

Beyond Multilingual Education: The Cree of Waskaganish

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This article is a first attempt to report on the course of action taken by the Cree community of Waskaganish, Quebec to promote multilingual education in a Cree way in its local system. In 1973 the innovative experimental Cree Way project was launched: the study of Cree language and culture at the elementary level (where the dominant language of instruction was English until 1988). In 1978 this project became an integrated part of the Cree School Board's curriculum. Ten years later another transformation took place; a native immersion program at the preschool level was inaugurated, to be extended gradually up to grade 4. The results of the project (the Cree Way approach) thus far seem to support the following hypothesis: Education in the Native language and culture will facilitate the process of second language acquisition on the one hand and assure maintenance of the Native language on the other hand.

Multilingual education among the indigenous population of Quebec has been practiced for over two decades, though its nature and form might differ from one community to another. For the Mohawk in Kahnawake (Feurer, 1991) and Kanesatake (Feurer, 1976), for instance, where the Native language was slowly disappearing and children were primarily monolingual speakers of English, Mohawk was taught initially for 20 minutes per day as a second language. Today Kahnawake permits its children to attend primary school in Mohawk (immersion program) or in English (with daily 30-minute Mohawk language lessons). The Cree of James Bay learned to read and write in Cree syllabics while their language was still alive and spoken in their communities. One community, Waskaganish, is now aiming at schooling entirely in the Cree language in the first few primary grades.

This article is an attempt to describe the example of Waskaganish in Quebec and how its struggle to maintain its own language and culture (in the larger Canadian context) while encouraging the process of scholarization has led to the ingenuous creation and development of a linguistic and cultural experiment, the Cree Way Project. A new Native school system is emerging, adapted to the community's needs and interests.

Public Schooling in Waskaganish

Waskaganish, formerly called Rupert House, is a remote Indian community settled along the mighty Rupert River not far from where it falls into James Bay, an immense saltwater bay in northern Quebec. It is one of the eight Cree communities nestled along the eastern shore of James Bay, over 1,300 km north of Montreal. Its typical northern ecology of small trees, shrubs, and plants, is inhabited by a highly diversified wildlife, including bear, moose, wolf, beaver, and geese. In spite of the long, harsh winters and the demanding environment, the

Cree have adapted and survived in the past through hunting and gathering in harmonious coexistence with their natural surroundings.

Today, though, the Cree way of life has greatly changed. Hunting has decreased as wildlife has become rarer, and contact with European Canadians and their culture has increased, affecting directly the socioeconomic basis of this people (Larose, 1991).

For example, since the 1960s each of the eight Cree communities has been subsumed in the regular federal public school system, with curriculum, textbooks, and materials patterned on the European-Canadian model. Although mandatory education became a reality for all Cree children at Waskaganish, the concept of "public schooling" remained foreign to Cree society, which was founded on the traditional method of teaching in the immediate context of the extended family, through modeling by its older members, a watch-them-do or think/listen-then-do approach (More, 1987, 1990). Children themselves chose or changed their teaching relatives, as well as started or ended their personal learning situations as desired. By the time a child entered school, he or she was already highly trained in appropriate skills (Wintrob, 1968), a cognitive style already firmly established (Murdoch, 1988, p. 237). For example, a six-year-old girl would be expected to care for an aging grandmother or her younger siblings. By comparison, some of the skills learned at school seemed inapplicable, out of context, and therefore meaningless (Bagley, 1984; Murdoch, 1988).¹

The discontinuity between the Euro-Canadian conceived school system and the Cree community is illustrated by Murdoch (1988) as follows: For instance,

a science lesson portraying a beaver as a "wild" animal; a member of the rodent family ... will be poorly remembered by a Cree student who has trapped, eaten and worn beaver. These facts, however plausible in southern Canadian classrooms, are not part of the Cree experience of beaver. The term "wild" (versus domestic) involves a view of nature and man's interaction with nature not shared by the Cree. The term "rodent" ... involves an abstraction based on isolation of generalised criteria not given priority in Cree experience. (pp. 246-247)

The Euro-Canadian school system was, in fact, ill prepared to adapt its curriculum to Cree values and lifestyle; although, in the meantime, the adapting of the Cree to European customs and concepts had become essential to their very survival (Berry, Wintrop, Sindell, & Macwhinney, 1982; Larose, 1991). In 1973, John Murdoch, at that time a local school principal, created the Cree Way Project as a direct response to the low degree of success and lack of adaptability of the local public schooling system (Murdoch, 1984, p. 293).

