoplehood (Crystal, 2000). Eli Taylor, an elder from Sioux Valley First Nations articulates this fear:

“... If you destroy our languages you not only break down [our traditional] relationships, but you also destroy other aspects of our Indian way of life and culture, especially those that describe man's connection with nature, the Great Spirit, and the order of things. Without our languages, we will cease to exist as a separate people,” (in Battiste, 1998).

While the impact of indigenous language loss in Canadian Aboriginal societies does not appear to have been extensively researched, the scope of the loss is glaringly apparent. Norris and Jantzen (2002), in their study of 1996 census data, show that only 20 percent of Aboriginal children had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue. Owing to various assimilating factors including the “fall-out” from residential school language policy, urbanization, exposure to English media, etc., Aboriginal children living in Canada are less and less likely to speak their ancestral language and many are increasingly distanced from their ancestral culture as well.

It is widely recognized that cultural alienation is a major factor in the continuing ambivalence of many Aboriginal people towards public education (e.g. CAAS, 2002).

Recent data indicates that the school completion rate of Manitoba's Aboriginal students is declining (Hallett, 2000). Provincial and local education authorities are paying increasing attention to Aboriginal culture in an effort to reverse this trend (Manitoba, 2003). Schools have been mandated to integrate Aboriginal culture across the curriculum, and Aboriginal Studies and language courses are offered in many schools. Little study has been done to gauge the impact of these language and culture programs; however. To what extent are students learning Aboriginal culture and language in school, and how are these courses affecting their attitudes about formal education?

In contrast to the dearth of research on Aboriginal language and culture programs, French Immersion language programs have been widely scrutinized and hailed as a successful innovation in second language programming. A number of Aboriginal language experts have advocated the use of French Immersion style programming to maintain and revitalize Aboriginal languages (e.g. Francis & Reyhner, 2002). But this raises the question of whether "alien" forms of education can revitalize the languages and cultures they have helped to destroy? To what extent can immersion style programs help address the problems of Aboriginal language loss and cultural alienation? How effective can they be in Aboriginal schools? Will they work in the socio-cultural and linguistic contexts of Aboriginal communities?

The following paper is a proposal to answer these questions as they apply to one particular Aboriginal language and culture program: a Cree language immersion program in an elementary school in northern Manitoba.

## Background

The idea for this study grew out of my work experience in a northern Manitoba school district (School District of Mystery Lake) between 1987 and 2004, first as a teacher and then as district curriculum coordinator. As an educator, I was all too often witness to the ways in which our education system was failing to address the needs of many Aboriginal students, and while these gaps were of concern to many teachers and were addressed by numerous initiatives at various jurisdictional levels, the problems were complex and the outcomes of the intended improvements were often difficult to assess. The Cree Language Bilingual<sup>i</sup> Program (Cree Program) was different in that it was a grass roots initiative that came about as a response to a need expressed by the Thompson Aboriginal community in a survey conducted by the Thompson Aboriginal Education Advisory Council<sup>ii</sup>.

As a French Immersion specialist with 15 years of experience in the classroom, I was well aware of the possibilities and challenges inherent in immersion language programs, and while I had often been impressed by the second language proficiency displayed by immersion program students, I was also aware that bilingualism is a complex affair and that not all students in a French Immersion program attain equally high levels of second language proficiency. It seems that school experience alone is rarely sufficient to develop students' second language skills to a level approaching that of a child acquiring the language in the home or in the community. I was of the opinion that an Immersion style program alone would be unlikely to produce a cohort of bilingual students fully at ease in the Cree language. Moreover, while I was a supporter of the Cree Program and was proud to see it develop in my community, I also feared that saddling the

program with expectations it was unlikely to fulfil would lead to the demoralization and embitterment of people with a stake in the program.

While working with a team of Cree educators to develop curriculum outcomes for the Cree Program, the complexity of the endeavour became increasingly evident. Our outcomes addressed not only the students' linguistic learning, they also had much to do with traditional knowledge and cultural values. Moreover, the program presupposed a significant level of pedagogical and linguistic knowledge on the part of teachers, many of whom had minimal or no formal training in either second language pedagogy or Cree linguistics. As discussion revealed discrepancies between what was happening in classrooms and what was hoped for by teachers and parents, we became increasingly aware that some type of assessment of the program was needed; indeed, it was happening already, although in an informal, haphazard and often non-constructive way. The need for a formal and formative assessment of the Cree Program was often expressed in our program development meetings. This experience with the programming committee was one of the reasons I decided to focus my graduate studies and research on second language acquisition and programming, and to do my thesis research on the Cree Program.

### **Cree Program Description**

The Cree Program was developed by the School District of Mystery Lake in response to an Aboriginal Advisory Council study, which found that Thompson schools were failing to meet the needs and interests of many Aboriginal students. The city of Thompson, despite its relatively remote location, is nevertheless an urban centre, offering a variety of opportunities and services to people throughout the vast region of northern

Manitoba. The city, built in traditional Cree territory in the sixties to service a nickel-mining project, has seen a demographic shift as its predominantly Euro-Canadian population ages and declines and is replaced by a younger Aboriginal population moving in from surrounding communities. Currently, it is estimated that 40-50 percent of the population in Thompson schools is Aboriginal and the proportion is increasing.

The Aboriginal community in Thompson is predominantly Cree, though there are also other groups represented including Métis and Dene. However, since there was no pre-existing Aboriginal settlement in the immediate vicinity of the Thompson town-site, there is no single community or local variant of the Cree language that predominates in the city, nor is there any single cultural or political body that represents or speaks for Thompson's Aboriginal residents. Most families still retain close ties to their communities of origin, and many regional variants of the “N” and “TH” Cree dialects are spoken in the city.

The Cree Program is a language immersion<sup>iii</sup> program, where Cree is the language of instruction for 35 to 50 percent of the school day. The program began with two Kindergarten classes in September 2001, and subsequent grades have been added every year since. At present it comprises eight primary classes from Kindergarten to Grade 4. A locally developed Cree Language Arts curriculum has been developed to guide Cree instruction, while in other subjects, English language curricula are adapted for use in Cree by classroom teachers. The Cree Program is housed in Wapanohk Community School, a school with an expressed mandate and mission to provide programming with a traditional Cree cultural focus in both the Cree bilingual and the regular English language

programs. All of the teachers in the Cree Program are fluent Cree speakers, as are several other educators in the school. According to the goals of the Cree Program, students will:

- 1) learn to listen, speak, read and write in Cree,
- 2) meet provincial curriculum outcomes in all subject areas, including ELA,
- 3) learn Cree cultural knowledge and perspectives,
- 4) develop confidence and pride in their cultural and linguistic identity.

In addition to various challenges anticipated in any new, evolving immersion program (e.g.: shortage of teachers who are also competent speakers of the target language; personnel inexperienced in immersion techniques; lack of teaching materials; sense of being in a fishbowl; etc.) the task of the Cree Program is compounded by the challenges of working with an Aboriginal population that is highly transient, lacking confidence in schools and formal education, and somewhat divided or ambivalent about the value of maintaining the Cree language and culture. Moreover, at the inception of the project, it had generated high hopes and considerable publicity, thereby putting the staff and students under some pressure not only to succeed, but also to be seen to be successful. In addition to the expectation that students will become fluent Cree speakers, there is also the belief that, with cultural programming delivered by Aboriginal teachers, the program will offer a culturally appropriate form of education that will engender greater success and less student alienation for Aboriginal learners than mainstream programs.

### **Research Question**

The study described in the following pages was undertaken to explore the question: How successful is the Cree Program in Wapanohk School as an agent of Cree

language revitalization? The following five areas were specified to further focus the study:

- 1) How well do students in the program speak Cree? (i.e. How proficient are they at listening, speaking, reading, writing, and conversing?)
- 2) To what extent have students gained understanding and appreciation of Cree culture?
- 3) How are students performing in other subject areas, including English?
- 4) What are the community's (students, parents, teachers, other stakeholders) perceptions of the Cree program?
- 5) What could be done to strengthen and support the Cree Program?

The findings of this study will be forwarded to the Cree Program community (students, parents, teachers) and to the School District of Mystery Lake in the hope that they will help Cree Program staff and associates to improve the program and enable them to better focus limited energy and resources on areas of greatest importance and need. The findings should also be of value to the Thompson Aboriginal community in that they will shed light on the effectiveness of a Cree language revitalization program that was developed in response to community demand. I hope that an awareness of the program and its operations will also contribute to the strengthening of a sense of ownership of the program. This case study will also be of interest to other Aboriginal communities and the larger language revitalization movement, particularly since the efficacy of immersion style programming in Aboriginal language revitalization contexts has not been widely researched.

## CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature that follows will briefly touch on some fundamental language revitalization issues, survey various language program studies and suggest a rationale, a theoretical framework, and a methodology for a formal study of the Cree Program.

### **Language Revitalization.**

There is general agreement among experts that most of the world's languages are endangered and may disappear within several generations. Researchers warn that over half of the languages spoken today are not being effectively passed on to the next generation (Crystal, 2000; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Norris and Jantzen (2002), in a study of 1996 Census data, find that the prognosis for Aboriginal languages in Canada is even more pessimistic. Only 30 percent of approximately 800,000 Aboriginal people in Canada are able to converse in an Aboriginal language, and only 18 percent speak an Aboriginal tongue as their primary language in the home. Of the 50 Aboriginal languages spoken in Canada, only Cree, Inuktitut and Ojibway have sufficient numbers of speakers to be considered viable in the long term. Yet even these languages are considered to be threatened. Their populations of mother-tongue speakers are aging, and it is generally only in remote areas that they have significant intergenerational continuity. Aboriginal people in urban centres are much less likely to use an Aboriginal language in the home than people living on reserves. But the proportion of Canada's Aboriginal population that lives in urban centres is increasing, and in the cities, the ubiquity of English, separation from extended families and high rates of exogamous marriage combine to create a situation where very few children learn to speak their Aboriginal language fluently.

The revitalization of Aboriginal languages is a relatively recent concept, coalescing as a movement in the 1990s, in the same generation that saw a rapid decline in indigenous language use in Canada and around the world. Despite its relative youth, the concept of revitalization has become a preoccupation of numerous linguists and educators as well as of indigenous people around the world, as attested to by a rapidly increasing body of popular and scholarly literature on the topic (Abley, 2003; Crystal, 2000; Fishman, 2001; Francis & Reyhner, 2002; Hinton, 2003; Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Reyhner, 1997). A good deal of the literature focuses on models and programs of language revitalization in various places in the world and much of it is characterized by a tone of urgency.

### **Language Immersion Programs**

Immersion style language programming is widely advocated as a “best practice” in the maintenance or revitalization of indigenous or heritage languages (e.g. Crystal, 2000; Francis & Reyhner, 2002; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Immersion programming has been widely studied and has been shown to be effective (e.g. Baker, 2002; Cummins, 1993; Cummins and Swain, 1986; Genesee, 1987, Thomas and Collier, 2002). These studies demonstrate not only that students successfully learn the second language but also that this gain comes at no apparent cost to their skill development in the dominant language or in content areas. In fact, immersion students generally fare as well or better than students in comparable monolingual programs in all subject areas.

The most well known immersion programs are the Canadian French immersion varieties, which originated in the 1970s and 1980s as novel and exciting social and pedagogical experiments. These have been subjected to close scrutiny over a period of

over thirty years and study results have given immersion programs overwhelmingly positive reviews. These results have been noted around the world and have inspired similar programs in many languages. Baker notes that not only the programs but also the positive results have been widely replicated (Baker, 2002).

The Canadian programs and its clones are most often set up to teach a second international language to children who are already competent speakers of the dominant language of their home area (i.e. French for English-speaking Canadians, Spanish for English-speaking Americans, English for German-speaking Swiss, etc.). In these programs, both the target language and the students' first language are international languages of considerable prestige.

A variant form of standard immersion programming is the heritage<sup>iv</sup> language immersion program, which resembles standard immersion programming in structure and method, but which typically has more pronounced cultural aims. Heritage language programs are often established in areas where there is a strong immigrant community, and are intended to help descendants of immigrants maintain and preserve an ancestral language and culture. Many such programs exist in Canada (e.g. German, Hebrew, Ukrainian, etc.). In terms of their focus on maintenance and preservation of culture and language, heritage language programs have much in common with Aboriginal language revitalization programs. One important distinction, however, is the fact that most heritage language groups in Canada have an ancestral homeland elsewhere, where the language and culture are vibrant, and thus, assimilation and language loss among the immigrant group doesn't mean language death. In this sense, one could say that there is less riding on heritage language programs than on Aboriginal language revitalization efforts.

The success of language immersion programming has led to its increasing adoption by indigenous language revitalization movements. One example is described by Baker (1992) in a review of Welsh language schooling in Wales. There are also “new world” examples where immersion methods have been used to revitalize endangered languages. These include Maori, Hawaiian, Navajo and James Bay Cree (Stiles, 1997). Like the international language immersion programs they resemble, these revitalization programs have also generated positive reviews; however, more detailed information about the studies on which the reviews are based is less readily available.

### **Research Studies of Language Programs: Issues and Considerations**

#### ***Program Evaluation or Program Study?***

A good deal of the literature consulted for this study deals with language program evaluation and I was inclined, initially, to view my study as, essentially, a program evaluation. The term *evaluation*, however, is problematic in that it carries overtones of judgment and value and conjures up images of aloof experts who appear out of nowhere and make pronouncements on the value of things. These images do not easily co-exist with the focus on formative study and program improvement that I and my colleagues in the Cree program had envisioned. Consequently, I have opted to use the term “program study” wherever possible, to connote the formative and informative intent of this work. There will be an evaluative aspect to the study, in that the collection and analysis of data will lead to judgments about the degree of success of aspects of the program. Moreover, since much of the literature consulted uses the term “evaluation” rather freely, it will appear in the following discussion, but I am hopeful that readers will understand the term

in the broad sense, as including formative as well as summative study and participatory as well as disinterested research.

### *Rationale for a Language Program Study*

Unlike French immersion programs, Aboriginal language immersion programs have not been extensively studied. One likely reason is the relative youth and the small scale of most Aboriginal language immersion programs. It may also be that in the climate created by recent educational reform movements where terms like accountability and evaluation have been connoted with back-to-basics schooling and large-scale standardized testing, the notion of program evaluation is somewhat discredited in the eyes of people active in Aboriginal education. Certainly, with the limited resources and energy available to Aboriginal language programs, there is a tendency to focus on mere survival, and there is little left over for program research. Nevertheless, the importance of studying and assessing programming is underlined by many indigenous language experts, precisely because of the urgency of the task and the need to get the most benefit out of the limited resources available (Ahenakew, 1988; Hinton, 2003). Fishman underscores the need for critical reflection and evaluation in his authoritative work on the reversal of language shift:

The sociolinguistic landscape is littered with the relatively lifeless remains of societally marginalized and exhausted [language revitalization] movements that have engaged in struggles on the wrong front . . .without real awareness of what they were doing or of the problems that faced them.” (1991, p. 113).

### ***Methodology of Language Program Research***

There are a number of fundamental issues that commonly run through discussions of language program research methodology. These can be organized around four key considerations (Jarvis & Adams, 1979):

- 1) Purpose. Why conduct a study? In whose interest is a study undertaken?
- 2) Target. What is to be studied? What is the scope of the study. Which aspects of a program should it cover?
- 3) Agent. Who conducts the study? An outsider or an insider? An individual or a team? Who makes important decisions? To whom does the researcher report?
- 4) Method. How is a program studied? What research methods are used in the gathering and analysis of information?

Current literature indicates that while the basic questions outlined in the above considerations have changed little in the last fifty years, the answers have changed a great deal. Lynch (2003) describes a considerable shift in methodology and epistemological orientation during the latter decades of the twentieth century. From a process rooted in a positivistic, scientific paradigm, he suggests that program evaluation theory has moved towards an *interpretivist*, post-modern paradigm that is less comfortable with isolated facts and increasingly more comfortable with holistic impressions and interpretation rooted in experience. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this shift in any great detail, I would like to briefly note some of the important ways in which the basic questions outlined above are addressed in language program evaluation literature.

In their 1979 publication, Jarvis and Adams presented program evaluation as a scientific discipline undertaken in the service of decision-makers. Their recommendations

promoted reliance on standardized instruments and use of quantifiable data as much as possible. Objectivity was held up as an ideal, and an "expert outsider" was considered the most likely to conduct an evaluation objectively.

A number of subsequent publications have questioned the suitability of the scientific model for language program evaluations. For instance, Genesee (1987) suggested that the classic scientific model, with equivalent control and experimental groups, was virtually impossible to establish with any validity, and held standardized tests to be preferable to comparisons of quasi-equivalent groups. On the other hand, other language experts (e.g. Cummins, 1986) have cast doubt on the ability of standardized tests to give valid and reliable measures of either language aptitude or skill. In their meta-analyses of research studies in bilingual education, both Baker (2002) and Genesee (1987) judged large numbers of studies invalid because of failure to meet basic standards of research methodology. Baker found the shortcomings fell into three main categories: 1) the studies tended to compare what is not comparable; 2) research was focused on what was easily measurable, not necessarily what was most useful; and 3) the studies lacked the qualitative data needed to give a complete picture.

Recent literature on the evaluation of language programs is less taken with the scientific model. Flexibility, subjectivity, interpretation and negotiation are identified as important considerations and ethnographic and other qualitative methods are considered to be at least as valid and reliable as quantitative methods of research (Alderson and Scott, 1992; Beretta, 1992; Lynch, 1992, 2003, Peter et. al, 2003). Evaluation teams and stakeholder representation are considered superior to "JIJOEs" (jet-in jet-out experts), and

“pooled intersubjectivity and neutralised impartiality” are preferred over objectivity, which is considered neither ideal nor desirable (Alderson, 1992).

### *Participatory Research*

Many language program evaluation theorists also recommend a fundamental involvement of the learner and the learner’s community in the evaluation process (Alderson 1992, Beretta, 1992, Lynch, 2002), suggesting that program users be involved as participants in the planning stage and be regarded as the intended beneficiaries of the research exercise. They maintain that when people with an interest in a program have influence over the object and scope of a study, the study process and its result are more likely to be of value to the community than if this is done by disinterested experts. Furthermore, they suggest that the involvement of community members and program insiders at the decision-making level will produce a result that is more relevant to community needs, because the questions of what is important, useful and knowable will take precedence over questions of what is easily measurable, what is publishable or what might support an academic theory.

Sensitivity to the issue of power relationships is also an important consideration in the recent evaluation literature, particularly for programs targeting members of minority groups (Cummins cited in Baker, 2002; Peter, 2003). For example, in Peter's "culturally responsive participatory approach" to evaluating a Cherokee language revitalization program, a team of insiders and outside experts negotiate all aspects of the evaluation, making decisions by consensus in order to equalize power and to respect the dignity and integrity of all stakeholders. The rationale given for such a seemingly cumbersome process is powerful:

...The Cherokee realize that a truly empowering language revitalization program engenders participant engagement through both pedagogical and evaluative processes, and so any language program that promotes cultural empowerment must also include an equally empowering plan for assessment and evaluation (p. 8).

