

The Development of Aboriginal Language Programs: A Journey towards Understanding

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Attempts to build intercultural understanding inevitably uncover tensions and involve negotiating issues of identity, power, and resistance. Using a self-study approach, I describe the development and early implementation phase of Aboriginal language programs in one school district. I consider the collaborative process involving representatives from the school district, community, and Aboriginal agencies to suggest strategies to transform material and discourse conditions in the community through dialogue and norms of reciprocity. I show that adopting traditional narratives and incorporating cultural structures into school practices demonstrates an integrated approach to communicating and responding to community concerns leads to greater understanding across cultures.

Key words: Aboriginal language programs, intercultural understanding,, community involvement, school change

Les efforts en vue de promouvoir les relations interculturelles mettent inévitablement en relief des tensions et impliquent la prise en compte des questions d'identité, de pouvoir et de résistance. L'auteure décrit l'élaboration des programmes de langue destinés aux autochtones dans un arrondissement scolaire et la première phase de leur mise en œuvre. Le processus, fruit d'un effort concerté entre l'arrondissement scolaire, des membres de la communauté et des organismes autochtones, a non seulement dévoilé des zones de conflit et de tension entre les attentes communautaires et les politiques et pratiques des écoles, mais également fourni des occasions d'étudier ces zones. En apprenant à estomper les frontières entre l'école, la communauté et les cultures, les participants ont réussi à transformer les conditions matérielles et les discours à travers le dialogue et des normes de réciprocité.

Mots clés : programmes de langue autochtones, promotion des relations interculturelles, participation communautaire, évolution de l'école.

School districts and community agencies are often encouraged to develop and administer collaborative projects to meet the needs and

interests of their respective communities. Collaborative projects, however, are difficult both to implement and sustain. In the following article, I describe how community members and school district personnel created new material and discourse conditions to initiate and implement Aboriginal language classes in Cree and Ojibwe in a suburban school district. Existing programs, resources, and organizational structures, introduced two years earlier in response to shifting demographic conditions in the district, provided a foundation on which to build the new language programs. Despite this foundation, participants discovered organizational, pedagogical, and cultural tensions and misunderstandings throughout the implementation phase of the language programs. By forming new alliances and improvising new norms of interaction, participants addressed and resolved these issues. To build inter-agency and cross-cultural collaboration and understanding, they used the strategies of participation, dialogue, and reciprocity.

THE STUDY

I chose a self-study approach to conduct the study to capture and represent my growing understanding of the complex interactions, meaning making, cultural elements, and interpersonal relationships of the program development process. As participant-researcher, my concern was with the relationship with self-as-teacher and self-as-administrator and the relationships that developed as I worked in concert with others, who were also engaged in developing the language programs. The three goals of the self-study follow the goals of practical action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982) with a focus on: "1) the improvement of practice; 2) the improvement of the understanding of the practice by its practitioners; 3) and the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place" (in Hopper & Sanford, 2004, p. 59). The practice being examined includes not only the processes of implementation and development of two Aboriginal language programs but also the norms of interpersonal communication within the school district. By understanding the context more completely, we were able to improve practices in the school district.

The study also fits within a definition of post-modern pedagogy (Lather, 1991) that focuses on a “transformation of consciousness that takes place in the intersection of three agencies – the teacher, the student, and the knowledge they together produce” (in Hopper & Sanford, 2004, p. 60). In this study, this consciousness best occurs in the relational space where the three agencies come together, namely the school district. Throughout the development process, participants shifted positions, at times assuming the role of student, at other times, the role of teacher.

I drew data from several sources: field notes, formal and informal observation, interviews with participants, district documents, minutes of meetings, agendas of workshops, professional development sessions, anecdotal reports of participants, and personal reflective journals. After reviewing the data and formulating preliminary notes, I identified issues and themes, trying to capture the thinking and feeling of the development process. I shared the emerging themes with participants who performed an authenticity audit. They supported the selected themes as being important to the telling of the story of the language programs. In addition, they verified the substance, tone, and accuracy of my accounting of our story. Participants have also read subsequent iterations of the account.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Two years before the current study began, several principals of schools located on the southwest side of the district had noticed changes in the demographic profile of their schools. At least 100 families had moved from the core area of the city to the school district, situated in a growing suburban area. Although the majority of these families had been born in the city, were accustomed to the congestion and size of city schools, and spoke English in their homes, they missed the support systems, friends, homes, and neighbours of their former communities. They found the transition to the suburbs difficult. With the changing student population, principals began to notice higher rates of absenteeism, an increase in the number of student referrals for special services and support for students, as well as an increasing number of students who were not succeeding

academically.

The district office responded to the concerns of administrators and teachers and to the changed context in the district with structural changes: they created new positions and programs. Two positions, Aboriginal Community Liaison Workers, were created to facilitate communication between schools and the community. Each liaison worker was assigned to a "family" of schools: (two or three elementary schools, a middle school and a high school). Other changes quickly followed. A Native Studies program was developed in one of the high schools. A Family Community Centre was established in an elementary school. In addition to this structural and organizational support, teachers and principals were encouraged to use curricular materials that included the voices of Aboriginal peoples and to incorporate instructional strategies that were culturally responsive.

Within a few months, district personnel noticed the impact of the new positions and programs. When the liaison workers contacted families, they encouraged family members to attend events and programs sponsored by the Family Community Centre or to visit the relaxation area that was set up to provide opportunities for interaction with other families in the area. Students in the Native Studies program acted as mentors to elementary school students who attended the school in which the Family Community Centre was located. The liaison workers assisted the teacher of the Native Studies Program by participating in sharing circles, supervising field trips, compiling lists of community members with expertise in traditional culture, and arranging opportunities for community members to work directly with students.