At this point primary schooling was the local concern of Waskaganish. High school education was offered only outside the community, in Fort George (relocated 9 km. to the north in 1979 and named Chisasibi), in Noranda, or in Sault Saint Marie, Ontario. Unfortunately, most of the young Native people (above 90% according to Murdoch) dropped out.

High school education seemed to correspond even less to the needs of these young people than had the local primary school education. The lack also of caring siblings was a disturbing factor for these adolescents, because it implied not only a change of environment (climate), but also of culture (housing, work, food, customs, family interactions/hierarchy) and language. Now goose or moosemeat was replaced by hamburgers and hot dogs.

Linguistic Innovation: The Cree Way Project

Amid all this upheaval, the Cree people wanted to remain a nation (Berry, 1989, p. 8). The Cree Way Project was a first attempt to apply this attitude in the school system and help Cree children feel more at ease by valorizing their own language and their own traditions. Materials were developed in Cree syllabics, drawing on the expertise of local resource people such as storytellers, elders who now hunted less, artists, and competent speakers of the language who were familiar with the syllabics. A trained Cree syllabic instructor spent at least half an hour per day in each classroom teaching students to read and write in Cree. At the same time a team of language and curriculum personnel (all local people) were busy preparing readers, workbooks, and materials (slides, handicrafts, videotapes) to assist both Cree and English language teachers. Even the production of materials was done locally by specially trained members of the community (National Film Board, 1977).

Indeed, the Cree Way Project had set itself a noble task, to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between two alien traditions: the Native peoples—nomadic hunters and the European Canadians—once agricultural, now postindustrial city dwellers; the former relying on an oral tradition, the latter on a written one; the former, global, visiospatial, experience-bound, or contextual in their approach; the latter analytical, abstract, and decontextualized (Denny, 1988; McShane & Berry 1988; Murdoch, 1984). How could the gap between two such conflicting traditions be narrowed without assimilation of the minority?

Some research findings suggest that a minority culture can adapt (its language use, for instance) to another without great loss, if its members feel secure, that is, their identity is not threatened (Lambert, 1974). Such attitudinal and affective variables seem to affect directly, either negatively or positively, the degree of linguistic competence of a bilingual community's growing children (Cummins, 1979, 1989). Murdoch (1988, p. 236) and other researchers (Berry, 1967; Sindell, 1968) have witnessed a high sense of self-esteem and self-worth among Cree children arriving at school. In order to maintain continuity between the Cree child's preschool experiences and those at school, the Cree Way project sought as its first, essential step to introduce formally the Cree way of life in the Waskaganish school system by including Cree syllabic readers as well as workbooks on Cree culture in English (the dominant language of instruction) in its curriculum. Already the written word had gained some prestige in the Indian community; through schooling and various government contacts the written tradition began to seem more tangible and "permanent" than the oral one (Murdoch, 1984, p. 254). Agreements and treaties with the government (which were always written down) also reinforced this imputed status. Gerti Murdoch, a local, Native-born anthropologist and educator, feels that the written form of Cree will also help to preserve the language, in its structure and vocabulary, by making it less susceptible to English loans and to code switching.

Cree language and culture were to be consolidated among the children in the form of printed syllabic readers in the hope that their contents would help the children to become more solidly anchored in their own tradition and that their written form would further raise their prestige and make reading and writing more meaningful. A truly intracultural context of learning was to be established

(with oral tradition now being recorded as well) where literacy was relevant and therefore interesting and rewarding.