A call for a collaborative and respectful approach to research involving Aboriginal people has also issued from two important and influential Canadian sources. The Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), established in the interest of resolving problems and restoring justice between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada, calls for educational reform to combat past assimilationist practices and maintains that this will require a) that Aboriginal communities make their own decisions about educational matters, and b) that collaboration between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities, governments and research bodies will be needed in educational program development and research (RCAP, 3.5.5; 3.10.3). Another government publication, the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, offers a list of “good practices” for research projects concerning Aboriginal people. These call for the inclusion of Aboriginal people at a fundamental level. More specifically, consultation, partnership and involvement in research design and decision-making are mentioned as good practices. (Tri-Council Policy Statement, 6.B)

The foregoing survey of language program research literature documents a shift from a disinterested scientific to an engaged interpretivistic paradigm, illustrated by the shift from the term “evaluation” to “study.” The latter paradigm, where negotiation, participation, multiple perspectives and flexibility are valued, appears well suited to the

purposes and goals of Aboriginal language revitalization programs. That is not to say, however, that scientific methods, quantifiable data and program evaluation have no place in the study of language revitalization programs. Rather, despite their low status in the interpretivistic paradigm, these methods and approaches may well be the most appropriate or the best possible ways to obtain particular information deemed important by stakeholders. As Beretta (1992) points out, if reflex use of any particular approach is to be avoided, so is reflex rejection.

### **Linguistic Dimensions of Language Program Studies**

There have been a host of studies focused on students' language learning in immersion programs. Canadian and American studies are widely documented and analysed and they use relatively similar experimental or quasi-experimental approaches to get relatively similar results (Baker, 2002; Cummins, 1993; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Feuerverger, 1993; Genesee, 1987; Thomas & Collier, 2002). The studies typically compare test results of groups of students in an immersion program with either a control group of matched students in an English only program or with normed results on a standardized test. Students' reading and writing abilities in the dominant language and their achievement in other academic areas are generally compared using standardized tests and students' achievement in the immersion language is generally measured against program expectations or compared with students in core second language programs<sup>v</sup>. The results of these studies tend to show that students in immersion style language programs have stronger development of target language abilities than their regular program counterparts, and after an initial lag in reading abilities in the dominant language,

bilingual students tend to outperform their monolingual program counterparts in this area as well.

Less common are studies focused on students' oral language abilities. Cummins & Swain (1986) and Genesee (1987) report on studies comparing French immersion and native French speaking students' French language skills. They found that standardized test scores indicated that the French immersion students at higher elementary levels were about a year behind native French speakers in reading and writing. But in an additional comparison to evaluate the communicative proficiency of the two groups, it was found that the French immersion students remained non-native-like in many respects, even after six to nine years of study in French. In another example, Fioriucci (1993) describes an Italian bilingual program study focused on student speech, where interviews with students were recorded and analyzed for evidence of dialectical variation.

Evaluations of Aboriginal language programs are not widely represented in the academic or professional literature. More common are program descriptions where authors give brief summary impressions of student performance in the Aboriginal language, without specifying how student achievement was assessed (e.g. Greymorning 1997; Stiles, 1997; McCarty, 2003). These reports also commonly mention students' performance on standardized tests of English. One summary report where a qualitative approach is described is Stairs' (1988) article on an Inuktitut immersion program where she mentions using an ongoing ethnographic descriptive approach as the basis of the evaluation.

These reports on Aboriginal language bilingual programs paint only very broadly stroked pictures of how the programs were evaluated. There appears to have been

considerable reliance on anecdotal evidence concerning target language acquisition, while more formal, systematic evaluations have tended to focus primarily on student performance on standardized tests in English. That this has occurred in this way is not surprising. Language revitalization programs have many needs and program evaluation is generally not the most immediate or pressing item. Certainly the survival of bilingual programs and the impressive performance of program students on English tests is something to celebrate. Nevertheless, there is a need for more detailed study of these programs, especially if, as Greymorning's report (1997) indicates, students will ultimately be judged in the community by how much and how well they speak the target language.

Despite evidence in the theoretical literature of disaffection with the limitations of quantitative language testing, there is relatively little evidence of interpretivist methodology in studies of language immersion programs. Programs appear to be evaluated largely on the basis of standardized tests of reading and writing, while individual students are judged in the community by their conversation. Clearly, reading and writing are not the only or even the best measures of general language proficiency; however, formal evaluations of socio-linguistic and communicative proficiency are surprisingly rare. If they occur at all, it seems to be primarily in smaller scale studies or on the basis of anecdotal evidence. This tendency seems to support Baker's (2002) charge that language program evaluations generally measure what is most easily measurable, not necessarily what is most important in a program. Such a tendency is perhaps not surprising, given the time and resource constraints affecting many program studies.

Hornberger's ethnographic study of a Quechua/Spanish bilingual education program in Peru (1988) is a noteworthy exception. It is a thorough, multi-faceted,

interpretivist program review, based on data compiled over the course of several years of field observations, interviews and document analysis. She compares school programs in two Quechua-speaking communities: one a monolingual Spanish school, the other bilingual. Her analysis looks at the effects of the schools on students, on teachers, and on the local community. In addition to collecting data on the language ability of the students, she is able to take note of diverse elements like student participation; behaviour; teachers' use of corporal punishment; teaching methods; and even community attitudes towards Spanish and Quechua schooling. As might be expected, student performance proved superior in the bilingual school where students could communicate with ease. Surprisingly, however, community attitudes were quite ambivalent about both the Quechua/Spanish and the Spanish school programs. Her depth of knowledge of the community enables her to explore the rather complex reasons underlying this ambivalence and to explain how a history of cultural and economic domination by white and Spanish institutions from "outside" has bred a wariness and disenchantment with projects intended to "develop" the Quechua community. In fact, her analysis of the situation explains that what appears to be a rejection of the Quechua language might actually be an attempt to preserve the Quechua language and cultural sphere by refusing to use it in a place where it does not belong and which is not part of its tradition. Hornberger's study demonstrates the potential of ethnographic methods to produce rich and thorough studies of complex realities, and to use this as a basis for evaluation. But it is also patently evident that this type of a study requires considerably more time and resources than are available for most language program studies.

The majority of the formal evaluations of language programs mentioned above have focused on tests of reading and writing. Oral development and other areas of communicative competency remain largely under-evaluated. The use of reading and writing tests makes some sense when evaluating abilities in a European language with a strong focus on literacy. As a way of evaluating language proficiency in an orally focused Aboriginal language, it makes little sense at all. It seems that many studies have been concerned with measuring what is measurable, not necessarily what is important. In contrast, Hornberger's comparative case-study approach allows important areas of difference to come to light and indicates the different ways in which the bilingual program has had a significant impact.

### *Evaluating Language Proficiency*

As indicated in the previous discussion, evaluating a person's knowledge of a second language is a complex task and is not easily accomplished by using simple tests. Cummins (2001), in a discussion of the importance of fair assessment for students receiving schooling in a second language, identifies the following three faces of language proficiency:

1. Conversational fluency, or the ability to carry on a conversation in familiar face-to-face situations, using high frequency words, simple grammatical constructions and relying on intonation, gestures, etc. to support communication.
2. Discrete language skills, or "the specific phonological, literacy and grammatical knowledge that students acquire as a result of direct

instruction and both formal and informal practice”. (p. 65) Examples of discrete language skills include reading, verb conjugation, etc.

3. Academic language proficiency, or the ability to use the language register appropriate to a school or academic context. This requires the use of less frequent, specialized vocabulary and the interpretation and construction of complex units of oral and written text. Cummins emphasizes that the conversational/academic distinction is not between oral and written language, noting that non-literate languages also have registers that resemble academic discourse, like story-telling, social rituals, etc. He also acknowledges a connection between academic and other discourses not learned in the family setting, including language registers appropriate to business, cultural and religious institutions.

Cummins has devised a framework to guide the evaluation of students’ ability to use a target language learned in a school context. The framework consists of two intersecting continua of cognitive and contextual demands, identifying four quadrants of language use common in an academic context. This is a useful tool for the development of Cree proficiency assessment instruments. The framework encourages the use of a range of language tasks, appropriate to the instruction students have received, and preventing a narrow focus on only one area of language use.

Baker (2001) also discusses the inadequacy of using simple tests to measure something as complex as a bilingual person’s ability to use a language effectively. He underlines the importance of using data that are representative of a student’s communicative competence in realistic, everyday settings and gives several examples of

ways in which such data can be obtained. These examples include: 1. interactive performance assessments in which students are observed as they carry out specific tasks; and 2. criterion referenced oral language tests that are essentially interviews based on protocols which are analysed according to predetermined criteria. According to Baker, it is important that such interactive assessment tools be loosely structured rather than rigidly based on checklists, to more closely resemble real-life interaction and to allow students the opportunity to show what they can, rather than what they can't do.

One example of an oral language proficiency assessment instrument that appears to incorporate many of the features identified in Baker's (2001) and Cummins' (2001) discussions, is the Student Oral Proficiency Assessment (SOPA) developed by the Centre for Applied Linguistics and described in an article by Rhodes (1996). The SOPA test was initially constructed to assess students in the primary grades of an American Spanish bilingual program, and has since been adapted for use in a number of international languages (see Appendix F for a Cree assessment protocol modelled on the SOPA instrument).

While there is clearly much more to be said about the evaluation of language proficiency in second language students, the above mentioned works present good starting points for the development of appropriate and effective language evaluation instruments.

### **Cultural Dimensions of Language Program Studies**

Second language programs commonly have as goals not only the linguistic but also the cultural development of students. This is commonly posited in curricular documents as including the development of cultural knowledge, values and even a sense

of cultural identification. This is no less the case in Aboriginal language programming. *The Common curriculum framework for Aboriginal language and culture programs* (Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 2000) holds that language and culture are interrelated and that one is not fully understandable without the other. The interconnectedness and interdependence of language and culture is underscored by language revitalization experts (e.g. Crystal, 2000; Nettle and Romaine, 2000). It seems likely that cultural elements would be of even greater significance in language revitalization programs than in a French program, for instance, where there is a cultural homeland where the language is dominant and where neither the culture nor the language are threatened.

### *Attitudes*

As was the case with program evaluations concerning language outcomes, it seems that the evaluation of cultural outcomes focuses overwhelmingly on a single cultural aspect: feelings and attitudes about the target culture. Many studies of French immersion or heritage bilingual programs include a question or two to measure appreciation of and identification with people of the target culture. For instance, Cummins and Swain (1986) report on several studies concerning ethnic identification and social distance between groups. In a comparative study of French Immersion and English programs, students were asked to answer the question, "Suppose you happened to be born into a French-Canadian family, would you be just as happy to be a French-Canadian as an English-Canadian person?" (p. 52). French immersion students responded 84 percent yes, while only 48% of English program students responded this way.

Baker (1992) explores attitude and language learning in a study on student attitudes in Welsh bilingual programs, providing numerous sample questionnaires and detailed explanations. He maintains that the treatment of attitude in language studies tends to be naïve and uninformed, and while there isn't room to summarize his discussion of attitude here, several key points are worth repeating. According to Baker, attitude is a complex phenomenon involving more than just feelings or motivation and is both cause and product of a language learning experience. Language learners' attitudes are fundamentally relational and are of great significance to a learner's success. Baker underscores the significance of the attitude of the target language group towards the language learner, noting that if learners perceive that they will be well received by members of the "in-group," their attitude and consequently their success in learning the language will be enhanced. He also suggests that attitudes are more important than linguistic aptitude since people with good attitudes and lower aptitudes routinely learn new languages, while the converse often isn't true.

While Baker's study concerns primarily the attitudes of learners, the attitudes of teachers are also important factors in language learning. A study by Fioriucci (1993) concerns Italian bilingual program teachers' attitudes towards non-standard variations in their elementary students' speech. Teachers who were native speakers of Italian were found to exhibit little tolerance for students who spoke non-standard Italian dialects. In fact, many of them considered the speech of native Italian speakers who used non-standard dialectal forms to be wrong. Students who were not native speakers, but who used standard Italian forms in their speech were evaluated more highly than native Italian speakers who used dialectal forms in their speech. This study of teacher attitudes

toward language varieties is of interest in the context of Cree language education, since there is no widely recognized standard form of the Cree language and regional variations abound.

### *Cultural Styles of Learning and Interacting*

The cultural differences between traditional Aboriginal and modern Euro-Canadian societies have long been acknowledged in educational literature, but it is only relatively recently that it has been seen to be the school's responsibility to bridge the cultural divide. This has been given increasing impetus as teachers have been charged to integrate Aboriginal perspectives throughout the curriculum in all Manitoba schools<sup>vi</sup>. Schools with an Aboriginal language program are generally considered to offer the greatest hope of convergence between the culture of the school and the culture of the Aboriginal students.

If such a convergence exists and Aboriginal programs are managing to create cultural environments that fit with their students' home culture, it is not widely reflected in the program reports I have surveyed. Instead, to explore the idea of evaluation of cultural elements in a language program, I will briefly discuss several articles that address cultural styles in education.

According to Leavitt (1995) and Stairs (1993), the process of teaching and learning remains firmly in the Euro-Canadian cultural sphere, even in schools devoted to the preservation of Aboriginal languages and cultures. "It is as if we have been able to recognise that there are cultural differences in *what* people learn, but not in *how* they learn." (Phillips, in Stairs, 1993). These proponents of educational reform suggest that school programs for Aboriginal learners must blur the lines between school and

traditional ways of learning, so that traditional ways, such as experiential and cooperative learning and observing until one feels ready to do something competently, become more acceptable in formal schooling.

Lowell and Devlin (1998) report on ethnographic studies that demonstrate discontinuities between the Indigenous culture children learn in the home and the dominant culture they are expected to fit into in the school. The researchers describe a situation of serious and continuous miscommunication between teachers and students in an Australian Aboriginal school. In the Aboriginal culture, where self-directed behaviour was valued, the children hadn't been enculturated to listen on demand nor did they feel any compulsion to respond to questions. Their teachers interpreted this to mean that the students were either deaf or unable to understand their teachers.

Macias (1987) describes a bilingual pre-school program in Arizona where Aboriginal teachers consciously set out to prepare children for the cultural discontinuities they would face in formal schooling. Contrary to the socialisation that occurred in their homes, children were taught to be verbal; singled out before their peers; subjected to strict school rules; and, had adults routinely interfere with their autonomy. All of these activities took place in English, so that the children would associate these behaviours with the English language of the school, not with the Indigenous language of their home culture.

Culture is a difficult item to study: to outsiders because it is unknown, and to insiders because it is assumed. The various cultural elements considered above could be seen as a potential cultural context of an Aboriginal school program. This, then, offers some ideas on what elements of culture a program evaluation might address. Some items

to consider include student and teacher attitudes and values, as well as the teaching, learning, and interactional styles they employ. Interestingly, these are all items that are addressed in Hornberger's (1988) study, which illustrates the value of ethnographic methods in generating information of value, and in allowing a researcher to acquire a depth of knowledge and insight that might not be readily available to an "impartial outsider" using scientific methods.

### **Study Framework**

The literature reviewed in this chapter presents a number of themes that can serve as a framework for a research study that will be of maximum value to the Cree Program community. Ideally, the research model needs to be participatory in its structure, multi-modal in design, and incorporate a strong qualitative, interpretivist component. Language proficiency assessment of students needs to have oral language skills as a central focus, but to consider also the attitudes and cultural beliefs that underlie students' learning.

### **CHAPTER THREE - RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

Following the model described in the previous chapter, and to ensure that the study respect and remain relevant to the local community, I recruited a stakeholders' committee comprised of school district and Aboriginal community representatives (hereafter called the research advisory committee) and I have consulted closely with members of this committee in the development and design of the study. Research committee members were instrumental in devising the research plan, designing data-gathering tools and also provided invaluable assistance in collecting and analysing data. This collaborative process was undertaken in the recognition that academic research involving Aboriginal people has often resulted in their exploitation and disempowerment and in the misuse and appropriation of their cultures. The ethical guidelines for this study have been influenced by Shaw's (in press) discussion of responsibility, reciprocity and respect in research and by the principles of consultation and partnership as called for in the RCAP report (3.5.5; 3.10.3) and the Tri-Council Policy Statement (6.B).

#### **Research Methodology**

Following Baker's (2001) and Alderson's (1992) beliefs that an interpretivistic and multimodal approach to research is most likely to generate information deemed useful by the beneficiaries and stakeholders of a language program, this study incorporates qualitative and quantitative analyses of data gathered through language proficiency assessments, observations, interviews and received documents. I have investigated the Cree language proficiency; cultural perceptions; and general academic performance of students in the Cree Program; as well as the school community's perceptions of the program.

### **Research Site**

Research was conducted at Wapanohk Community School, one of six K-8 schools in the School District of Mystery Lake, Thompson, Manitoba. It is the only school in town offering a Cree bilingual program, which currently has about 120 students out of a total student population of approximately 360. Wapanohk School is located across the street from the University College of the North campus in Thompson's Eastwood neighbourhood and there are many apartments and townhouses in the immediate vicinity. Eastwood is generally regarded as the neighbourhood with the highest proportion of Aboriginal residents in the city, and the school has a higher proportion of Aboriginal students than other schools. While exact numbers are unavailable, I have heard teachers estimate that the population of the school is 90% Aboriginal compared to 40-50% for the school district as a whole. In 2001, the School District of Mystery Lake changed the school's name from Eastwood to Wapanohk Community School, identifying it as a centre for innovative Aboriginal Education programming like the Cree Bilingual Program and a community school initiative. The school clearly has a visible Aboriginal character, as evidenced by the prominent display of Cree words outside and inside the school. Extracurricular activities include a powwow club, drumming and fiddling groups, and occasional adult Cree language classes. The school has numerous Aboriginal teachers on staff (at least 10) and, while the current administration is not Aboriginal, it has, in recent years, also had Aboriginal principals and vice principals.

Thompson is a nickel-mining town of 15,000 people set in the traditional Cree country of Northern Manitoba, located 760 road kilometres from Winnipeg. The city was built in the 60s as a mining town, and has over time become an administrative and

economic centre for northern Manitoba with regional government, judicial, educational and commercial services centred there, including an increasing number of Aboriginal organizations. The Aboriginal population of the city is increasing steadily, while the non-Aboriginal population slowly declines, subject to the boom and bust cycles of resource-based economies.

### **Participants**

The participants in the study have been drawn from the various elements of the Thompson Aboriginal community with a significant interest in the Cree Program: the students, their parents/families, the teachers, other school personnel.

#### ***Parent Participants***

Three Cree program parents were interviewed for the study. A list of potential participants had been compiled on the recommendation of school or parent council officials, and the Community School coordinator (a Research Advisory Group member and a former Cree teacher with extensive connections among the Cree program parents) served as an intermediary, explaining the study to parent candidates as she encountered them, and passing me names and contact information of those who showed interest in being interviewed. This was done to ensure that research contact with parents would not undermine the parent-school relationship-building that is being carried out by school personnel. From this list, three candidates were contacted and interviews were arranged at the participants' convenience. In two cases the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, in one case it was held in a school board office. In all cases, children and other family members were present and contributed to the interviews.

The parent participants had a total of six children enrolled in the Cree Program, and each of them had been involved with the program as parents for at least four years. They identified themselves and their children as First Nations people, did not consider themselves Cree speakers but all claimed to know “a bit” of the language and were interested in being able to speak it.

### ***Teacher Participants***

Having formerly worked as a colleague with the Cree Program teachers, I was already acquainted with them and presented my original proposal to study the Cree Program to them for discussion and approval at a Cree teachers meeting. Cree Program teachers who indicated interest in the study and who had several years experience in the program were approached directly and invited to volunteer for an interview. Three of the teachers who accepted were interviewed for the study. The interviews were conducted in the teachers’ classrooms after school hours or during free periods.

All three teacher participants are experienced teachers with over three years experience in the Cree Program and prior teaching experience in other programs. All of the teachers had grown up in First Nations communities and all of them stated that they were fluent in the Cree language.

### ***Student Data***

Data collection on student performance and language proficiency was focused on Grade 3 students for several reasons: 1) I felt that Grade 3 students had been in the program long enough (3-4 years) to reflect the program’s impact and serve as good sources of information. 2) The students currently in Grade 3 comprise the 2<sup>nd</sup> cohort of students in the program, and have received programming that is more established and less

experimental than children in the first cohort, currently in Grade 4. 3) The Manitoba Provincial Grade 3 Assessment of reading and numeracy provides an existing body of data on the reading and mathematical abilities of Grade 3 students, thus allowing an assessment of student performance in other subject areas without burdening teachers with another data collection task. These provincial data also permit a comparison with student performance in the English program in the same school, the program most Cree Program students would have attended if they were not in the Cree Program.

For oral language proficiency interviews, six Grade 3 student participants were selected from a pool of candidates identified by Grade 3 teachers according to the following criteria: 1) the students did not speak Cree at home, 2) they were considered cooperative and informative sources, and 3) their Cree language skills were considered at or above the class average. It was felt that focusing the study on students with average or above-average skills would provide a more accurate picture of the program's impact, by excluding students whose learning may have been hampered by various causes like social or learning difficulties. Assessing the language learning of children who have had difficulty learning would not tell us much of value about the program. A list of 17 candidates was compiled and given to the community school coordinator who subsequently explained the project to parents as she encountered them, and parents expressing interest were sent consent forms to sign. Parental consent was received for six of the children to participate in the project.

### ***Participant Privacy***

To encourage informants to freely express their ideas, and to safeguard their privacy, participants (other than officers speaking in an official capacity) were informed

that measures would be taken to safeguard the anonymity of all participants in the study. Identities have been masked, pseudonyms have been used and personal details have been altered. Given the small number of teachers in the Cree Program, it was deemed difficult to ensure their anonymity and so teacher participants were given “member checks,” i.e. they were sent a preview copy of the findings and analysis to verify the representation of their comments and were asked to bring any concerns or objections to my attention with the promise that changes would be subsequently negotiated. No objections have been brought to my attention.

### **Permission and Consent**

A letter of permission to conduct research on the Cree program was obtained from the Superintendent of the School District of Mystery Lake (see Appendix A). Informal permission was also sought and obtained from the district’s Aboriginal Education Consultant and the Wapanohk Community School principal. Each of these individuals were encouraging and supportive and provided me access to data sources and school district facilities. Moreover, the presence of Cree Program teachers and parents on the research advisory committee, as well as their ongoing assistance with the study itself, have been interpreted as further signs of their support of this study project.

Subsequent to a review of a proposal outlining the purpose and methodology of this study, the Education and Nursing Research Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba granted ethical approval to conduct the study on September 8, 2005 (see Appendix B).

All interview participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study as well as the voluntary basis of their participation. Adult participants and

parent/guardians of student participants signed consent forms (see Appendices C & D), and all student participants gave verbal consent (see Appendix E for script of verbal consent request) prior to taking part in the interviews. Formal and informal conversations were also held with School District and Ministry of Education officials in their official capacities and thus written consent was not sought in these instances. In these cases, officials were made aware of the purpose of the study and conversations occurred either spontaneously or in response to prior requests for meetings.

### **Limitations of Study**

While my previous work with the Cree Program has clearly been the source of motivation to undertake this research study, my past involvement with the program along with my experience and beliefs as a language teacher can all be seen as potential sources of bias: I am clear and unapologetic about my support of the Cree Program and my interest in seeing it succeed. In view of this I have made conscious attempts to be fair and honest in my interpretation and analysis of data, and it will be up to readers to assess to what degree this has been a successful enterprise.

Two other important factors limiting the study are a lack of time and money. A four-month period for gathering data is hardly sufficient, especially when the researcher resides 760 kilometres from the research site and data gathering is limited to 4 visits of 4-6 days each within that time period. It would certainly have been preferable to have more resources and time to interview more people and assess more students. As it was, the logistics of arranging and conducting six adult and six student interviews within a limited timeframe was sufficiently complex. Moreover, the compiled data from six adult and six

student interviews, along with that provided by the school district and Wapanohk teachers presented me with quite a substantial body of data to analyse.

A further complication was the fact that I do not speak Cree, and, having failed to secure funding for the project, was required to rely on volunteer assistance for Cree language expertise. Fortunately, the School District of Mystery Lake seconded a Cree teacher and language expert, Ron Cook, to assist with the development and administration of Cree language assessments. While my language handicap severely limited my own ability to assess and analyse data on student language proficiency; the collaborative work that ensued to overcome this obstacle also resulted in an ongoing collaboration on various other aspects of the study and the study has certainly been enriched by Ron Cook's astute observations and sage advice.

Finally, this study is not intended to give the final word on the Cree Program. My intent is, rather, to contribute data to a discussion that will, I hope, continue on for a long time to come since the Cree Program is still very young and has yet to reach its potential. I hope that the collaborative work on this study and the language assessment tools developed will contribute to the development of regular and ongoing data collection that will permit longitudinal studies of the Cree Program to be carried out.

## CHAPTER FOUR - DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected between September 2005 and January 2006 from a variety of sources, focusing on the following areas: students' Cree language proficiency; students' appreciation of Cree language and culture; students' general academic performance; and parents' and teachers' perceptions and feelings about the program. The diverse sources and types of data (qualitative and quantitative) give the case study breadth and depth and permits triangulation of data. A description of data sources and data-collection tools follows.

### **Cree Language Proficiency**

#### *Cree Oral Language Proficiency Assessment Protocol*

A Cree interview protocol, adapted from a Student Oral Proficiency Assessment (SOPA) tool described by Rhodes (1996) was developed to assess students' oral language ability. Pairs of students were interviewed in Cree by one adult, while another adult (myself) observed and made notes. The language assessment protocol consisted of 4 components, each pertaining to language proficiency in a particular domain (see Appendix F). To assess listening comprehension, participants were shown a display of animal pictures and addressed a series of questions and instructions. Boreal forest animal pictures were chosen because of their cultural relevance and because animals had been a subject of classroom activities in prior years. Any student responses showing comprehension of the question were accepted, including actions or answers given in English.

To assess students' basic interpersonal conversation skill, students were asked a series of common personal questions all of which could be answered correctly in single-

word responses. For academic language proficiency assessment, students were shown a picture book about weather (a topic in Grade 2 Science and a common subject of daily classroom discourse in northern Manitoba) and were asked to talk in Cree about what was on the page. For the language fluency component, students were given an illustrated book depicting a story and were asked to tell what was happening in the illustrations. This proved to be the most difficult component to design, since the model SOPA protocol uses a story well-known to the children, a story they have heard or read in the target language so that students have been exposed to the language required to retell the story. In consultation meetings with Cree program teachers, we were not able to identify a book or story with which children in the Grade 3 classes would be familiar in Cree, and thus, a storybook with illustrations depicting a simple story in a familiar northern environment was chosen. This was not, however, a story with which students were already familiar.

The student interviews were recorded on audiotape. After the interviews were completed, the two interviewers, in consultation, reviewed each student's performance and assessed the students' language according to a rating scale<sup>vii</sup> developed for use with the SOPA assessment tool.

A final component of the interview protocol concerned the students' attitudes about Cree culture and language. Following the examples described by Cummins and Swain (1986), students were asked a series of structured questions to elicit their sense of personal identity and their attitudes toward Cree language and culture. One example of the questions is: "How happy would you be if you had been born into a family that wasn't Cree, instead of into your own family? Just as happy, more happy, or less happy?" Students' answers to these questions were transcribed and analyzed for common themes.

### ***Classroom Listening Comprehension Assessment***

A classroom listening comprehension exercise (developed for a future annual assessment program to accumulate longitudinal program data) contributed data to complement those gathered in the individual interviews. The assessment was piloted by a Cree teacher in his Grade 2 homeroom, then administered to the two Grade 3 classes in the Cree Program and the class results compiled and forwarded to me by the teacher. In the assessment exercise (see Appendix H), students were given a paper with pictures of boreal forest animals and were addressed a series of questions and instructions in Cree. Answers were given on the student paper.

### ***Adult Perspectives***

Semi-structured interviews, approximately one hour long, were conducted with three parents and three teachers. All adult interviews used a single interview protocol featuring open-ended questions that allowed interviewees to focus on themes important to them (see Appendix I). Interview questions explored the interviewees' perceptions and feelings about Cree Program students' linguistic and cultural learning as well as about the program more generally. Interviewees were invited to identify and analyze program strengths and weaknesses and suggest improvements. The interviews were initially tape-recorded and then transcribed and analyzed in the months following the interviews.

### ***Informal Conversations***

Informal conversations about the Cree Bilingual program and bilingual programming in general were held with several officials holding positions in the school district, in other bilingual school programs and in the Manitoba Ministry of Education.

Conversation notes were made during and immediately after these conversations, and these notes were added to the body of data on the Cree program.

### ***Grade 3 Provincial Assessments in Reading and Numeracy***

Data were obtained from the school district on student performance on the Grade 3 provincial standardized assessments in English Language Arts and Mathematics. These standardized assessments are conducted annually by classroom teachers in Manitoba schools, with the aggregated results forwarded to school, district and provincial officials (see Appendices J and K for sample reporting forms with the assessment categories used by teachers).

The results for Wapanohk Community School were sought to obtain data on Cree program students' academic performance in curricular areas other than Cree Language Arts. Results for students in the Cree Program as well as for students in the mainstream English program were analyzed to permit a comparison between students from two parallel programs with similar populations housed in the same school.

### ***Student Attendance Records***

September to December attendance records for all Kindergarten to Grade 4 students in Wapanohk School were obtained from the school district, to enable a comparison of attendance in Cree and English program classes. High attendance is often viewed by schools as a corollary of family and student commitment to education, high absenteeism an indicator of a lack of engagement. While it is clear that factors other than educational commitment affect student attendance, it was felt that an analysis of student attendance records could provide insight into the educational commitment of Cree program students and their families.

## Data Analysis

Data collected from the various sources were categorized by type, source and theme. Recorded semi-structured interviews and notes on conversations were subjected to a qualitative analysis. Preliminary analysis occurred during transcription, and interview transcripts and informal conversation notes were reread and contents coded by source and sorted according to the components of the research question: *1) students' Cree language proficiency, 2) their understanding and appreciation of Cree culture, 3) their academic performance in other subject areas, 4) community perceptions of the Cree program, 5) recommendations for program improvement.* In a subsequent analysis of sorted data, common themes were identified and data were organized around themes and data source. For instance, in the category *students' academic performance in other subject areas*, interview data were sorted by the following themes: *a) assessments of students' academic performance*, and *b) the importance of students' academic performance* and by data source, i.e. whether the data came from a teacher, parent or student. Thematic comparisons of data within and across data source groupings allowed for predominant themes and sub-themes to be identified and analyzed. For instance, on the above topic of students' academic performance, interview data from teachers and parents suggested different priorities: for teachers, academic success was deemed quite important, while parents regarded Cree language proficiency and self esteem more highly.

Cree language proficiency assessment data, Grade 3 provincial assessment results and school attendance records were organized in tables and charts and analysed. These data were then also sorted according to the research question content areas mentioned above. Finally, all data pertaining to a particular theme were analyzed and interpreted

against the findings of other pertinent data, allowing for a complex and multidimensional picture of the Cree Program to emerge.

### **Validity and Reliability**

The use of a variety of data-gathering and analysis procedures has permitted data to be compared and findings to be triangulated, allowing for data quality and inferential validity to be assessed. Furthermore, working closely with a Cree teacher on language assessments and consulting periodically with two research mentors as well as with the research advisory group has provided me opportunities to compare interpretations and inferences with peers and experts in language research and assessment.

## CHAPTER 5 - FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Study findings show considerable agreement among data sources about students' Cree language proficiency and attitudes about cultural identity. Data concerning students' academic performance in other subject areas are less conclusive. Adult interview findings show thematic congruence in community members' perceptions of the Cree program, but also indicate that teachers and parents have perceptual differences on a number of issues.

### Cree Language Proficiency

Students' Cree language proficiency was assessed on the basis of data derived from three sources: 1) parent and teacher interviews, 2) Cree oral proficiency assessments, 3) a classroom listening exercise.

In individual semi-structured interviews, parents and teachers drew a very consistent picture of the communicative proficiency of students in the program. One teacher described students in Grades 3 and 4 of the program as follows: "they can understand some Cree and know a lot of words, but they can't really speak it, they don't have conversational ability yet" [Teacher 3]. Other teachers concurred with this portrait, agreeing that students had learned "lots of vocabulary," that many of them "try to speak it" and "use many Cree words" in their speech, but that they do not make Cree phrases or sentences. Parent and teacher interviewees specified that students had learned "their colours, numbers, seasons and many animal names" [Teacher 2], but several also questioned how well this learning was being retained over time.

One parent of a Grade 3 child recounted that upon hearing about this assessment project, she had begun wondering how much Cree her children had learned. "After the meeting [where the Cree Program study had been discussed], I asked the kids what they,

what Cree words they could tell me and they couldn't tell me any..."[Parent 1]. She found this disconcerting since, already in Kindergarten, her children had been speaking Cree phrases: "... [name of oldest child] would say 'clean up time' and 'push your chair' and oh, I was just amazed with her, with how fast the words came out of her mouth. She picked it up really fast" [Parent 1].

Another parent described how Cree-speaking relatives had been impressed with the quality of her child's pronunciation of Cree words, but noted that the child did not understand when her grandparent would address her in Cree, "unless it's a list of numbers, or colours, or names of some animals" [Parent 3].

### **Listening Comprehension**

Data from the Cree oral assessment interviews and classroom listening exercise support the parents' and teachers' perception of the students' oral proficiency in Cree. In the class listening comprehension exercise, given to 31 students in grades 2 and 3, many of them (up to 80% on some questions) associated animal names, numbers and colours with appropriate images, but on more complex questions like "Which animals sleep in winter?" comparatively few students were able to give appropriate answers (see Table 1 for details).

Similar results occurred on the listening portion of the oral assessment interviews. Five of the six students answered half of the questions correctly, and all six participating students responded to a question, "What does the eagle have in its claws?" by identifying the eagle in the picture instead of giving a more correct answer in Cree or English (the eagle had a fish in its claws). While this indicates that participants had not understood the question completely, it also suggests that they felt comfortable making inferences on the

basis of what they had understood, and in this they were demonstrating an important language comprehension strategy. Two of the six students taking the oral assessment interview displayed an ability to translate Cree terms and phrases for the benefit of their interview partner (e.g. “He’s saying the weather, what’s the weather like?”). Overall, the assessment data clearly supported teachers’ and parents’ perception that students were able to understand a variety of Cree words, but that their ability to comprehend more complex speech was limited (see Table 2). A more complete summary and analysis of the results from the Cree oral language proficiency assessment as well as the class listening exercise is offered in the appendices to this paper (see Appendices L & M).

On the basis of their performance in the Cree interviews, five of the six Grade 3 students would meet the criteria for the Junior Novice-Mid category of the SOPA grading scale (Centre for Applied Linguistics, 2000) in oral comprehension (i.e. understands predictable questions, statements, and commands in familiar topic areas with strong contextual support), while the remaining student would be classed in the Junior Novice-Low category (i.e. recognizes isolated words and high-frequency expressions). The classroom listening exercise results for Grade 2 and 3 also demonstrate that students’ comprehension ability ranges between the low and the mid- basic levels.

**Table 1. Class Listening Exercise Results**

Class	Number of Students	Questions									Mean Score /8
		1 (identify bear)	2 (identify goose)	3 (identify animal that flies)	4 (identify the animal that's black)	5 (identify animal with antlers)	6 (which animal looks like a dog)	7 (which picture has two animals)	8 (which animal sleeps in winter)	9 (identify empty box)	
Gr. 2	14	9	14	1	6	4	4	10	3	discounted	3.6
Gr 3A	8	7	6	2	3	1	3	4	2	discounted	3.5
Gr 3B	9	8	5	0	3	1	2	8	5	discounted	3.6
total	31	77%	81%	10%	39%	19%	29%	71%	32%		3.6

**Table 2. Student interview listening component results**

questions	Students						total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
a. Where is the moose?	√	√	√	√	√	√	6
b. Where is the bear?	√	√	√		√	√	5
c. Which animals can fly?	√	√	√	√	√	√	6
d. Name the ones that fly.							
e. Which one do you like best?	√	√	√		√	√	5
f. Name an animal that's missing.							
g. Which one is like a cat?	√	√	√	√	√	√	6
h. What does the eagle have in its claws?	*	*	*	*	*	*	
i. Which animals are red?	√	√	√		√	√	5
j. What are the moose doing?			*	*	*	*	
k. Pick up the lynx and put it on your head.	*	*					
l. What does the owl say?	*	*	*	*			
<b>total acceptable responses /12</b>	6	6	6	3	6	6	

Empty cells indicate that no answer was given.

√ Indicates an acceptable answer – i.e. answering orally in Cree or English or pointing to an appropriate picture.

\* Rather than answering the question (or following the instruction) students indicated the animal named in the question.

## Speaking

In the matter of the students' Cree speaking ability, the assessment interview results again supported parents' and teachers' observations. Students demonstrated their ability to pronounce Cree words clearly and comprehensibly and students generally used Cree words readily and eagerly, identifying items (e.g. animal names) in Cree before it was asked of them (and even when it wasn't). Students used Cree nouns most commonly, spoken either in isolation or as insertions in English sentences. For instance, when students were asked to tell a story from the illustrations in a picture book, four of the six freely inserted Cree terms in English sentences, e.g. "*napesis* (boy) is hiding and *iskwesis* (girl) is carrying a pail." In all of the interviews, students' use of Cree occurred only in single word utterances, and at no time did students put Cree words together in a phrase in any of the interviews. However, in Cree, where verb inflections and affixes are the rule, and where single words frequently express complete thoughts, single word responses can represent perfectly valid proficient language use. An example of this is student 5's answer when asked to identify the weather in an illustration. She responded with the word, "*kimowan*," which translates as the sentence, "It is raining." In Cree it is common for single words with inflections and affixes to encompass the meaning of an entire English phrase and thus, the students' use of isolated words could be viewed as more acceptable in Cree conversation than it is in English. (See Table 3 below for a summary of student speech on one component of the oral assessment interviews.)

**Table 3. Summary of student speech on oral fluency component.**

A. Students 1, 2	Students refer to an illustrated book, telling the story in English, inserting <i>napesis</i> and <i>iskwesis</i> for English terms boy and girl. E.g. “ <i>napesis</i> is hiding and <i>iskwesis</i> is carrying a pail.” No Cree phrases used, though the students indicate comprehension of several questions (e.g.: “Is the weather good?” S1 shakes head; “What is her name?” S2 says: “Emily.”).
B. Students 3, 4	Students tell the story in English, using Cree terms ( <i>napesis</i> , <i>iskwesis</i> ) for boy and girl.
C. Students 5, 6	Students speak in English only. S5 explains what is happening in the illustrations and answers many questions appropriately, but all answers are given exclusively in English. S5 answers questions <i>awena awa</i> (who’s this?) with “girl” or “brother,” answers <i>kekwan oma</i> (what’s this?) with “bucket,” and answers <i>tansi itòtak</i> (what is he/she doing?) with verb phrases like “helping her,” “skipping,” “following her,” “going to get something,” “wearing her brother’s coat,” etc. S6 answers the question, <i>kekwan oma</i> , by identifying numerous items in the illustrations using English words but doesn’t respond to any other prompts. S5 responds to many Cree prompts, giving logical and appropriate responses in English.