It was hoped that the project would create a context of teaching where children were met in terms known and familiar to them, in a conceptual framework that made sense to them and from which skills could be transferred to a new learning context (see Mexican study by Modiano, 1973). With this new approach, supported by culturally relevant workbooks, the learning of English became less difficult and made children more receptive to learning in general (Murdoch, 1984, p. 244).

In this new classroom model, a local resource person was obviously the best equipped educator. But institutional barriers prevented the hiring of such "unqualified" people, with the exception of the Cree language teacher. Initially a local linguistic resource person qualified for teaching if he or she were fluent in speaking, reading, and writing Cree. Yet these qualifications soon proved insufficient in the classroom. In response to methodological and pedagogical gaps, the University of Quebec in Chicoutimi started a program in the early 1970s, to train Indian (language) teachers. Waskaganish had several of its staff attend these courses, first taught during the summer vacation, later during the spring and fall, at one of the eight communities in James Bay. The program is currently administered by McGill University, which already had an extensive program in place for Native students. Linguists such as Margaret MacKenzie and myself (the latter in 1972-1973) took part in this academic program, assisting the community in its remarkable undertakings.

The Cree Way Project Transformed

The Cree Way Project no longer exists as a separate undertaking. It has now been incorporated into the Cree School Board's own curriculum in James Bay.² The other seven communities have started to implement it and use its textbooks (now numbering over 500) printed in Cree syllabics.

In Waskaganish there is currently a staff of three people working on language and cultural development. Printing of materials has been done in Ottawa since 1985, due to technical difficulties. Waskaganish (population 1,400) can now offer both primary and high school education to its 485 school-aged children. Enrollment at the preschool, and elementary levels is currently about 285.

Cree Immersion Program

Parents now have a multilingual choice for their young children. A Cree immersion program (using only Cree as the language of communication and instruction) is currently in its fifth year. It was begun in 1988 with one class at the preschool level. In 1989 the program was extended to the primary level; in 1991 to the entire preschool level; in 1993 grade 1 will be included, and so on, to grade 4, where half the subjects will be in Cree and the other half either in English or French.³ From grade 5 on, these students will continue to follow the curriculum either in French or in English. Cree syllabics and cultural programs, though, will continue from grade 5 on and throughout high school. The result is that an ever-increasing number of Cree children are becoming proficient bilingual and trilingual people, at ease in Cree, English, and/or French.

According to the local school board's judgment, the preschool immersion program has already successfully passed its first test. Active oral participation is now the norm whereas before the onset of this program silence or minimal oral par-

ticipation was the norm. At a recent gathering, a four-year-old immersion student's wide vocabulary allowed him to out-talk, in Cree, a seven-year-old (nonimmersion) student on the subject of trapping in the bush. Four- to five-year-old children now bring their school-acquired proficiency home, correcting their parents' pronunciation, grammar, and use of English terms in Cree. These parents, now highly motivated, enroll in the Cree syllabics course offered by the local Adult Education Services to assist their children in the Cree literacy process.

The community's concern over frequent code switching, or, as Gerti Murdoch calls it, the "sloppy" Cree being spoken by its young people, loaded with borrowed English terms and expressions, has further motivated it to opt for a Cree immersion program. Nowadays, code switching among young bilingual people seems to be a common phenomenon in Native communities (Drapeau, in press-a) where the socioeconomic context has greatly changed within the last 15 years, possibly reflecting new concepts (for which no lexical equivalents exist in the Native code) introduced by formal schooling and public service employment (i.e., the Cree health Board), as well as extensive exposure to the dominant language via the mass media (radio and television having been avidly consumed by young people since 1976).

In Waskaganish, code mixing (Drapeau, in press-b) increasingly marked the speech behavior of its young people. A new code seemed to emerge, with its lexical entries (mainly nouns) partly in Cree and partly in English. In everyday speech, some of the common Cree words such as *table* were replaced by their English equivalents. Code mixing, according to Cree traditionalists, portrayed linguistic incompetence, a lack of mastery of a speaker's native language. In the light of some claims that incompetent Native speakers tend to transfer their incompetence to second-language learning (observation I made on a Mohawk reserve, in the province of Quebec. See also Cummins, 1979, p. 89 and Hamers, 1982, p. 57), the school felt that more radical measures such as a total Cree immersion program starting at the preschool level were necessary. The immersion program was to act as a preventive measure against the ultimate loss of Cree language proficiency and general linguistic competence among its speakers (Lambert, 1977). Although Native language programs of full or partial immersion such as the Betsiamits pilot project (Drapeau, 1991) with its curriculum partly in Montagnais and partly in French have not necessarily resulted in higher native language proficiency, they have influenced favorably the affective domains, serving to enhance or reinforce the student's sense of identity and pride in belonging to a First Nation (Larose, 1991, p. 89). It is known now that self-esteem is essential for learning (Arnberg, 1988, pp. 76-77). The high scholastic success of the Mohawk immersion program at Kahnawake could possibly be explained, even if only partly, from within this affective perspective (Lazore, personal communication, 1990).

Waskaganish Cree Way Schooling Today

Each local classroom now has the chance to reexperience bush life at least four or five times a year for a whole day at the bush camp (12 miles outside the community) set up especially for the Waskaganish children and funded privately by the local Cree Trapper Association. Traditional skills, such as trapping, beadwork, the construction of snowshoes and other tools, cooking, and fur tanning are taught by three local resource persons. Each child also keeps a syllabic diary of the experience. This outdoor program aims at transmitting knowledge about a

tradition related to the art of survival, a tradition currently in grave danger of disappearing because of formal schooling on the one hand and loss of land on the other. Regular school requirements now prevent children from accompanying their parents to the trapline for extended periods of time (i.e., three to nine months) and acquiring the survival skills that had traditionally been transmitted orally from one generation to the next.

But even the best bush camp program has its limits and cannot replace the traditional training. Indeed, the training of a trapper starts in early childhood and extends over a long-term apprenticeship with a highly experienced trapper on traditional hunting grounds (Feurer, 1977; Larose, 1991, p. 89). The disappearance of traditional hunting grounds through encroaching industrialization and resource extraction technologies has become acute with the government-sponsored James Bay Project to construct huge, ecologically devastating hydroelectric dams in the area. The James Bay Project has been called "the greatest environmental disaster in continental history" (Green Energy Conference, Montreal, September 1989). If the final phase of this mammoth project is realized, it will leave 83% of the trappers entirely without land.

Even the school calendar is beginning to reflect the commitment of the Cree Way approach to fostering the traditional trapping experience. Summer vacations have been shortened to allow students to accompany their family on the goose hunt for two weeks in the fall and for one week in the spring, to participate in traditional hunting and ceremonial activities. A full 80% of students are indeed utilizing these scheduled breaks to accompany their elders into the bush and learn the traditional ways.

The adapted curriculum, integrated schedule, and Cree immersion program, with its rapidly growing Native teaching staff, seeks to meet the needs and maximize the abilities of the Waskaganish community. Of its 43-member teaching staff, 21 are Native. In fact, most of the elementary school teachers, with the exception of five French (out of a total of eight French-speaking teachers) and one English (out of a total of eight), are Native-born and thus at ease in the Cree Way. They are nevertheless, having been trained in Euro-Canadian institutions, obliged by the adapted curriculum, together with the rest of the staff to rethink and transpose the Cree Way in terms of formal teaching methods. Regular workshops (e.g., on teaching methods) are offered by the local school board to assist teachers in this challenging task with suggested hands-on activities (such as Cree games, group singing, keeping a diary) and organized group activities (such as tasks requiring collective problem solving). There was, in any case, no space for competitive behavior in the Cree tradition, where sharing was its most fundamental premise, the critical key to survival. In addition to workshops, the local resource center provides support to teachers with, for example, a display of locally handcrafted tools and artifacts and accompanying reference materials (pictures, slides, videotapes, cassettes, and so forth).