The oral production assessment was based on three interview components: 1) an informal conversation, 2) an academic language component focused on an illustrated book about the weather and, 3) a fluency component focused on an illustrated storybook. Students spoke Cree words most often in the interview components referring to illustrated books or pictures. Students appeared least proficient in the informal conversation component of the interview, where the interviewer asked students relatively informal personal questions about their age, their friends, their family. In this section, no student answered any question appropriately, suggesting students’ comprehension and production skills in informal Cree language social interaction remain undeveloped.

In the oral production categories of oral fluency, spoken grammar and spoken vocabulary, all of the students performed at the Junior Novice-Low level on the SOPA grading scale (i.e. using isolated words, having virtually no [or very little] functional communicative ability). See Appendix L for a fuller description and analysis of the assessment results.

### **Meeting Program Outcomes for Oral Language?**

In the context of these assessments it is worthwhile to consider what level of Cree language proficiency is a realistic outcome for students in the Cree bilingual program. While parents indicate that they are loath to criticize the program, their interview comments suggest a measure of disappointment when, after 3 to 4 years in the program, students remain unable to converse in Cree. Teachers' comments also indicate that they had anticipated that students would develop a greater level of oral proficiency, though one of the teachers was quick to point out that, "this is not an immersion program where kids have French all day long. Here they only spend 30 – 50 percent of their time in Cree. It's not fair to compare the two programs [Cree Bilingual and French Immersion]" [Teacher 2]. The same teacher also pointed out that even in well established French Immersion programs, students are not generally expected to be speaking French exclusively in class until sometime in Grade 2, and given the lesser amount of time allocated to Cree, it was unfair to hold Cree program students to the same standard.

When analysed against the outcomes in the Cree Program curriculum, (School District of Mystery Lake, 2004, p. 33), it appears that students are falling somewhat short of expectations in that they did not use simple sentences or questions in the interview, and use of familiar vocabulary was very limited. According to the Framework, students

should demonstrate ability to speak Cree independently (i.e. in classroom activities that are not rigidly structured by the teacher) beginning in Grade 2. The table below compares student speech observed in the oral language interviews with the student outcomes for independent speech for grades 2-4.

**Table 4. Comparison of oral language outcomes with observed student performance**

<b>Oral language outcomes for independent speech, by grade.</b>	<b>Student oral language use (in oral assessment interviews).</b>
Grade 2. Use simple sentences and questions for classroom procedures.	Students were able to understand simple questions, e.g. <i>kekwan oma</i> (what's this) and <i>tansi itòtak</i> (what is he/she doing) but didn't use Cree phrases in response.
Grade 3. Use basic familiar vocabulary in classroom context.	Students used some familiar Cree words, e.g. <i>iskwesis</i> (girl) and <i>nepesis</i> (boy) in isolation or inserted them in English phrases. One student spoke a "phrase" using a root word with affixes: <i>kimowan</i> (it's raining).
Grade 4. Converse informally about familiar topics.	No observed informal conversation in Cree.

These outcomes for the Cree Bilingual Program are adapted from framework documents for German and Ukrainian Bilingual Heritage Language programs, and, as part of my research, I thought it would be instructive to briefly explore the levels of language proficiency and use attained in those two programs. Informal conversations with Grade 3 teachers in two Heritage language programs in Winnipeg indicated that considerably different levels of language proficiency exist between Heritage Language bilingual schools. One teacher said she considered the outcomes of the Framework Document to be quite attainable by her students and in a subsequent visit to her Grade 3 class, I found the majority of students conversing quite fluently in the heritage language during a group conversational activity. A Grade 3 teacher in a different Heritage

Language program said that her students “don’t speak in sentences in [the heritage language]; they use [heritage language] words in English sentences” (personal communication), a use of “interlanguage” similar to that exhibited by Cree Program students during the oral language assessment interviews. On the basis of this informal comparison, it appears that the Cree Program students’ Cree mastery is perhaps low in relation to students in some Heritage Language programs, but not dissimilar to others. Certainly it falls short of the outcomes in the Framework document, but the document itself doesn’t seem to have been evaluated in any systematic way in the Heritage Language schools in Manitoba. It does appear that the Cree Program students’ language proficiency is not fully meeting parents’ and teachers’ expectations, but all parents and most teachers indicated that, given the Cree Program’s relative youth, they were reluctant to pass judgment on it at this point.

### **Cree Culture**

The assessment of Cree Program students’ understanding and appreciation of Cree culture was informed by the following data sources: 1) semi-structured parent and teacher interview transcripts; 2) student responses on the cultural component portion of the Cree oral proficiency assessment interview. Analysis of the data collected from these two sources suggests considerable agreement between teachers, parents and students, that Cree program students view Cree culture in a positive light. The depth of their cultural understanding is not addressed in this study, but an exploration of this would be an interesting and valuable area of investigation for future research.

All three parent interviewees mentioned at numerous points that they were giving their children instruction in traditional Aboriginal cultural ways and thus their children

could be expected to understand and have regard for Cree culture. The three parents selected for this study are not assumed to be representative of Cree Program parents in general and thus it should not be expected that all Cree Program students receive such instruction in the home.

All parents felt that being in the Cree Program contributed to greater cultural self-awareness and self-esteem for their children. One of them put it this way:

Kids [in the Cree Program] know who they are. They know that they're Cree...when they come home from the school here... they're proud of what they do. I want my children to have a high self esteem, I want them to feel good about themselves [as First Nation people] [Parent 2].

Teachers agreed with the parents for the most part on this point. One of them, reflecting on the difference between students in the Cree and in the mainstream English programs, suggested that the Cree Program helped to develop a more positive perception of the Cree language.

Before [the Cree Program] they didn't want it [Cree language instruction]. Students would go, Aw Cree, what's that? Is that like Indian talk? ... [Now] they're knowing who they are, and that pride and that self-confidence provides opportunity for much more success [Teacher 2].

Another teacher dissented somewhat from this view, maintaining instead that "many students in both programs don't really know who they are," and went on to describe several situations where Aboriginal students deny their roots [Teacher 3].

All teachers and parents talked about the importance of revitalizing the language in order to preserve Cree culture. Several of them indicated that this was important for the

following reasons: 1) the language contains cultural information which is lost when one loses the language (e.g. animate and inanimate nouns, concepts of spirituality, etc.) and 2) communicating with Elders in Cree is necessary in order to learn cultural knowledge from them. All adult participants expressed the belief that language and culture are intertwined.

Student responses to questions about cultural attitudes (see Table 5 below) correspond with the views expressed by the majority of the adult interviewees. It appears that the students chosen for the interviews generally have a clear sense of their ancestry. Five of six students interviewed were quick to identify themselves as hailing from Aboriginal families. The sixth one initially said no, she did not have Aboriginal parents or grandparents, but then subsequently changed her mind and said yes. All but one of them also expressed positive views about learning Cree. When asked whether they thought they would be happier in an English only program, the results were mixed. The majority of the students indicated they preferred to study in the Cree Program and gave several reasons. One of the students explained, “Because Cree’s my language.” However, another student expressed no preference at all, while a third would prefer to be in the English Program because she “doesn’t like speaking Cree.” When students were asked if they would be more or less happy to be in a non-Cree family, one said she’d be “more happy,” but didn’t know why. The other five said they would be less happy. At the end of the interview students were asked if they wanted to add anything that they hadn’t had a chance to say. One of the students responded, “Yeah, Cree rocks.”

**Table 5. Summary of Student responses to Cultural Component Questions**

question	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6
<b>Best thing about learning Cree?</b>	To learn a different language.	To learn Cree words.	Words, spelling, listening	I don't know	You can talk in a different language with someone who doesn't speak English.	You can speak Cree better.
<b>Would be more, equally, or less happy in English program?</b>	Less happy Because Cree is my language	Less happy	Less happy, because I like speaking Cree, I even say that to my Grandparents and my Mom.	More happy. Because I don't really like speaking Cree because I don't know how.	Less happy. I like my class now.	Just as happy, because I wouldn't have to listen to so much Cree. Cree is hard.
<b>Would be more, equally, or less happy in non-Cree family?</b>	Less happy.	Less happy.	Less happy, because I like speaking Cree a lot.	More happy. I don't know why.	Less happy. Because I wouldn't know Cree.	Less happy. No reason.

(see Appendix L for a more complete analysis.)

The fact that students were talking in the presence of both a Cree teacher and a peer needs to be kept in mind when interpreting the data. Moreover, two criteria for selection of students were: 1) they were considered successful students, and 2) they were likely to be cooperative participants. In view of the above considerations, it has to be acknowledged that the students consulted might have a more positive view of Cree language than their peers, because they are considered good at it, and they might be more inclined say what they think an interviewer might want to hear because they are inclined to be cooperative. For these reasons, and because no classroom observation data was available to offer a third perspective, the data on Cree cultural learning and attitudes is somewhat incomplete. Nevertheless, the fact that almost all the participants consulted, including teachers, parents and students, articulated a positive perception of Cree culture within the program does suggest that many students in the program do have a positive attitude toward Cree culture. Moreover, there is nothing in the data to suggest that the

Cree Program has had any deleterious effect on students' Cree cultural learning or identity development, and thus no reason to believe that the Cree Program is not having a positive impact on students' cultural development.

### **Academic Performance in other Subjects**

Grade 3 Provincial Assessment in Reading and Numeracy results were analyzed to obtain a picture of Cree Program students' academic performance in subjects other than Cree. The Grade 3 Provincial Assessment in Reading and Numeracy is a list of three reading and nine numeracy outcomes used by teachers in the formative assessment of all children in Manitoba schools in the first few months of Grade 3. This provincial Education Ministry initiative is not designed to be a program assessment tool and doesn't impose standardized instruments, procedures, or assessment conditions. In fact, teachers choose how and under what conditions they assess their students in particular outcomes. For these reasons, the results displayed below should not be given undue weight and need to be interpreted with caution. However, they do present data from a formal assessment of Grade 3 students' academic performance, and thus shed light on the academic performance of Grade 3 students in the Cree program and permit a rough comparison with student performance in the English program in the same school.

The data portrayed in the table and charts below (Table 6, Figures 1 & 2) represent Provincial Assessment in Reading and Numeracy aggregated mean results for the 32 Cree Program and 17 English program Grade 3 students in Wapanohk School. Classroom conditions for both programs are similar, with the Cree Program students divided among two classes of 16 students, and the English program housed in one class of 17 students. A comparison of percentages of students performing in each category

indicates that in reading, for instance, the difference between the two programs is less than 2.5% for each of the three assessment categories: “meeting expectations, needing some help, or needing ongoing help.” Given that the two sample groups (32 and 17 students) are divided into 3 assessment categories, each containing fewer than 16 students, the difference of 2.5% or less is too small to infer that there is any difference between the two program groups in English reading proficiency.

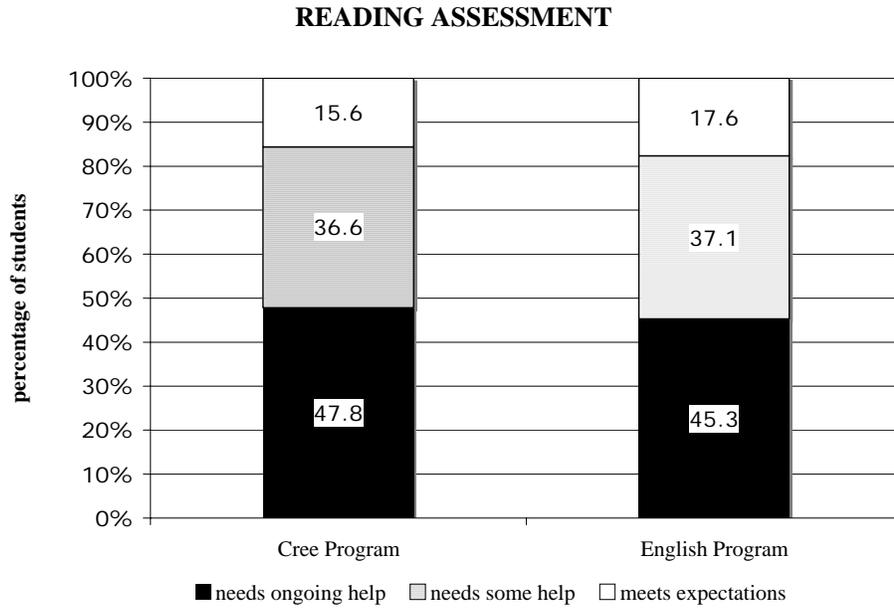
In the numeracy assessment, there is a greater difference between the two programs but overall, the difference doesn't strongly favour one program or the other. The percentage of students meeting numeracy outcomes is higher in the Cree Program, but so is the percentage of students needing ongoing help. In both programs, the majority of students do not yet meet the Grade 3 reading and numeracy outcomes, while a minority do. That this is so is not unexpected and is in fact the case in many schools across the province. What appears clear, according to these data, is that students in the Cree Program are not falling behind their peers in the English program, in which the classroom conditions and student population are very comparable to those of the Cree Program. While it's important to exercise caution when drawing conclusions from such a small student sample, the data offer no reason to suggest that Cree Program student learning is suffering because of time accorded to instruction in Cree.

**Table 6. Grade 3 Provincial Assessment Results**

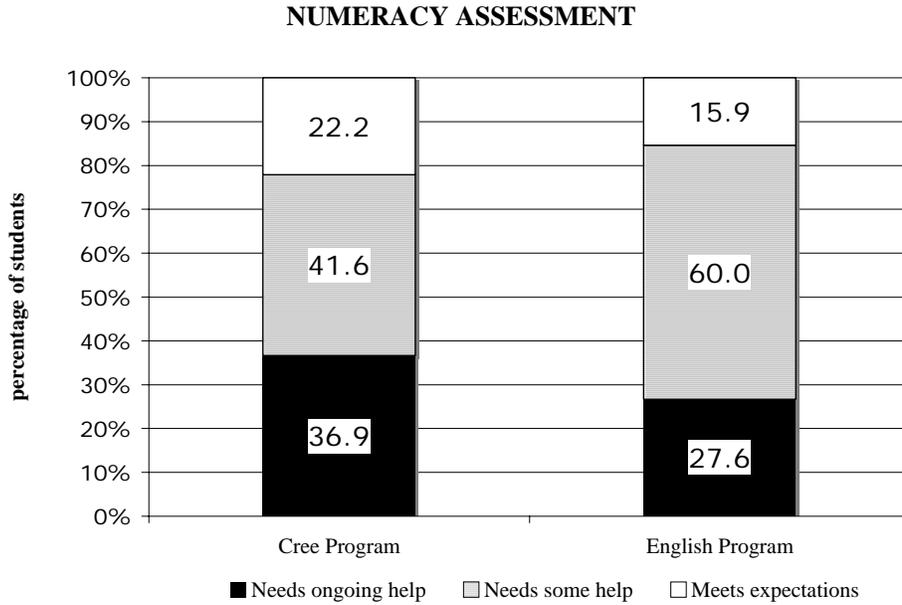
**WAPANOHK SCHOOL CREE AND ENGLISH PROGRAMS**

program	number of students.	READING (avg. of 3 categories)			NUMERACY (avg. of 9 categories)		
		need ongoing help	need some help	meet expectations	need ongoing help	need some help	meet expectations
Cree	32	15.3	11.7	5	11.8	13.3	7.1
English	17	7.7	6.3	3	4.7	10.2	2.6

**Figure 1. Grade 3 Reading Assessment Results for Cree and English Programs**



**Figure 2. Grade 3 Numeracy Assessment Results for Cree and English Programs**



### **Perceptions of the Cree Program**

The interviews conducted with three parents and three teachers from the Cree Program were designed to elicit their thoughts, opinions and general perceptions of the Cree Program. The interviews had a conversational format and thus varied considerably in structure and content from one participant to another, but in each of the interviews, participants were asked to address the following themes: 1) to explore how they feel about the Cree Program, 2) to assess and prioritize its goals, 3) to identify its needs, 4) to assess the program's success in teaching children Cree language and culture, 5) to comment on its importance and value, and 6) to indicate how it might be improved. As might be expected from participants who had volunteered for the task, all of them indicated strong support of the Cree Program, and all of them had clear ideas on the achievements and needs of the Cree Program as well as on its relative importance and value. An outline and analysis of the participants' thoughts on these themes follows.

#### ***Level of Commitment***

The theme of alienation features prominently in Aboriginal Education literature (e.g. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Grant & Gillespie, 1993). High rates of absenteeism and attrition, low rates of achievement, lack of parental involvement in school and little support for education at home, these are factors often mentioned as both symptoms and outcomes of alienation from the school system. Many programs, initiatives and resources have attempted to address this issue. In fact, the genesis of the Cree Program can be traced to just such an effort, when the Thompson Aboriginal Education Advisory Council, in concert with the School District and the Aboriginal Education Directorate of Manitoba conducted a survey of the needs and interests of the

Thompson's Aboriginal community. Given the importance of the theme of alienation in the field of Aboriginal education, one might expect it to also feature prominently in the parents' and teachers' perspectives on the Cree Program.

### *Parents' Commitment*

Instead of parental alienation, it is commitment and engagement that figure most strongly in the interview data. The parent participants indicated that they were engaged and committed to the Cree Program and to Wapanohk School. They claimed to be at the school frequently and identified a variety of involvements in school activities: sitting on committees, participating in parent/child programs, attending school functions in support of their children. One parent summed it up in the following way: "I feel that that's my school as well. I'm there at all their functions and that's because I feel that I'm invited. I feel that I'm valued as a parent" [Parent 2].

All three of the parents noted that all of their school-aged children currently attend the Cree Program, and intend to enrol younger or future children in the program as well. When asked if they would recommend the Cree Program to friends and acquaintances with school-age children, they all answered yes, and two parents stated that they already had actively encouraged friends and colleagues to consider the program for their children.

A further indication of the parents' level of commitment is their active engagement in their children's education, illustrated by the detailed awareness of their learning and the evident pride in their achievements that the parents displayed. In one of the homes visited, this was clearly illustrated by the prominent celebration of children's activities (e.g. art projects, newspaper articles, school certificates) that covered an entire

dining room wall. All three of the parents also stated that they made a point of supplementing the school education, giving their children cultural instruction about “First Nations beliefs and values” at home. “It’s up to me now to provide the cultural perspective, and not always to depend fully on what the school’s providing” [Parent 3].

All three parents indicated as well that they encouraged their children to use Cree at home, to practise, to teach them (the parents) Cree vocabulary, and use Cree with Cree-speaking relatives and friends. In fact, all three of the parents mentioned that they would like for the school to offer a Cree language course for Cree Program parents so that the parents would be able to learn what their children are learning in order to serve as language learning models and to support Cree language in the home.

I would like to learn more Cree. And I would like to follow up what the children are learning in school, so I could follow it up at home. ... I would just like to see that take place, that what the children are learning at the school be transferred to the home so that we could be working closer together, the home and the school [Parent 2].

While both other parents echoed this suggestion, one of them also observed that it wasn’t fair to expect the school to provide everything:

I have family, and a lot of these parents have... family that speaks Cree. So what’s the problem, why can’t we learn it? ...[We] have the family members there who speak it fluently, and that can teach us. Why they don’t, I don’t know.

[Parent 3]

### *Teachers' Commitment*

Their comments in the semi-structured interviews and in other informal conversations suggest that the Cree Program teachers are also very committed to the program. For the First Nations teachers, the simple fact of their presence in the program could be interpreted as a sign of strong commitment, since they could instead be working for a tax-free salary on a nearby reserve. All the participating teachers explained that they had chosen to work in the Cree Program because of a perceived need “to save the [Cree] language and the culture” and this sentiment was also echoed in informal conversations with other teachers in the program. Teachers frequently mentioned feeling a sense of fulfilment when children were heard to use the Cree language. “To hear kids speak the language, that’s why I became a teacher. That’s what drew me into teaching” [personal communication with a Cree Program teacher].

According to the teachers, a majority of parents with children in the program share the sense of commitment illustrated in the parent interviews discussed above, but there are some significant exceptions. For example, one teacher in the Cree program told about a newly arrived child in class who had explained to the teacher and the other students that she didn’t have to or want to learn Cree and that, in fact, her mother had instructed her not to learn it. Upon exploring this further, the teacher was astonished to find that the child had been telling the truth; the mother admitted that she didn’t want her child to speak Cree and even expressly asked the teacher not to use Cree when addressing the child. The teacher explained how difficult it would be to do this in a Cree Program classroom and suggested the mother put her child in the English program instead. At this the mother indicated that she had reservations about the English program teacher and had

chosen the Cree Program as “the lesser of two evils” [personal communication with Cree teacher]. While this anecdote is an extreme example, it serves to illustrate that there is quite a range of views among Cree Program parents. Given the history of alienation from educational institutions common in Aboriginal families, it should come as no surprise that not all parents are supportive of school programming. More surprising, perhaps, is the strong sense of commitment to the Cree Program evident in the words expressed by each of the participants in this study.

### *Student Attendance*

School absenteeism is widely regarded as an indicator of alienation from the education system at both individual and family levels (e.g. ERIC Digest, 1997). Families and communities with positive attitudes toward schooling are considered more likely to encourage and value regular school attendance for their children. Community and family alienation from schooling is commonly held to explain why, as a group, Aboriginal students have higher absentee rates than non-aboriginal students.

An Australian study estimates that mean absentee rates of Aboriginal children are three times greater than those of non-Aboriginal children (Bourke, Rigby & Burden; 2000). Current Canadian statistics on absentee rates of Aboriginal children have not been found, but the mention of chronic absenteeism in reports concerning Aboriginal education (e.g. Jeffrey, 1999) as well as my own experience in Northern Manitoba schools suggest that the Australian estimates would not be unreasonable in the Canadian context.

Whether the parent participants’ high level of commitment (and diminished alienation) to the Cree Program and toward Wapanohk School generally is shared by

other parents in the program is not known. However, school attendance data for the Cree Program and for the school in general were made available for this study and can serve as a rough measure of Wapanohk School families' commitment to schooling, with high attendance suggesting high commitment and absenteeism indicating the contrary. With this in mind, I analysed Cree and English Program attendance data for Wapanohk School for the first four months of the current school year. According to school personnel, virtually all students in the Cree program are Aboriginal, as are a large majority of students in the English program. Identification of Aboriginal identity is not required on registration, and thus an exact breakdown by ethnic or racial identity is not possible. However, in view of the literature cited above, it might be expected that Cree Program attendance rates would be lower than rates for the English program where non-Aboriginal students have greater representation. According to school district attendance data, in the first four months of the 2005/06 school year, the mean rate of school attendance for the English Program was 86.1%, 2.4% higher than the Cree Program rate of 83.7%. What is most surprising in these data is that the rates for the two programs are not much different.

It should be noted that both the English and the Cree Programs have a number of students with extremely high absenteeism: six students in the Cree and two in the English Program have missed over 50% of school. Since students with such unusually high absentee rates are almost certainly dealing with other factors like personal and social problems (e.g. family transitions, foster homes, FAS, etc.), their absence tells us little about the educational commitment of their families. Moreover, the inclusion of several extreme cases in the calculation of the mean average rates may draw a misleading picture, that perhaps tells us little about the attendance patterns of the majority of the

students. To obtain a school attendance picture that is not skewed by a few extreme cases, the median rates for each program have also been compared. The median attendance rate for English Program students is 89.7%, the median rate for Cree Program students, 87.9%.

**Table 7. K-4 Attendance in Wapanohk School, September to December 2005**

program	total students in program	students with perfect attendance	students with less than 50 % attendance	mean attendance rate (%)	median attendance rate (%)
Cree	129	1	6	83.7	87.9
English	115	5	2	86.1	89.7
difference	14			2.4	1.7

The rate of student attendance in the Cree Program can be interpreted as evidence of a high level of commitment to schooling on the part of Cree Program parents, but it should also be acknowledged that credit for this cannot be attributed solely to the Cree Program. The school has a strong majority of Aboriginal students, and while the Cree Program is almost 100% Aboriginal, the regular program also has a very high proportion of Aboriginal students. There are many factors that contribute to making the school a place where Aboriginal people feel welcome and where the parents would like their children to be, and the comparable rates of attendance in both Cree and English programs attest to the success of these programs in the school.

### ***Program Goals***

To focus interviews on the Cree Program goals and priorities, all participants were asked to read and respond to a handout containing the following text:

The stated goals of the Cree Program are that students will:

1. learn to listen, speak, read and write in Cree,

2. meet provincial curriculum outcomes in all subject areas, including ELA,
3. learn Cree cultural knowledge and perspectives,
4. develop confidence and pride in their cultural and linguistic identity.

Please tell me what you think of these goals.

- a. Are they appropriate? Do you support them?
- b. Are they sufficient? Is anything missing?
- c. Do they correspond to what you want for your children?

[see Appendix I for full interview protocol]

### ***Parents' Goals***

All three parent participants were in agreement that three of the four stated goals were very important and they strongly affirmed the school's efforts to address them.

Their comments expressed the view that the goals of language and cultural learning are intertwined and that they are significant factors in the development of cultural pride and self-esteem. One parent put it this way: "I want my children not only to have high self esteem and to feel beautiful about themselves but to connect up with and to have their First Nation identity" [Parent 2].

Parents acknowledged a close connection between knowing the language and having full access to the culture:

Language is the most important part because that's where you get your oral history, and passing down of the traditional stories and once that's translated into English it loses its meaning, so I think that having the language and understanding those traditional Cree stories is very important [Parent 1].

Another parent described how not being able to speak Cree left her feeling emotionally disconnected from her own extended family:

I think it's very important now that maybe my parents should have [required me to learn Cree]. Because like I say, I'm a little bit left out you know...when we're at family gatherings and that, and we're sitting among family members and they're all yapping away in Cree, and laughing... and now they'll talk to me in Cree and I'll answer back in English [Parent 3].

All three of the parents stated that they wanted their children to know the Cree language so that they could have full access and develop strong connections to Cree culture.

Concerning the second goal, "to meet provincial curriculum outcomes in all subject areas, including ELA," the parents were less convinced of its importance. While one of the parents stated initially that all four of the goals were important and that none should be neglected, in the ensuing discussion, the other three goals were addressed in some detail while this one received no attention at all [Parent 3]. The other two parents explicitly stated that meeting goals of "western" curricula was the least important of the program goals.

I'm really not too sure what to say about [curriculum goal #2)... I'm glad Wapanohk is looking at those [other subject] areas, ...making sure that the children, and that the other areas don't suffer... I guess I'm glad Wapanohk's looking at that...[Parent 2].

This statement was delivered with hesitation and a questioning tone that suggested doubt and lack of conviction about the matter. The parent then went on to state

that she holds self-esteem and instruction in Cree culture and traditional ways to be “more important than Science or Math” [Parent 2]. This sentiment was echoed by the third parent. In fact all three of the parents felt that traditional Cree culture and cultural practices should have a more central role in the Cree Program, and two of the parents even suggested that the attention given to more conventional subject areas could be reduced to make way for a more central role for Cree language and culture instruction.

When asked to sum up in a few words what they would like for their children to get out of the Cree Program, one parent answered: “For my children to get their language back. The goal would be for them actually to have a conversation with my dad, fluently in Cree” [Parent 1]. Another parent agreed that learning the language was the primary goal, suggesting that this would lead to both greater cultural awareness and self esteem, while a third offered the opinion that developing the children’s personal and cultural self esteem was the utmost priority, adding that this would serve to “break a cycle brought on by years of assimilation” [Parent 2].

### ***Teachers’ Goals***

The teachers’ perspectives on the Cree Program goals closely paralleled the views expressed by the parents: that the language, culture and self-esteem goals were closely interconnected. The following three comments illustrate the teachers’ points of view:

Culture and then language, they’re integrated, the rest will fall into place [Teacher 1].

Using the [Cree] language is a sign of cultural pride...If you get kids to feel good about who they are, then they’ll be open for it, they’ll want to learn the language. The more confidence you feel in yourself, and the more positive an

outlook that you have on your own cultural background, the more you're going to want to learn the language [teacher 2].

Goals 1 and 4 [are priorities], language and pride in identity. Pride will motivate students. If the students aren't proud of who they are, if they don't accept that they are Native people, then they're not going to want to learn to speak the language [Teacher 3].

As might be expected, given that they spend a substantial portion of their workdays teaching these subjects, the teachers viewed academic achievement in math, science and English Language Arts as being quite important, in contrast to the views expressed by the parents. Two of the teachers indicated that high achievement in these subject areas was important for the development of personal and cultural self-esteem, a third indicated that all learning was connected to and enhanced by self-esteem. One of the teachers implied that success in English Language Arts was at least as important as learning Cree language and culture:

Sure it's good to teach them Cree, but you can't just do that all day long. I have students in my class who hardly read, they're one or two years behind grade level. You can't just neglect that and teach them Cree.  
[Teacher 3].

All of the teachers also expressed reservations about teaching children to read and write in Cree. Listening and speaking Cree were identified as priority areas, but writing and especially reading were questioned because of the traditional oral focus of Cree culture. All three teachers indicated that this was an area of difficulty in the program

because of the dearth of Cree language resources available for teaching Cree literacy, and one of the teachers went on to question the point of this effort:

We're teaching kids how to read in Cree, but where are they going to come across all this material to read once they're outside of school? Sure, in Thompson they'll see some signs, but those are just names, or words to identify buildings. There are no textbooks, or magazines and newspapers out there for them to continue reading outside of school [Teacher 1].

In summary, parents and teachers were united in their view that three of the four central program outcomes were in line with their own priorities for their children. They all supported the idea that learning to speak and understand Cree, acquiring Cree cultural knowledge and perspectives and developing cultural pride and self-esteem should be the Cree Program's priority areas. Support for the goal of learning to read and write in Cree was less strong, with teachers questioning the value of devoting much time and effort to Cree reading and writing because the language is used primarily for oral interactions. While parents didn't question the value of reading and writing Cree, their own hopes for their children were also clearly focused on the development of conversational skills. On the goal of high academic achievement in other subject areas, parents' and teachers' opinions were mixed. While teachers didn't question the validity of this goal, the parents did, indicating that, in their view, the Cree Program should have a strong Cree culture and language focus, and a lesser focus on conventional curricular areas like English, math and science.

### *Assessing the Program*

All adult interview participants were asked for a global assessment of the Cree Program, indicating how well they thought it was working.

#### *Parents' Assessment*

The three parents interviewed all gave the program a strong vote of confidence, stating that they are fundamentally happy with what the Cree Program is doing, indicating that while improvements are needed, they are willing to be patient with it.

I would give it a... B. I would like to give it an A, because my kids come home knowing more Cree than I do. The reason why I don't, why I say it's not an A yet, is that I think that the way the language is taught could be improved somewhat [Parent 3].

This parent went on to explain that she was not suggesting that there was anything wrong with the way the language was being taught, in fact she stated that her children had had excellent teachers in the program. However, she added the hope that teachers would become more enthusiastic and use more interesting teaching methods more often to keep children excited about the language. She also expressed the view that different teaching methods needed to be used to get the children to use the language more.

However, she took pains to note that she was not complaining:

But, I can't say that I'm disappointed in any way, because they're making that effort, the school itself, the program itself is making an effort to teach the language. So I can't go and say that I'm disappointed with it in any way, because that effort is there. They're trying. You know that's all I'm concerned about right now [Parent 3].

Another parent who also gave the program a B indicated that she was reluctant to criticize the program in any way because simply having it at all was already a very good thing.

I'd give it a B because it's so important that we have this, that my children go there. But it could be better. One way to make it better would be to include a Cree for parents component. It's basically doing what it should be doing but it's going to take a whole community effort to undo a lot of the damage and to bring young First Nation children, to introduce them to a world that believes in them. So there's definitely more work to be done on a community level, but I think absolutely, we're heading in the right direction on this one [Parent 2].

The third parent demonstrated a similar perspective of patience and appreciation, essentially giving the program a vote of confidence while also implying that improvements were possible. "It's a start. It's boosting my children's self-esteem and giving them a sense of who they are as Aboriginal children and eventually Aboriginal adults" [Parent 1].

### ***Teachers' Assessment***

One of the teachers agreed with the parents' generally positive assessment of the Cree Program, saying:

And is the program is being delivered, successfully? Yeah, I see it happening in the school... but it's got to be continuous throughout the school year. It can't just happen in spurts throughout the year, it's got to be on a daily basis... [The students] have a keen interest [in Aboriginal culture and language]. They want to get right in there and learn and see and hear about what's being demonstrated and

what is happening in the school... and they do try to use it [Cree language] throughout the day [Teacher 1].

The other two teachers interviewed didn't assess the Cree Program quite as positively. In one case, the teacher expressed some disappointment with the slow development of her students' English literacy and Cree conversational skills.

The students I have now are very low...in their [English] reading and writing skills. I think it's because in past years, Cree was so focused on that English was left behind and so, the skills that they need weren't learnt.

And [in Cree] the students do understand some of the stuff, but they're not speaking it yet. They try, but...we can't communicate with them in Cree. Not yet anyway [Teacher 3].

When asked what, if anything, was successful in the program, she identified the attitudes of the students and their parents. In her view, students were trying hard to learn the language, and many parents were involved and were showing a high level of interest in the Cree Program.

Another teacher also identified student and parent interest as an area in which the Cree Program was particularly successful.

The parents would come to me for lists of what the kids were learning so they could go home and put them on the fridge and make their own flash cards. And you could see that a fire got lit in those parents, because those kids were coming home with Cree words. One of things that let me know I was doing the right thing, was when I had a grandma come and tell what her granddaughter had said when they were cutting up onions. The little

girl had told the grandma what onions were in Cree, and the grandma hadn't heard that word since she had been a little girl. She got all excited and came and told me what her granddaughter had said, and how proud she was of her. The grandmother was in tears when she told me this... To me that was a real success, the parent interest. They started coming into class, started coming into the school, they'd come just to listen and learn a little bit. To me that was successful [Teacher 2].

Parents' and teachers' comments suggest that there is much agreement on the subject of how well the Cree Program is working. According to this data, the program has been successful in the following ways:

- 1) engaging students' families and creating an educational community that expands beyond the school;
- 2) exposing students to Cree cultural events and developing a sense of cultural pride and self esteem;
- 3) teaching students Cree vocabulary.

Teachers and parents also agree that the program has fallen short of expectations in the development of students' Cree language proficiency. They are not yet speaking the language fluently, and this disappoints parents and teachers alike.

On the subject of academic achievement in other curricular areas, teachers are mixed in their assessment of the program. Two teachers indicate that the program is meeting this goal, while one teacher wonders if students' English reading and writing skills are suffering because of time spent in Cree. Parent participants differed from teachers on the relative importance of this goal, implying, and explicitly stating in one

case that this is not a priority area for them. Perhaps the parents' apparent lack of interest in the "other academic areas" indicates that a measure of alienation from the mainstream educational system still remains. This suggests an interesting topic for exploration in future research.

### ***What would make it work better?***

In the semi-structured interviews, all participants were asked the question: is there anything that could be done to make the Cree Program work better? The purpose of the question was twofold: 1) to identify and prioritize program needs and improvements; 2) to gain a second perspective on parents' and teachers' assessment of the program's efficacy by having them indicate where they think program improvement is needed. Overall, there was considerable agreement between parents and teachers about improvements needed in the Cree Program, and these were centred around three main themes: 1) support for culture and language learning in the school; 2) the need for a common understanding of the Cree Program in the school and the community; 3) the need for more program resources. Two other areas for improvement figured prominently for the teachers, but were not mentioned by any parents: 4) program administration, and 5) program cohesion. A brief survey and discussion of participants' comments on program improvement follows.

### ***Support for Culture and Language Learning in the School***

Teachers and parents were largely in agreement that the Cree Program needs more organized culture and language activities inside and outside the classroom to support the students' learning. The support activities envisioned by the parents and teachers focused on two areas:

*Cultural activities for students.* Teachers and parents alike indicated that there was already Cree cultural programming offered at the school and all of them made a point of expressing support and appreciation for this. However, all of the participants also suggested that more cultural activities were needed to better support the children's learning. Teachers' comments were focused primarily on activities outside the classroom while parents expressed a desire to see more cultural practices inside the classroom as well.

*Teachers' comments:*

We should have extra-curricular activities after school or in the evening, like games and events, to promote the language and make it fun [Teacher 3].

More cultural activities are needed. to give the students an opportunity to be able to relate and give meaning to all the other subject areas. That is the most important part... [if] they're learning [the culture], then things like the language fall into place [Teacher 1].

*Parents' comments:*

I think Wapanohk really does make efforts to have [Cree cultural programming]. They bring guests in regularly I think, and they have days set aside for traditional games and things like that. However, I think we could also add something in there that's more of a bridge between western and First Nations thinking, like a talking circle...vision quest, etc. [Parent 2].

Maybe [we could have] more on the cultural knowledge, ...including... even the naming ceremonies, because that's another important part of our culture, having our spiritual names. Now that we're on that...I think teaching them about

the sweat lodge and the meanings of the animals as well...there's so much more [that could be done] [Parent 1].

*Language support for parents.* Five of the six adults interviewed talked about the importance of Cree language support for parents, to enable them to support the Cree Program in the home. Teachers suggested that parents could model positive attitudes and interest by making an effort to learn and use Cree on their own. Parents, on the other hand, indicated a need for a language course offered at the school and designed specifically for them as parents of Cree Program children. However, two of the three parents also added that they have Cree speaking relatives to whom they can look for language support, and a parent and two teachers also made the observation that it wasn't entirely fair to expect the school to do something that families should be doing on their own.

*Teachers' comments:*

I think if the kids see their parents wanting to learn [Cree], they're going to want to learn with their parents. [Teacher 3].

[The parent] is the first teacher, you need to encourage it to be used at home also, not only at the school, otherwise you're not going to get the best benefit out of it... parents have to be willing to help at home by using the language [Teacher 1].

...It's a risk to say something for fear you may sound funny or different, or it may not be exact. But to be able to get across that that's okay, you have to take that chance...Parents will see, hey I need to do this for my kids [Teacher 2].

*Parents' comments:*

I as a parent don't benefit from [the Cree Program]. I would like to learn more Cree. And I would like to follow up what the children are learning in school, so I could follow it up at home... I have a lot of Cree speaking friends but I'm not immersed in it the way my children are so that I'm not picking it up as easily as they do... I would just like to see that what the children are learning at the school be transferred to the home so that we could be working closer together the home and the school [Parent 2].