A closer look at the high school suggests that some difficulties remain in adapting the curriculum to the real needs of Cree adolescents. The dropout rate, although much lower than the 90% national average (Clark & MacKenzie, 1980) among Natives in the 1970s, when students were obliged to seek their secondary education outside the community, is still relatively high, especially in the last two grades. The reduced dropout rate might be explained by the appealing specialist options now available in art, mathematics, and computer science as well as Cree

language and culture. Furthermore, today's dropouts are reintegrated as quickly as possible into the community's many certification programs (cooking, construction, plumbing, etc.), management courses, and training programs (e.g., fish camp training) to prevent the loss to the community of these precious human resources.

Higher education is still available only south of James Bay where presently, in 1992-1993, 102 young people pursue postsecondary studies. Most of the graduates, 99% in fact, return home after graduation as skilled multilingual, multicultural persons—a new resource and a true asset to their communities.

Conclusion

Waskaganish's innovative Cree Way project in its different phases has clearly demonstrated the complexity (of which this article is a small reflection) of such an undertaking. In addition to linguistic variables, environmental factors, and the socioeconomic basis outside the school system have to be taken into account. Most important, however, is a community's willingness to support the linguistic endeavors of its school. Waskaganish as a community is supporting, with all its resources, the Cree Way immersion program initiated in 1988. With the whole community mobilized, eager to valorize and promote their cultural and linguistic heritage, we agree with the Cree school's position that Native instruction in the low school grades might ultimately further, on the one hand, the process of scholarization (i.e., second-language acquisition) and, on the other, help assure a high level of Cree proficiency not only in but also outside the school, in the community at large.

Though the immersion project is in its infancy, there has already been some evidence of increased language proficiency and awareness. More empirical data are needed to assess its effectiveness at the purely linguistic or sociolinguistic and academic levels. As far as the second-language acquisition is concerned, assessment will be possible only after the completion of elementary schooling. The school, though, claims that the Cree Way project started 15 years ago has already produced positive results in second-language acquisition (English literacy).

As the immersion program develops, other questions of interest need to be pursued. Does the relatively late onset of formal second-language studies affect the skill transfer mechanism described by Cummins? How does this late start (at grade 4) affect the acquisition of French, a language less often used in the community than English?

Positions on bilingual education in Quebec are as diverse as are the various educational projects themselves, due to a set of complex variables that differ from one locality to another and to research methods that are far from being uniform (Kalenztzis, Cope, & Slade, 1989, p. 40). These reservations having been stated, I consider the initial results achieved in Waskaganish to be highly promising.

Thus ends our sketch of an indigenous people's efforts to adapt its school system to its own traditions in an intracultural setting in which learning is becoming the relevant and fertile soil for the acquisition of a new tradition.

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Notes

¹For further reading on native learning styles, see, for example, Berry (1976) on field dependence-independence; Swisher and Dehyle (1989) on the relationship between home and school learning; Kaulback (1984) on modality; Vernon (1984) on patterns of ability; and Sawyer (1991) on instructional adaptations.

²The locally elected Cree School Board makes decisions about the language of instruction, the curriculum, and the school texts; it employs its own staff and is self-administrating. This unique case in Canadian history resulted directly from the signing of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement in 1975.

³Historically, the Cree have been educated in English. However, the growing influence of the Quebec nationalist movement and the language legislation enforcing the exclusive use of French for official government purposes has enhanced the incentive among the Cree to learn French. Now that government documents are issued in French, most government jobs in the Cree community require a knowledge of French. In addition, there is a disincentive to learn English formally, because this is easily accomplished through the mass media. It is therefore not at all astonishing that in recent years, 70% of the students have opted for a formal education in French.

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