...Maybe it's up to me now to provide the cultural perspective, and not always to depend fully on what the school's providing. So, between the parents and the school, the parents have to see their role too... Here I go, "Have my kids and teach them Cree," when I should have been going to myself: "How can I make it a hundred per cent effective or a higher percentage effective for them, [by working with the school]" [Parent 3].

### ***A Common Understanding of the Cree Program***

All but one of the adults interviewed expressed concern about the lack of a common understanding of the Cree Program in the school and the community, suggesting that a measure of confusion about the program structure and goals currently exists within the Cree Program community, and that this confusion is an impediment to the program's success. Teachers' were concerned that administrators and teachers didn't have a common understanding of the Cree Program and this was affecting what is happening in the classroom and what students are learning. Parents' comments were primarily focused on classroom language teaching approaches.

*Teachers' comments:*

We need to have a common understanding of the program, its goals, methods, structure, etc. I think a lot of people, even our own staff, our administration, [are] confused about it. Some of them have called it a Cree immersion program, and it's not immersion, it's only 35 to 50 % of the time that is spent in Cree. I'm not sure that we're all doing even that [Teacher 2].

You can do all the subject areas in both languages, just go back and forth. Use Cree, then English, that's how some of us do it. We don't have a Cree part and an English part [to our day]. We talk to them in Cree steady. And if I say something in English then I say it in Cree. I go back and forth [Teacher 3].

*Parents' comments:*

I know that when I signed my girls up for the Cree Bilingual program, they said that they would speak only Cree in certain classes and [in others] they would speak English. I'm not sure that that's what's actually happening [Parent 1].

***Program Resources***

The need for program resources was mentioned in all of the teacher interviews, as might be expected given their role in the program delivery. The teachers had much to say about the Cree Program's resource needs and there was much agreement in their comments. The need for resources figured less prominently in the interviews with parents where the topic came up in only one of the interviews. Five main areas for improvement of program resources were identified: money, time, materials, professional development and personnel.

*Money.* There was only one instance in the conversations where money was mentioned specifically, but money would be needed to meet many of the other program improvements presented below.

For a Cree bilingual school, we don't even have a budget, we don't have a Cree bilingual budget. Science, library, different areas have a budget. The Cree Bilingual Program doesn't. All we have is a computer and a printer, and even that we had to fight to keep at the school [Teacher 2].

*Time:*

We need time to develop resources, make Cree books, materials and games to use in the classroom...and we also need PD days for resource people to come in and show us how to deliver the program, to show us strategies to use in language teaching [Teacher 1].

... we also need time to work through curriculum resources and documents together and to make continuums so that we know what we need to do in Kindergarten to get to Grade One, and what we need to do in Grade One to get to Grade Two [Teacher 2].

Teachers suggested that the preparation time given to all teachers was not sufficient for them, and that it was unrealistic to expect them to develop the resources and the program itself in addition to their regular classroom duties.

*Material resources.* Material resources to support classroom learning received more attention than any other programming improvement, and all of the teachers mentioned the need for books, flashcards, visual aids, etc.

I think if there were more resources available for the teachers and for the kids, the program could be a lot better. Right now we have to develop our own materials, there are no books available, even songs and stuff, if you don't have a visitor come in, there are no records or tapes or discs... So we need more hands-on resources to use in the classroom and more audio materials, books, anything that's written, visuals that will go with whatever concept it is that you're teaching [Teacher 1].

Several parents also suggested that the program could benefit from more resources, suggesting that audio equipment and recordings would be useful so that teachers and parents to work together to develop and support students' oral language in the home.

*Professional development for teachers.* As indicated above, teachers would like to enlist experts to assist and guide them in the development of resource material, bilingual language teaching strategies and also in Cree linguistics.

*Personnel.* A number of parents and teachers indicated that the program would benefit from having community members, especially Elders, become involved in the school and in the classroom, to support the teaching of Cree language and culture.

We need to make use of [the Elders], they are the experts on language and culture. [they] are our main teachers within our community. I think getting them involved in our schools and within the classrooms would be beneficial for the whole program itself, because the Elders are the number one teachers and [they] are slowly diminishing, they are dying out... So an Elder coming in to do story-telling, or to be a Grandmother, because some children don't have extended

families, I think the program can use the Elders as main teachers and resource persons [Teacher 1].

A similar suggestion came from a parent, who believed that not only the school, but also the community would benefit from community involvement.

We need to get more Elders to come in and tell stories... And there are a lot of Cree speakers out there that are so-called uneducated and unsuccessful in this society, the dominant society...They really know the language and the culture.

Somehow I'd hope that we can tap into that wealth and let them know that they're important and valuable to us for retaining our languages here [Parent 2].

When asked who should coordinate community involvement in the Cree Program, several teachers suggested that this should be the responsibility of the Cree Program coordinator. They also added that this position should be responsible exclusively for Cree programming and should be based in the school.

*Program administration.* All three of the teachers (and none of the parents) interviewed identified program administration as a key area where improvement is needed. Informal conversations with other teachers in the program supported this point of view. Teachers' comments on this topic were lengthy and detailed and often directed at personalities in the school district administration, and so, to protect anonymity, the comments are summarized below rather than quoted verbatim. Teachers identified the following items as issues needing attention by program administrators:

- Program entry points need to be clearly established, to govern placement of students new to the program, since at present, transfer students with no

background in Cree have been placed in Cree Bilingual classrooms at all grade levels.

- Orientation and support is needed for teachers new to the program. New teachers have been placed in the Cree Program (there is a new teacher added every year as the program develops) without receiving any orientation, and are unaware of program structure, curriculum documents, goals, etc.
- Meetings of Cree Bilingual Program teachers should be held regularly and should focus on classroom issues: Cree language standardization, programming, sharing ideas, methods and materials and solving problems.
- A Cree speaking administrator/coordinator who can support teachers in planning and resource development, plan and coordinate school wide cultural events and be involved in the hiring and evaluation of program staff should be placed inside the school.

*Program cohesion.* Another area mentioned by all teachers was the importance of improving cohesion among teachers in the Cree Program. Teachers indicated that program cohesion had diminished over recent years, and while various explanations for that were offered, all teachers agreed on the need for improvement in this area. Teachers agreed that individual teachers sometimes floundered on their own, and the program could not work properly if teachers didn't work together. Comments focused around the need for teamwork and standardization of language in the classroom.

On the topic of teamwork, teachers agreed that because the program's needs are so great, they can't afford to work alone:

Everybody has to work together, we can't afford a lack of cohesion [Teacher 1].

We need to work together as a team, sharing, working together, everybody being treated equally. We started off like that but it just kind of fell apart [Teacher 3].

... because right now, everybody's everywhere. People are feeling stressed, people are feeling pushed down, pushed around, people are feeling guilty because they're not doing what they're supposed to be doing, but they don't have the tools to do it. And we don't have the... the cohesion to feel comfortable asking for help [Teacher 2].

Teachers indicated that there was much cooperative work required in the area of language and dialect standardization. There are several dialects of Cree that are prominent in Northern Manitoba, and even within these dialects, there is significant variation between communities. For learning, teaching and material development reasons, it had been decided to adopt Cross Lake Cree (a regional version of the N dialect -- Muskego or Swampy Cree) for use in the Cree Program, even though Cree Program teachers (and many students' families) come from communities where other variants of Cree are spoken. Teachers indicated that this continued to be a source of difficulty and some friction for Cree Program teachers.

We need to work together so that we're on the same page, teaching the students the same thing. In the beginning of the program, we met once a week for between 2 and 3 hours a night, just to standardize the words, the vocabulary we were going to use in the classroom, so that all the teachers were teaching the same thing, because there are different ways of saying it, but we needed to standardize to develop our materials. And we worked hard at that [Teacher 2].

In class [some teachers] speak the “N” dialect instead of their own “TH,” which is good. And then we have others who [don’t do that]. I guess they need a reminder that they should... If you’re a fluent speaker it’s not hard. You’ll have no trouble doing that or understanding another dialect. [Teacher 3]

***How Well is it Working and What Would Make it Better? Analysis of Interview Data***

A comparison of interview participants’ assessment of the Cree Program with their ideas on how the program could be improved reveals considerable consistency between these two sections, and between teachers’ and parents’ perspectives on the program. For instance, in their assessments, teachers suggest that the Cree Program has been very successful in engaging parents in the educational mission of the school. In the case of the three parent participants in the study, there is certainly evidence in their comments that they are engaged with the school, and that they would welcome an even deeper engagement, calling for Cree language lessons for parents and for other measures to enable parents to work even more closely with the school in the education of their children.

On the topic of a Cree cultural presence in the Cree Program classrooms, there is also agreement between the participants’ assessment and their suggestions for improvements. All participants agreed that Cree culture is present in the school and that children are exposed to various cultural events over the school year, and they also expressed a desire for even more Cree culture. However, on this topic, the vision of culture is not the same for teachers and parents. It appears that the parents are eager to go beyond what the teachers want; they are asking for something bolder than cultural activities like games, Elders’ teachings or story-telling. When parents talked about

cultural practices, they mentioned sweat lodges and traditional ceremonies, and several of them also expressed an interest in having children taught in more traditional ways, like making vision quests and being out on the land. When asked if they thought that the existing school system would be willing or able to accommodate their wishes, several parents demonstrated impatience with the question and answered that it was time that the system accommodate Aboriginal ways, after centuries of having it the other way around.

I'm actually tired of keeping the spirituality so quiet all the time and playing it safe. I think that if the Cree culture and knowledge is to come back, you know, let it come back for what it is, not worry about if it's going to be ok with everybody else. We've bent with our culture for long enough, you know. It's time to let us express who we really are. Instead of being so afraid of what the principal or the school board is going to say. We're getting slapped on the hands every time we try to express who we really are [Parent 1].

Nowadays we're looking at a lot of things, like how alcohol affects First Nation people, how sugar and food that never was a part of our culture affects us, and now we're suffering not only from addictions, we're suffering from diabetes and.... You know all this because our bodies weren't meant for things like that. And if that's valid, then why aren't we looking at education and that type of learning like something that's foreign to our systems too. Instead, First Nation children are being put on Ritalin all over the place. And so, instead of looking at it the other way around, why don't we make learning institute learning more relevant to First Nation kids if they're not quite fitting in? [Parent 2].

Cree language learning is another area in which teachers and parents' assessments of the program agree with the improvements they suggest. All of them called for students to learn more Cree, and they agreed that the ability to understand and converse with Grandparents and Elders was the end goal, rather than being able to read and write in Cree. On the topic of how to achieve this goal, there was less agreement. Teachers focused on resource needs to make their teaching more effective, while also acknowledging that language teaching practices need attention. Parents were primarily focused on teaching practices, wanting classrooms to be more consistently active, fun and engaging. Here again it seemed that parents were asking for bolder measures for the Cree Program, advocating for more Cree in the school and calling for "Cree only" periods in the classroom. All of the parents expressed the hope that, eventually, the Cree Bilingual Program would become a Cree Immersion Program, where Cree would be not only the language of instruction but also the primary language of communication in the school.

The topic of student achievement in other subject areas elicited much less concern from parents than from teachers, with the parents holding to a vision of the Cree Program that is considerably more radical than that held by the teachers. In the parents' view, Cree Program learning should occur in culturally appropriate ways and spirituality should be an integral part of the program. The Cree Program school should be a place where Aboriginal culture is practiced in its entirety, and where Aboriginal children's self-esteem is the utmost concern. The parents appear to believe, as several of them suggest, that if these things are present, other learning will simply "fall into place."

### **How Important is the Cree Program?**

At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were asked to talk about the Cree Program's importance: is it important and if so, what is important about it? The question elicited a variety of answers that were uniformly heartfelt and provided the most eloquent moments in the interviews. I'll close the discussion of the research findings with a brief overview of the Cree Program's importance as seen by parents and teachers in the Cree Program.

Helen Settee, the director of the Aboriginal Education Directorate, Manitoba Education, talked about the Cree Program's importance as follows:

It's important because it is the result of a grassroots initiative. The Aboriginal community in Thompson said that they wanted this, and then with the help of various agencies they went about getting it. That's what's so significant about it [Helen Settee, personal communication].

Several teachers echoed this perspective, saying that the Cree Program was essentially a stepping-stone to much bigger accomplishments.

The Cree program gets the ball rolling. Kids learn, parents get involved, they learn to use the language, communicate with Elders and have access to cultural knowledge. And this restores pride and contributes a sense of importance. Parents get the sense that they matter, they are important when the school makes efforts to meet their needs [Teacher 2].

One parent offered a bolder expression of this sentiment. In her view, not only is the program important because of its grassroots origins, it's important because it's "in your face":

For a long time, especially in this area, people have never seen [Cree language] as having any value. This is a really good start. It's kind of like, in your face, we're saying: "Look, these are our children and we want them to learn the language." And then we went and did something about it. I feel that this is a very good start [Parent 3].

Participants generally agreed with the above statements about the program's importance: that it was overdue, that it is a bold step, that it is matter of pride. The symbolic value of teaching Cree in school is also significant and was mentioned by three interviewees. While the irony of using the school system to save the Cree language is acknowledged, what is striking is that the participants are moved by the hopefulness more than the irony of the situation. Ron Cook, a Cree Program teacher and my collaborator in the Cree language assessments, explained the symbolism in the following way:

"When I was in school we were forbidden to use Cree. I think the fact that Cree children don't know their own language is a legacy of that. This [Cree] Program is a chance to change that, to redress it. That's why it's so important to me that it's happening in the school" [personal communication].

During several of the interviews, bystanders had been impassively listening to the interview conversation and when the question about the program's importance was posed, felt compelled to jump in and add their views on the topic. One of the "bystanders" offered the following point of view.

"There's a generation of people who are lost.... who were made to feel badly about who they were and about speaking their language at school, and who didn't teach their kids the language because they were ashamed of it. And now they can

learn it at school. That's hopeful. I would have loved to have an opportunity to do that, to learn my Mom's language at school" [Parent 1 interview bystander].

The notion that the Cree Program is a sign of hope was expressed in many of the interviews. One of the parents explained the hope in the following way:

"Introducing Cree or any of the Aboriginal languages in schools that are attended by First Nations kids, I think that's a really powerful message that your giving the children that your language is important, and that your history, your background, your culture, everything about you as First Nations is important... It's saying you know, we're willing to adapt to your world, your worldview, your languages and I think it's just really encouraging for First Nation youth. It says that this is your community as well" [Parent 2].

The comments of another parent provide a fitting way to close this chapter. She believed that the Cree Program was important because it says: "we matter. We wanted this, and we got it. It's constructive, it's good, it's like: Look! We can do this!" [Parent 3].

## CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Until very recently, the intergenerational transmission of the Cree language occurred as a natural part of everyday life, with children growing up in a context where learning to speak the language was the norm and was supported in the home and the community. Due to an array of factors including a history of assimilationist governmental policy, residential school experiences, media, marketing and technological influences as well as recent urbanization trends, the future of the Cree language is threatened. Preserving the language is a concern, and new approaches to language transmission are being explored. Immersion style language programming in schools is viewed as a relatively painless and effective way for children to learn a second language and Aboriginal language activists are advocating Aboriginal language immersion programs as a way to address the problem of language loss.

This gives rise to a number of questions. For one thing, learning Cree in school is quite different from learning the language from parents and peers in the home and the community, and the learning approaches used in schools are quite different from those used in traditional Aboriginal societies. How well will Cree students learn to speak a language if it is taught only in school, in a setting with an academic rather than a natural communicative focus? How effectively can a program developed to teach French, a highly standardized language with a strong literate focus, be adopted to teach Cree, an unstandardized language with a strong oral focus? With alienation from schools and educational systems common in Aboriginal communities, how will the presence of Cree in schools be received? And how will the promotion of Cree language and culture in school affect the attitudes of Cree students and their families towards schooling? These

are some fundamental questions that underlie my research, and while the questions are large and the scope of this study is limited, the investigation and findings described in this thesis offer a starting point for answering these questions.

The focus of the study described in this thesis has been on one particular Aboriginal language program, the Cree Bilingual Program in Wapanohk Community School in Thompson. The study has explored the central question: “How successful is the Cree Program in Wapanohk School as an agent of Cree language revitalization?” by investigating five specific areas:

- 1) How well do students in the program speak Cree? (i.e. How proficient are they at listening, speaking, reading, writing, and conversing?)
- 2) To what extent have students gained understanding and appreciation of Cree culture?
- 3) How are students performing in other subject areas, including English?
- 4) What are the community’s (students, parents, teachers, other stakeholders) perceptions of the Cree program?
- 5) What supports and strategies could assist and strengthen the Cree Program?

### **What Does the Data Tell us about the Success of the Cree Program?**

The findings presented in the foregoing chapter suggest that the Cree Program is somewhat successful as an agent of Cree language revitalization. On the topic of the students’ Cree language proficiency, it seems that students in Grade 3 of the Cree Program have acquired only a very limited knowledge of Cree and do not fully meet the outcomes of their Cree language arts curriculum. Students are able to understand some spoken Cree, they can follow some directions and answer some simple questions, but do

not understand all of the everyday language a Cree teacher would use in the classroom. The students are able to speak some common Cree words correctly and comprehensibly but very rarely construct phrases or express complete thoughts and don't appear able to converse freely about any topics. According to the SOPA rating scale, Cree Program students are functioning at the most basic levels of language development in Cree. They appear to have second language skills comparable to students in one Heritage Language bilingual program in Winnipeg, but have considerably lower skills than students in a second similar program. While parents and teachers are satisfied that students are making an effort to speak Cree, they are not satisfied with the level of language attained by the students.

Cree language programming and resources and language teaching professional development were frequently mentioned by teachers as priority areas where attention was needed. Parents also referred to a need for attention to be paid to classroom language programming as well as Cree language courses for parents. Addressing these items is likely to have a significant impact on the students' Cree language learning.

On the topic of students' learning and appreciation of Cree culture, student data was rather limited, but indicated that students had a positive view of Cree language and culture and of themselves as Cree people. Parents' and teachers' comments expressed a similar perspective. Nevertheless, they also both indicated that Cree culture in the school was insufficient. Teachers called for increased cultural programming to support their classroom teaching and parents called for the school to introduce fundamental cultural changes.

While parents and teachers were in agreement on their call for more cultural programming, there was a significant difference between the types of changes envisioned. Several of the parents suggested that bolder and more fundamental changes were desired to better fit school into their Aboriginal culture instead of making Aboriginal culture to fit into the school. Despite these differences, the degree of common purpose between teachers and parents evident in the study data is impressive, and thus, in light of the recent history of Aboriginal alienation from schools, it would seem important for teachers and parents to work together to explore the issue of Aboriginal culture in the schools in order to maintain the cooperation and support that is currently apparent.

Students in the Cree Program appear to be performing about as well in English reading and math as their peers in the English program in the same school. It is important to remember that this is a rough comparison only, based on non-standardized sources of data, and that ongoing monitoring of student performance is needed to provide more conclusive evidence. Nevertheless, there is little reason to suspect that the reduction of time spent in English instruction has had any negative impact on student development in these areas. Longitudinal data in this area would be valuable.

How is the Cree Program perceived by the community? This study collected data from parents and teachers who display a very positive perception of the Cree Program, demonstrated by their strong sense of commitment. They support the program goals, actively participate in school events, state clearly that they are happy with the Cree Program and give it fairly high marks. However, they also qualify their positive comments. Parents and teachers agree that program improvement is needed in two important areas: more Cree culture in the schools; a higher level of Cree language

development for students. Moreover, parents and teachers seem to agree that the focus of the Cree Program should be on oral language skills rather than on Cree literacy.

Despite indications of some concerns with the current program, parents and teachers also agree that the Cree Program is very important. They find it important because they believe that learning Cree language and culture will lead to enhanced self-esteem, confidence, pride and greater academic success for the students. They believe it will help to preserve the Cree language and make cultural knowledge accessible to the students. They view it as a source of pride and a symbol of what a community of Aboriginal people can achieve. Finally, it is important because it is perceived as a sign of hope to a community of people where hopelessness is a common concern.

### **Recommendations**

Given the collaborative nature of the research approach taken in this study, it is important to note that the following recommendations have not been formulated in consultation with the research advisory committee where all stakeholders are represented. Unfortunately, it hasn't been possible to meet with the research advisory committee to review these recommendations. They are my own, based on themes that have recurred frequently in the data, and are offered as starting points for discussion rather than the final word on the topic. The recommendations fall into four general categories:

- 1) Teachers need more support to teach Cree effectively, and so I recommend:
  - A. That provisions be made for Cree Program teachers to receive frequent and ongoing professional development in immersion/bilingual language pedagogy and Cree linguistics.

- B. That Cree Program administrators and teachers collaborate to achieve and maintain a clear and common understanding of the structure and model of the bilingual program employed in the Cree Program. Specific items needing to be considered include:  
instructional time in each language; subjects taught in each language; pedagogical approaches to content-based language teaching; language use in the classroom; oracy and literacy in Cree.
  - C. That frequent and regular meetings of Cree Program teachers be held to address team development, instructional concerns, sharing of teaching methods and materials, and development and familiarization with teaching resources.
  - D. That time be made available for Cree Program personnel for resource development. Teachers are being asked to deliver a specialized program with few support materials and thus require time for instructional preparation.
- 2) There appears to be considerable agreement that the primary focus of the Cree Program should be on oral language skills, and so I recommend:
- A. That administrators and teachers collectively explore changes to classroom structure and teaching practice to accommodate an oral focus in subjects taught in Cree.
  - B. That professional development and program resources and materials be focused on oral language learning.

- 3) The evidence of parental support and engagement in the Cree Program is impressive. It is my recommendation:
  - A. That Cree Program personnel continue to take measures to maintain and encourage parental engagement.
  - B. That Cree language programming for parents of Cree Program students be explored with parents.
  - C. That parents and Cree Program personnel collaboratively explore programming concerns: e.g. Cree language outcomes for students, Cree culture in the school, etc. There is currently evidence of considerable goodwill and commitment on the part of Cree Program parents and continued involvement of parents at the exploratory and decision-making levels will help to maintain this.
- 4) Continuous and regular formative assessment of the program is desirable and will help the Cree Program to develop, especially if teachers and parents are involved in the assessment. I recommend:
  - A. That program research be conducted and student assessment data collected on a regular basis to accumulate a longitudinal body of data (e.g. using this study's Cree listening exercises and the Cree Oral Proficiency Assessment interviews as part of an annual Grade 3 classroom assessment activity; annually comparing Cree and English program data from the Grade 3 assessments; etc).
  - B. That a formal evaluation of the Cree language proficiency of students currently in Grade 3 be conducted at a future point (e.g. at

the end of Gr. 5 or 6) to measure improvement over time and to contribute data for an assessment of curriculum outcomes.

## ENDNOTES

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- i The term Bilingual is used in the program name because, in Manitoba, only French Immersion programs are termed Immersion programs. Immersion and bilingual programs largely employ similar methods and have similar goals, but in bilingual programs, the proportion of the curriculum delivered in the target language is less than in immersion programs (e.g. 50/50 target language/English as opposed to 75/25 French/English at the elementary level.) For the purposes of this paper, the Cree Bilingual program will be considered an immersion program as well.
- ii The Thompson Aboriginal Education Advisory Council is a rather fluid body of educators, parents, elders and agency representatives with a preponderant but not exclusively Aboriginal membership which served as an advisory body to the School District of Mystery Lake on matters pertaining to Aboriginal education. It stopped meeting in 2005.
- iii In this paper I use the term immersion program to refer to language programs which meet the following criteria:
  - a) They are additive and enriching, not subtractive or transitional. Their purpose is to develop students who are bilingual (Baker, 2001, p.114).
  - b) They have cultural as well as linguistic goals.
  - c) They use the immersion model of language education: the target language and culture are both the medium and a goal of instruction.

- 
- iv Heritage bilingual programs refers to programs common in various Canadian provinces where children study their ancestral language in an immersion program, where 50% of the school day is spent studying in the heritage language, and 50% is spent studying in English.
- v A core language program refers to the more traditional type of second language course in which the target language is the object of study, and is offered as discrete subject area. This is in contrast to Immersion language programs, where the target language is the language of instruction for other content areas as well as the language itself. Typically, in a core language program the target language is taught for up to one period per day.
- vi See *Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives into Curricula; A resource for Curriculum Developers, Teachers and Administrators* (Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, 2003) for further discussion.
- vii Unfortunately, permission has not been granted to reproduce the SOPA rating scale in this paper; however it can be viewed online at:  
[http://www.anciauxinternational.com/language\\_immersion/9levelSOPA-RSRv20008x14.doc](http://www.anciauxinternational.com/language_immersion/9levelSOPA-RSRv20008x14.doc) and can be obtained from the Center for Applied Linguistics, 4646 40<sup>th</sup> Street NW, Washington, DC 20016-1859.

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**Appendix A – Letter of Permission from School District**



**School District of  
Mystery Lake**

Greg Penney, Superintendent/Secretary-Treasurer  
gpenney@mysterynet.mb.ca

408 Thompson Drive North, Thompson, MB R8N 0C5

Phone: 204-677-6164 Fax: 204-677-9528

June 22, 2005

Walter Nikkel  
738 Garwood Avenue  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3M 1N3

**Re: CREE BILINGUAL PROGRAM**

Dear Mr. Nikkel;

The Board of Trustees of the School District of Mystery Lake at their meeting of June 14, 2005 has given permission for you to study the Cree Bilingual Program at Wapanohk Community School for your Masters Thesis in education at the University of Manitoba.

Yours truly,

Greg Penney  
Superintendent/Secretary-Treasurer

GP/cm

cc: M. Monias, Principal Wapanohk Community School

**Appendix B – Research Ethics Board Approval Certificate**

**APPROVAL CERTIFICATE**

08 September 2005

**TO: Walter Nikkel** (Advisor S. MacPherson)  
Principal Investigator

**FROM: Stan Straw, Chair**  
Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB)

**Re: Protocol #E2005:068**  
**“A Study of a Cree Immersion Program in a Northern Manitoba Elementary School”**

Please be advised that your above-referenced protocol has received human ethics approval by the **Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board**, which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement. This approval is valid for one year only.

Any significant changes of the protocol and/or informed consent form should be reported to the Human Ethics Secretariat in advance of implementation of such changes.

**Please note that, if you have received multi-year funding for this research, responsibility lies with you to apply for and obtain Renewal Approval at the expiry of the initial one-year approval; otherwise the account will be locked.**

**Appendix C – Adult Interview Consent Form**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

You have been identified as a potential source of information for a study of the Cree Bilingual Program at Wapanohk Community School. The purpose of this letter is to inform you about the study and to invite you to consent to an interview.

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, please feel free to ask. It is important that you read this carefully and understand the accompanying information.

The purpose of the study is to look at how well the Cree Bilingual Program is working, in order to better understand the program and find ways to improve it. The study will get information from students, teachers and parents/guardians. This research is being conducted for my Masters thesis at the University of Manitoba. When the study is completed, the results will be presented to the Wapanohk School community and to the School District of Mystery Lake and may be published elsewhere as well.

The interview will take about 1 hour. If you agree to participate, I will contact you to arrange a convenient time and place. In the interview, I will ask you to talk briefly about your languages and your background, but I will not be asking other questions about your personal life. I want to know your thoughts and feelings about the Cree Bilingual Program. I will record the interview on cassette tape and then transcribe it later. The information you give (on tape and on paper) will only be seen by me (Walter Nikkel). Tapes of the interview will be destroyed once the study is complete. Any information you give will be kept strictly confidential. Your name will not be used in the study and any identifiable characteristics will be changed to disguise your identity and protect your privacy.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions unless you want to, and you are free to end the interview any time you please, without penalty. If you decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study, this will in no way affect the academic or classroom assessments of your children. Before beginning the interview, you will be asked to read and sign this form to indicate your consent. At the beginning of the interview, you will be given an honorarium of \$15, which is yours to keep whether or not you answer all the questions.

On the back of this page is a copy of the consent form and a list of people who are advising me in this study. Please feel free to contact me, or any of the advisors listed, if you have questions or concerns about the study.

Yours truly,

Walter Nikkel

*Adult Interview Consent Form continued.*

Please keep this page for your records.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

**This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. At the bottom of this page are the names of the research committee members who are advising me in this study. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the below-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at (204) 474-7122 or e-mail [margaret\\_bowman@umanitoba.ca](mailto:margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca).**

**You agree to be interviewed for the Cree Bilingual Program Study. You have read the information on these pages and you understand that your participation is entirely voluntary.** You have been given an honorarium of \$15, which is yours to keep whether or not you answer all the questions.

---

(participant's signature)

(date)

---

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Walter Nikkel

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*Adult Interview Consent Form continued.*

**Cree Bilingual Program Study – Adult Consent Form**

**Please sign and return to Walter Nikkel before beginning the interview.**

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

**This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. On the accompanying page are the names of the research committee members who are advising me in this study. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of them or the Human Ethics Secretariat at (204) 474-7122 or e-mail [margaret\\_bowman@umanitoba.ca](mailto:margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.**

**You agree to be interviewed for the Cree Bilingual Program Study. You have read the information on these pages and you understand that your participation is entirely voluntary. You have been given an honorarium of \$15, which is yours to keep whether or not you answer all the questions.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
(participant’s signature) (date)

If you would like to receive a summary of the results of this research project, please fill out the information below. Wapanohk Community School and the School District of Mystery Lake will also have copies for you to read. The summary should be available in February, 2006.

Name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D – Student Interview Consent Form****Dear Parents/Guardians of Students in Grade Three of the Cree Bilingual Program,**

Your child, \_\_\_\_\_, has been selected to participate in an interview as part of a study of the Cree Bilingual Program at Wapanohk Community School. The purpose of this letter is to inform you about the interview and to ask for your consent to proceed with the interview.

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, please feel free to ask. It is important that you read this carefully and understand the accompanying information.

The purpose of the study is to look at how well the Cree Bilingual Program is working, in order to better understand the program and find ways to improve it. The study will get information from students, teachers and parents/guardians. This research is being conducted for my Masters thesis at the University of Manitoba. When the study is completed, the results will be presented to the Wapanohk School community and to the School District of Mystery Lake and may be published elsewhere as well.

Participation in the interview is voluntary. The interview is not a test and there will be no penalty for students who choose not to participate. Students who choose to participate will not have to answer any questions they don't want to and will be free to withdraw from the interview at any time, without penalty. You are also free to withdraw your consent at any time by contacting me (Walter Nikkel) or Wapanohk Community School.

The interview will take about 20 minutes and will be conducted at the school, during school hours by Mr. Ron Cook (a Wapanohk Cree Program teacher) and me (Walter Nikkel). Students will be interviewed in pairs. Interview questions will focus on students' ability to speak and understand Cree. In the interview, students will be asked briefly about their home languages and will be invited to talk about their feelings about the Cree program, but they will not be asked questions about their personal life. Most of the interview will be in Cree, followed by several brief questions in English. The interview will be recorded on cassette tape. The tape will only be listened to by me (Walter Nikkel), Mr. Cook, and several other Cree language teachers. Tapes of the interview will be destroyed once the study is complete. Any information students give will be kept strictly confidential; no students will be named in the research report and any identifiable characteristics will be masked.

If you agree to allow your child to be interviewed, please sign the consent form on the attached page and have your child return it to the classroom teacher. Please keep this letter for your records.

Yours truly,

Walter Nikkel

*Student Interview Consent Form continued.*

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to allow your child to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You and your child are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions your child prefers to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

**This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. Below are the names of the research committee members who are advising me in this study. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the below-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at (204) 474-7122 or e-mail [margaret\\_bowman@umanitoba.ca](mailto:margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca).**

**I agree to permit my child \_\_\_\_\_ be interviewed for the Cree Bilingual Program Study. I have read the information on these pages and I understand that his/her participation is entirely voluntary.**

---

(parent/guardian signature)

(date)

---

Researcher:

Walter Nikkel

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ph: (204) 478-6621

Research supervisor, Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba,

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Research advisory committee members:

1. William Dumas                      ph: 677-6179
2. Loretta Dykun                      ph. 677-6106
3. Ron Cook                              ph. 677-6140
4. Marcella Clarke                      ph. 677-6140
5. Rob Fisher                              ph. 677-6157

**Please keep this page for your records.**

*Student Interview Consent Form continued.*

**Cree Bilingual Program Study – Student Interview Consent Form**

**Please sign and have your child return this page to the classroom teacher.**

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to allow your child to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You and your child are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions your child prefers to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

**This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the persons named in the accompanying letter or the Human Ethics Secretariat at (204) 474-7122 or e-mail [margaret\\_bowman@umanitoba.ca](mailto:margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca). A copy of this form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.**

**I agree to permit my child \_\_\_\_\_ be interviewed for the Cree Bilingual Program Study. I have read the information on these pages and I understand that his/her participation is entirely voluntary.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
(parent/guardian signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(date)

If you would like to receive a summary of the results of this research project, please fill out the information below. Wapanohk Community School and the School District of Mystery Lake will also have copies for you to read. The summary should be available in February, 2006.

Name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix E – Script for Verbal Consent Request**

#### **Script: Student interview presentation and request for verbal consent.**

My name is Walter Nikkel and I am a student at the University of Manitoba. I am doing a study of the Cree Bilingual program, and I'm looking for information from you to help me understand how the program is working.

This is Mr. Cook and he is helping me with the study, since I cannot speak to you in Cree.

I am inviting you to do an interview with us. In the interview, we will ask you some questions in English and in Cree. It will last about twenty minutes and then you can return to class. You do not have to participate in the interview and nothing bad will happen if you say you don't want to. If you decide you would like to do the interview, you only need to answer questions if you want to. If you don't want to answer a question, or if you want to stop the interview, you simply need to tell us and we'll stop.

It is important that you know that this is not a test. You will not get a mark for this interview; whether you participate or not is entirely your decision and will not affect what your teacher thinks about you or about your school work.

Do you have any questions?

If you would like to answer our questions, please say yes, and we'll begin.

**Appendix F – Cree Oral Proficiency Assessment Protocol  
Cree Student Oral Proficiency Assessment Interview Notes and Protocol**

- Interviews conducted Dec. 7, 8 and 9, 2005
- Wapanohk Community School
- Cree interviewer: Ron Cook (Cree teacher)
- observer and English interviewer: Walter Nikkel (researcher)

*Cree Assessment Interview Notes*

Oral assessment interviews were conducted during the school day with participating students pulled out of their classrooms in pairs. Assessment sessions lasted approximately 30 minutes, and were held in an informal atmosphere with two students and two interviewers gathered around a table in an otherwise unoccupied classroom. On the table were various interview paraphernalia: a tape recorder; 6 large pictures of animals native to northern Manitoba; two illustrated books, *All kinds of Weather* and *Emily's Walk*.

To start the session, students were informed about the purpose and process of the interview and the voluntary nature of their participation, and asked for consent to proceed. When verbal consent was given, the interview proceeded. The interviews began with a Cree component, lead by the Cree interviewer, while I observed and made notes. Following this, I conducted the English component of the interview. All interviews were recorded on audiotape. After the departure of the interviewees, the two interviewers would briefly compare observations and general impressions, and upon completion of all three sessions, student performances were assessed in light of the SOPA grading scale (Centre for Applied Linguistics, 2000).

*Interview Protocol*

1. Introduction (English)

- Students welcomed, introductions made (Cree and English).
- Purpose of the interview and voluntary nature of participation explained.
- Students invited to give verbal consent if they agree to participate.
- Students encouraged to use as much Cree as possible in the interview.

2. Listening component (Cree)

- Animal pictures arranged in front of students (species common to Northern Manitoba: moose, cinnamon bear, red fox, bald eagle, horned owl, lynx.)
- Students invited to answer in English if they are unable to answer in Cree.
- Students addressed the following questions/statements about the animal pictures:
  - a) *taniwa mòswa?* (Which one is the moose?)
  - b) *taniwa maskwa?* (Which one is the bear?)
  - c) *awena, awenikik ka piminacik?* (Which ones fly?)
  - d) *tansi isinikàsocik?* (What are their names?)
  - e) *awena mawaci minwenimat?* (Which animals do you like the best?)
  - f) *kotak nà pisiskiw kikiskenimaw?* (Name an animal that is missing.)
  - g) *awena pòsis isinakosit?* (Which one is like a cat?)
  - h) *kekwan miciminak mikisiw?* (What does the eagle have in its claws?)
  - i) *awenikik pisiskiwak mikosicik?* (Which of the animals are red?)
  - j) *tansi itotak mòswa?* (What are the moose doing?)

- k) *otin pisiw ekwa kistikwanik ani?* (Pick up the lynx and put it on your head.)
- l) *tansi itwet ohow?* (What does the owl say?)

***Informal conversation component (Cree)***

- All students asked the following questions:
  - a) *tanikok tahto piponiyani* (How old are you?)
  - b) *tantahto wiciyamacik?* (How many people do you live with?)
  - c) *tansi isinikasot kitotem?*(Who is one of your friends?)
  - d) *kekwan minwenitamek kita itotamek kitotem ekwa kina?* (What do you like to do with your friend?)
  - e) *tansi isinikasot kòkom?* (What is your Grandmother's name?)
  - f) *tante kòkom wikip?* (Where does your Grandmother live?)

***Accademic language component (Cree)***

- Students shown the book, *All Kinds of Weather* (a book of illustrations with minimal text, text in Cree) and invited to talk about what they see on each page. The interviewer used prompts to elicit and encourage student conversation. The most common prompts used by the interviewer were:
  - a) *tansi isì kìsikak?* (What is the weather?)
  - b) *awena awa?* (Who's this?)
  - c) *kekwan oma?* (What is this?)
  - d) *tansi isinikatek oma?* (What is this called?)
  - e) *mino kìsikaw na?* (Is it a nice day?)

***Fluency component (Cree)***

- Students shown an illustrated storybook (*Emily's Walk* – a book of illustrations) and asked to tell the story and talk about is happening in the book, using Cree as much as possible. When students responded with silence, they were prompted with questions about the illustrations. Common prompts included the following items:
  - a) *tansi itòtak napesis?*(What is the boy doing?)
  - b) *tansi itòtak iskweisis?* (What is the girl doing?)
  - c) *tansi isinikasot iskweisis* (What is the girl's name?)

***Cultural component (English)***

- Students thanked for participation in the Cree portion of the interview and invited to answer the following questions in English:
  - a) What languages are spoken in your home?
  - b) Do you have parents or grandparents who are Cree?
  - c) Do you ever speak Cree outside of school? Where and with whom do you speak Cree?
  - d) What is the best thing about learning Cree in school?
  - e) How would you feel if you were in an English program instead of in the Cree bilingual program? Do you think you would be: just as happy, more happy, less happy? Please explain.
  - f) If you had been born into a family that wasn't Cree instead of your own family, would you be just as happy, more happy less happy? (Since all

participants indicated they had Cree families, a variant of this question for children from non-Cree families was not used.)

## Appendix G – Class Listening Comprehension Exercise

**This item has been removed due to copyright issues. To view it, refer to its source.**

**This item has been removed due to copyright issues. To view it, refer to its source.**

1. Masinaya “M” ita ka ayat maskwa. (Write “M” where the bear is.)
2. Masinaya “N” ita ka ayat niska. Write “N” where the goose is.)
3. Masinaya “P” ita ka ayat ana ka piminat. (Write “P” where the one that flies is.)
4. Masinaya “K” ita ka ayat ana misiwe ka kaskitesit. (Write “K” where the one that is all black is.)
5. Masinaya “O” ita ka ayat ana ka oteskanet. (Write “O” where the one with antlers is.)
6. Masinaya “X” ita ka ayat ana atim ka isinakosit. (Write “X” where the one that looks like a dog is.)
7. Masinaya “W” ita ka ayacik niso pisiskiwak . (Write “W” where there are two animals.)
8. Masinaya “Y” ita ka ayat ana ka nipat kape pipon. (Write “Y” where the one that sleeps all winter is.)
9. Masinaya “peyak” ita ka ayat pisiskiw eka kekwan ka masinahikatenik. (Write “1” where the animal that has nothing written on it is.)

## Protocol for Assessment

1. Gather students at Circle area and preview the assessment with them.
2. Explain the procedure. You will be asking them to write letters or numbers on the animals you specify in the Cree instruction.
3. Go over the questions, giving them a key word from each one that they should be listening for.
4. When giving the test, write the number of the question and the letter that the students are to write on the blackboard.
5. Read the instruction, reread it again, placing emphasis on keywords.

## **Appendix H – Adult Interview Protocol**

**Adult Interview Protocol** (for use with teachers and parents of Cree Program students.)

Introductory comments:

This is a study to explore the Cree bilingual program. I am interested in your thoughts about how well it is working and what could be done to make it better. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can choose not to answer any question and you may end the interview any time you like.

If you choose to participate, I will interview you for about an hour. The interview will be recorded on cassette and I will transcribe and analyze it later.

The questions I will ask you are only intended to guide you through the interview. There are no right and wrong answers. I want to know what you think and I would like you to say as much as possible, giving examples and experiences and any other details to show me what you mean.

Interview questions:

1. Do you speak any languages besides English? If so, please name them and indicate how well you speak them.
2. (*If person is a Cree speaker*) Please tell me more about your use of Cree. Where, when, with whom do you mostly speak it?
3. What do you see as the goals of the Cree bilingual program? What, in your mind, is it supposed to do?

4. *For parents:* Why have you chosen to place your child in the program?
5. *For teachers:* Why have you chosen to work in the program?
6. *Participants are given a handout containing the following:*

*The stated goals of the Cree bilingual program are that students will:*

- i. *learn to listen, speak, read and write in Cree,*
- ii. *meet provincial curriculum outcomes in all subject areas, including ELA,*
- iii. *learn Cree cultural knowledge and perspectives,*
- iv. *develop confidence and pride in their cultural and linguistic identity.*

These are a summary of the original stated goals of the program. Please tell me

what you think of these goals:

- a. Are they appropriate? Do you support them?
  - b. Are they sufficient? Is anything missing
  - c. Do they correspond to what you want for your own children?
7. Which of the goals do you hold to be most important? Please explain your reasons.
  8. How well do you think the program is working, overall?
    - i. Please explain how you arrive at your assessment.
  9. How do you think your child (or the students, for non-parents) has been affected by the program?
    - i. What would be different for her/him if s/he hadn't been in the Cree bilingual program?
    - ii. Can you give any examples?
  10. What do you see as being the most successful aspect of the program?
  11. Is there any aspect you see as being unsuccessful? Please explain.
  12. Could anything be done to make the program better?

13. Would you recommend the program to friends with children approaching school age?
14. How important do you think it is to offer a Cree bilingual program? Please explain your answer.
15. Those are all of my questions about the Cree bilingual program. Is there anything else you would like to say?

### Appendix I – Grade 3 provincial assessment reporting form for reading

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Form 6

#### Report to Department: Reading – English Program Grade 3 Entry

School :

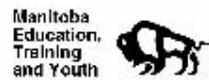
Report the number of students in each cell.

Reading Competencies	Levels of Performance			* Total # of Students
	Needs on-going help	Needs some help to meet expectations	Meets expectations	
<b>Reflection</b> Student's ability to think about own learning as a reader.				
<b>Oral Reading Skills and Strategies</b> Student's ability to use a variety of strategies to read.				
<b>Reading Comprehension</b> Student's ability to understand and draw conclusions from text.				
Please enter the number of students not included in reporting of competencies. Please explain. <input style="width: 80px; height: 25px;" type="text"/>				
*Please explain any discrepancy in the "Total # of Students" column.				

Contact Person \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this form to your school division.



**Appendix J – Grade 3 provincial assessment reporting form for numeracy**

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Form 2

**Report to Department: Numeracy—English Program  
Grade 3 Entry**

School :

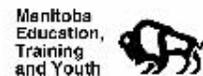
Report the number of students in each cell.

Numeracy Competencies	Levels of Performance			
	Needs on-going help	Needs some help to meet expectations	Meets expectations	* Total # of Students
Student sorts objects using one mathematical attribute; identifies attributes such as <i>shape</i> and <i>size</i> .				
Student selects the appropriate standard unit (cm, m); estimates and measures length.				
Student recalls addition facts to 10.				
Student recalls subtraction facts to 10.				
Student represents and compares numbers, using terms such as <i>even, odd, more, less, same as</i> , to 100.				
Student understands place value to 100.				
Student identifies, extends, and describes mathematical (repeating and growing) patterns.				
Student solves and creates addition and subtraction story problems.				
Student reads and interprets graphs.				
Please enter the number of students not included in reporting of competencies. Please explain. <input style="width: 60px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>				
*Please explain any discrepancy in the "Total # of Students" column.				

Contact Person \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this form to your school division.



## Appendix K – Student Cree Oral Language Assessment Findings

### *Findings and Analysis*

I decided to record data in notes rather than complete transcripts of student interviews for the following reasons:

- identical questions were posed in all 3 interviews
- there was little Cree used in student responses and consisted of words in isolation, or inserted in English phrases
- Many questions were met with silence or indecipherable “mumbles”
- Much repetition of questions occurred as the interviewer attempted to elicit answers by repeating or rephrasing questions and prompting students and transcription would essentially result in multiple repetitions of questions and clarifications, with largely English responses containing occasional single Cree words.
- I (the researcher) wasn’t able to transcribe Cree data with accuracy and given the paucity of Cree words spoken, it wasn’t deemed worthwhile or preferable to have someone else transcribe the data. This would be a lengthy and tedious task and the resulting transcripts would give little more information than these notes on students’ Cree language abilities.

The initial plan had called for two Cree teachers to listen to the recorded conversations and independently assess the students’ Cree language proficiency according to the SOPA rating scale (see Appendix However, given students’ limited use of Cree words, spoken primarily in isolation or inserted in English phrases, my interview

partner Ron Cook (Cree Program teacher) and I agreed that it seemed unnecessary and even disingenuous to seek confirmation of this from other Cree teachers.

According to the criteria of the SOPA rating scale, all six students performed at the basic level of oral proficiency (Junior Novice-Low) in the productive categories of Oral Fluency, Grammar and Vocabulary, while five of the six students performed at the next level (Junior Novice-Mid) in listening comprehension ability.

### *Listening Component*

Students' performance was strongest in the listening comprehension component of the interview. Five of the six participating students gave acceptable responses to 50% of the questions posed. An analysis of the results shows that students generally gave acceptable responses to straightforward identification questions (e.g. Which animals are red? Which animals can fly? ) but did not give acceptable responses to more complex questions. In fact, identifying an animal by pointing to its picture or saying its name was a frequent response to more complex questions as well. For instance, to the question, "What does the eagle have in its claws?" all respondents indicated the eagle (who was carrying a fish), showing that the question was not understood, but also showing comprehension of the Cree word for eagle. In these cases, when students didn't fully understand the questions, they responded by identifying an item that they had understood. This should not be viewed in a negative light since it indicates that students partially understood the statements and were comfortable taking risks and make inferences from what they did understand. These are important language learning skills. It appears that

students are accustomed to being asked to identify vocabulary items but less comfortable with questions other than the “what is” variety.

An overview of student performance on this component is given in the table below.

**Table of results for Student interview listening component.**

questions	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6	total
a. Where is the moose?	√	√	√	√	√	√	6
b. Where is the bear?	√	√	√		√	√	5
c. Which animals can fly?	√	√	√	√	√	√	6
d. Name the ones that fly.							
e. Which one do you like best?	√	√	√		√	√	5
f. Name an animal that's missing.							
g. Which one is like a cat?	√	√	√	√	√	√	6
h. What does the eagle have in its claws?	*	*	*	*	*	*	
i. Which animals are red?	√	√	√		√	√	5
j. What are the moose doing?			*	*	*	*	
k. Pick up the lynx and put it on your head.	*	*					
l. What does the owl say?	*	*	*	*			
<b>total acceptable responses /12</b>	6	6	6	3	6	6	

Empty cells indicate that no answer was given.

√ Indicates an acceptable answer – i.e. answering orally in Cree or English or pointing to an appropriate picture.

\* Rather than answering the question (or following the instruction) students indicated the animal named in the question.

*Informal conversation component.*

Italics indicate actual words spoken, blank spaces indicate no answer given and observer comments are given in parentheses.

**Summary of student responses to informal conversation component**

question	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6
A <i>tanikok tahto piponiyan</i> How old are you?		(indecipherable questioning tone)	(shrugs)	(shrugs)	<i>How are you doing?</i>	<i>I don't know.</i>
B <i>tantahto wiciyamicik?</i> or <i>awena wiciyamat?</i> (Ss 5,6). How many people do you live with?					(indecipherable mumble)	(giggles)
C <i>tansi isinikasot kitotem?</i> Who is one of your friends?	<i>No</i>	<i>No</i>				<i>I know it says hello.</i>
D <i>kekwan minwenitamek kina mina kitotem e-itotamek?</i> What do you like to do with your friend?					(question not posed)	(question not posed)
E <i>tansi asinikasot kòkom?</i> What is your Grandmother called?		(shrugs)	<i>kòkom</i>	<i>kòkom</i>	<i>kòkom means granny</i>	
F <i>tante kòkom wikip?</i> Where does your Grandmother live?	<i>I don't know.</i>		<i>kòkom?</i>	<i>kòkom?</i>		<i>I didn't know any.</i>

The responses to E (*kòkom*) by students 3 and 4 could be considered appropriate answers to the question since children may not know their Grandmother by any other name. However, given that the term repeats what was said in the question, and the same term is repeated in the following question, it's also likely that students were merely picking up on a term they understood rather than answering the question.

*Academic language component.*

Students were shown the book, *All Kinds of Weather* (a book of illustrations with minimal text, text in Cree) and invited to talk about what they see on each page. The interviewer used prompts to elicit and encourage student conversation. The most common prompts used by the interviewer were:

1. tansi isì kìsikak? (What is the weather?)
2. awena awa? (Who's this?)
3. kekwan oma? (What is this?)
4. tansi isinikatek oma? (What is this called?)
5. mino kìsikaw na? (Is it a nice day?)
6. tansi itòtak awa? (What is that one doing?)
7. tansi itòtak awa iskwešis (What is this girl doing?)

### Summary of student speech on academic language component.

- A. Students 1, 2 Many questions met with silence, or single words (mostly in English, occasionally in Cree) giving the impression that Ss were not certain they understood the questions. *awena awa?* (Who's this?) was answered (*iskwesis*) by S2 and then *iskwesis* was used appropriately by S1 in a subsequent response. *Tansi isi kisikak* received no response initially, but when asked a second and a third time, one S answered with *kimowan*, (raining) which was correct. A question about the weather on another page was answered with an English word (Windy). No Cree phrases or expressions were used. Cree words were used in isolation only.
- B. Students 3, 4 Students gave numerous appropriate responses to questions. S3 gave one word answers in Cree to *awena awa?* (Who's this?) by answering, appropriately, *iskwesis* (girl) and *napesis* (boy). S4 gave appropriate one word answers in English. Both Ss responded appropriately to *awena awa*, *kekwan oma* and *tansi isi kisikak*. Both Ss answered questions about the weather in English only: e.g., rainy, cloudy, sunny. It appears that the Ss were able to understand the first three questions but only one student answered some of them in Cree. English answers were more common. Both students gave only one-word answers in either language, though students were clearly able to construct phrases and sentences in English.
- C. Students 5, 6 Students responded exclusively in English except for one Cree answer, despite encouragement from interviewer to speak as much Cree as possible. S5 appeared to understand questions a, b, and c, giving numerous appropriate one-word responses in English to illustrate this (e.g. church, boat, sun). S5 also translated the question *tansi isi kisikak* for S6, saying, "He's saying the weather, what's the weather like?" S5 made one Cree response to this question: *kimowan* (It's raining.) S6 identified items in the illustrations with appropriate one-word statements in English only, responding to the prompt *kekwan oma* (what's this?). The question, *tansi itòtak?* (what is he/she doing?) was never answered with a verb, but was answered at one point by "boy and girl," indicating that the question was misunderstood.

### *Fluency component.*

Students were shown an illustrated storybook set in a northern Aboriginal setting (*Emily's Walk*) and were asked to tell the story and talk about the illustrations in Cree.

When the instructions were met with silence, students were prompted with questions about the illustrations. The prompts included the following items:

- a) *tansi itòtak napesis?*(What is the boy doing?)
- b) *tansi itòtak iskwesis?* (What is the girl doing?)
- c) *tansi isinikasot iskwesis* (What is the girl's name?)

### Summary of student speech on oral fluency component.

- A. Students 1, 2      Students refer to an illustrated book, telling the story in English, inserting *napesis* and *iskwesis* for English terms boy and girl. E.g. “*napesis* is hiding and *iskwesis* is carrying a pail.” No Cree phrases used, though the students indicate comprehension of several questions (e.g.: “Is the weather good?” S1 shakes head; “What is her name?” S2 says: “Emily.”).
- B. Students 3, 4      Students tell the story in English, using Cree terms (*napesis*, *iskwesis*) for boy and girl.
- C. Students 5, 6      Students speak in English only. S5 explains what is happening in the illustrations and answers many questions appropriately, but all answers are given exclusively in English. S5 answers questions *awena awa* (who's this?) with “girl” or “brother,” answers *kekwan oma* (what's this?) with “bucket,” and answers *tansi itòtak* (what is he/she doing?) with verb phrases like “helping her,” “skipping,” “following her,” “going to get something,” “wearing her brother's coat,” etc. S6 answers the question, *kekwan oma*, by identifying numerous items in the illustrations using English words but doesn't respond to any other prompts. S5 responds to many Cree prompts, giving logical and appropriate responses in English.

***Cultural component***

Students were informed that the Cree portion of the interview was over and were invited to answer the following questions in English:

**Summary of student responses to cultural component questions.**

<b>Student 1</b>	<b>Student 2</b>	<b>Student 3</b>	<b>Student 4</b>	<b>Student 5</b>	<b>Student 6</b>
<b>a. What languages are spoken in home?</b>					
<i>English and sometimes Cree</i>	<i>English and sometimes Cree</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Cree, English</i>	<i>Cree, Dene English,</i>
<b>b. Has Cree parents or grandparents?</b>					
<i>Yes</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>No, then yes</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>yes</i>
<b>c. Student speaks Cree outside of school?</b>					
<i>With teacher outside class</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>Only inside</i>		<i>Yes, anywhere, talks to self.</i>	<i>No. Doesn't really speak much Cree in school either.</i>
<b>d. What's the best thing about learning Cree?</b>					
<i>To learn a different language.</i>	<i>To learn Cree words.</i>	<i>Words, spelling, listening</i>	<i>I don't know</i>	<i>You can talk in a different language with someone who doesn't speak English.</i>	<i>You can speak Cree better.</i>
<b>e. Would student be more or less happy in English program?</b>					
<i>Less happy Because Cree is my language</i>	<i>Less happy</i>	<i>Less happy, because I like speaking Cree, I even say that to my Grandparents and my Mom.</i>	<i>More happy. Because I don't really like speaking Cree because I don't know how.</i>	<i>Less happy. Likes class now.</i>	<i>Just as happy, because I wouldn't have to listen to so much Cree. Finds Cree difficult.</i>
<b>f. Would student be more or less happy in non-Cree family?</b>					
<i>Less happy Cree rocks</i>	<i>Less happy</i>	<i>Less happy, because I like speaking Cree a lot.</i>	<i>More happy. I don't know why.</i>	<i>Less happy. Because wouldn't know Cree.</i>	<i>Less happy. No reason.</i>

### *Conclusion*

Student performance on the SOPA rating scale of oral proficiency is at the level of “junior novice-low” in oral fluency, grammar, vocabulary and, “junior novice-mid,” in listening comprehension, where students demonstrated greater ability and confidence than in the other areas.

In post-interview discussions, both interviewers agreed that it was clearly evident that all 6 of the students have some comprehension ability and that S5’s ability was particularly strong. All students exhibited only minimal ability to make sentences or to converse in Cree. The students’ productive use of the Cree language was limited to using Cree vocabulary (sometimes in a decisive tone, sometimes a questioning tone) while a) indicating an item or an illustration, or b) inserting one or two Cree words (nouns generally) in an English phrase.

## **Appendix L – Class Listening Exercise Summary of Notes and Findings**

### **Cree Listening Skills Assessment**

The listening assessment was developed as a Cree language assessment tool for the School District of Mystery Lake (see xxx for exercise protocol) and the results subsequently forwarded to me by the school district. The assessment was piloted by R. Cook in his Grade 2 Cree Bilingual homeroom, and then administered by him in the two Grade 3 Cree Bilingual classes, with homeroom teachers in the classroom. Not all students were present on the day of the assessment, in fact there were many absences and thus not all students are represented in this survey. The two Grade 3 classes have enrolments of 17, but on the afternoon of the assessment, only 9 and 10 students were present.

According to Mr. Cook's report on the administration of the assessment, there were students in each class who appeared unwilling to cooperate in the assessment and handed in blank sheets (one in each class). These were discounted and these students were not included in the calculation of the mean score.

We also decided to discount Question 9 because no students had left any boxes empty and were thus prevented from answering this question correctly. Since students had incorrectly indicated every box at least once, seemed unfair to penalize them again if they were unable to find an empty box. Thus the number of points possible is 8 instead of 9.

**Table A. Class Listening Exercise Results**

Class	Number of Students	Questions									Mean Score /8
		1 (identify bear)	2 (identify goose)	3 (identify animal that flies)	4 (identify the animal that's black)	5 (identify animal with antlers)	6 (which animal looks like a dog)	7 (which picture has two animals)	8 (which animal sleeps in winter)	9 (identify empty box)	
Gr. 2	14	9	14	1	6	4	4	10	3	discounted	3.6
Gr. 3A	8	7	6	2	3	1	3	4	2	discounted	3.5
Gr. 3B	9	8	5	0	3	1	2	8	5	discounted	3.6
total	31	77%	81%	10%	39%	19%	29%	71%	32%		3.6