My professional responsibilities as Divisional Team Leader included support for all programs and services, as well as the development of new projects that would build on the strengths of the community. I had been providing support to the Aboriginal Liaison workers by arranging meetings, introducing them to social workers and psychologists assigned to the schools, and helping them understand "the way things" worked in the school district.

Another important area of my professional responsibilities was the coordination of the many language programs in the district. Each September, I sent letters with information about Heritage Language

classes to families with students in grades 4 to 12. All families with children attending district schools were eligible to participate in these classes, taught three days each week after school, from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. The school district would provide transportation to the classes; families were to arrange transportation after class.

Two days after the letters had been mailed, the phone rang.

Why, when the schools offer so many language programs, do you not offer classes in Aboriginal languages?

The mother who asked the question was both a teacher and a parent in the district. Her question became the first step in an exciting cross-cultural journey, not only for me, but also for my colleagues and others who were interested in providing culturally relevant experiences for students in school. The question became the catalyst for new programs in the district and for increased collaboration between the school district and community agencies and governmental departments.

Language Programs in the School District

In 1979, the school district had formulated policies and procedures for the first heritage language programs. The Board created the after-school programs in Italian, Polish, Punjabi, Tagalog, Portuguese, and Spanish, in response to parental requests for programs to supplement existing curricular offerings in French immersion, and Hebrew, and Ukrainian bilingual programs. The district policies specify procedures for establishing new language programs, hiring instructors, and providing transportation to take students from their home schools to the sites where the language classes are held.

Heritage language classes were to be established if the following three conditions were met: at least fifteen families had signed a written request for classes in a particular language, qualified language teachers were available to teach the classes, and parents agreed to arrange for transportation from the language classes to their homes.

Wherever possible, the teachers hired for the heritage language programs were fluent speakers of the target language and participated

actively in the dynamic cultural life of the city. For the most part, students in the heritage language classes heard the heritage language in their families, speak to family members in that language, and participated in cultural activities organized by the numerous cultural organizations in the city. Many are recent immigrants to Canada and studied their languages to maintain fluency. Several have been able to write the equivalency examinations and use their heritage language as one of the high-school credits needed for their diploma.

INITIAL STEPS OF THE JOURNEY

Shortly after the phone call, the mother, two community liaison officers, the teacher of Native Studies, and I met with the superintendent to develop processes to implement heritage language programs in Aboriginal languages. To decide whether there was interest in the language classes, identify parents who spoke an Aboriginal language fluently, and determine if any parents had the necessary skills and interest to become language instructors, we developed a short survey and distributed it to all parents in the district.

Within a week, we had received more than 200 parental responses, with several parents asking to take the classes with their children. More than half the parents indicated that Ojibwe was their heritage language, a large number of families knew that Cree had been spoken in their families, and others were not sure what language their ancestors had spoken. Only four parents indicated that they could speak Ojibwe and two indicated that they could speak Cree. None indicated that these languages were spoken regularly in the home. The extent of the loss of Aboriginal Languages in our school community would inhibit student learning because students would hear the target language only in their language classes and not in their homes and community.

After we tabulated the survey results, we developed an action plan that consisted of:

- forming an advisory council of the Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers, teachers of Native Studies programs, community organizers, teachers, and administrators
- consulting with principals and educators in school districts where

classes in Cree and Ojibwe were offered

- involving parents from the district in the program implementation process and in the hiring process for the instructors
- working closely with the provincial government, community agencies, and other school districts to obtain resources and materials
- involving the Departments of Native Studies at the two universities and community college in the recruitment of instructors, during the hiring process, and during curriculum development.

The positive parental response to the survey fuelled our efforts to introduce the language classes as quickly as possible. We placed advertisements for language instructors in newspapers, in the departments of Native Studies at both universities, in the translation departments of the community colleges, in community publications, and in hospitals. The advisory council contacted the parents who had reported that they could speak either Cree or Ojibwe and invited them to apply for the position of language instructor.

The advisory council formed an interviewing team of community members, the community liaison workers, the Native Studies teachers, representatives from the Department of Education, Aboriginal educators from other school districts, and administrators from schools with language programs in Cree and Ojibwe. The team developed questions and conducted interviews. All members of the interview team, except one liaison worker and myself, spoke either Cree or Ojibwe.

Central administrators in the school district had not anticipated the positive response rate, the interest in Aboriginal languages, or the challenges we would meet as we tried to establish after-school language classes in Cree and Ojibwe. Looking back on the implementation process, it is clear that we moved too quickly. Our haste to build on the interest generated by the survey, however, pushed us into collaborative interactions with community members. During the implementation process, we discovered several tensions and challenges that threatened to derail the language classes as the following discussion outlines.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

Recruiting Qualified Instructors

Two important organizational issues — the scarcity of qualified instructors and the lack of curricular materials — surfaced very early and needed to be addressed before classes could begin.

The advisory group had interviewed twenty people for the four positions created by the school district for the Aboriginal language classes in Cree and Ojibwe. Each was proud of his or her language and eager to teach young people to help revive the language. Several candidates had worked as instructional assistants in language classes in neighbouring school districts. Some had studied their language at community college or had worked as translators in local hospitals. None, however, was a certified teacher, who had studied theories of second language instruction, instructional strategies, or classroom management. Unfortunately, none of the parents from the community had either the language fluency or cultural knowledge to be selected as language instructor.

The interview team selected four women, two to teach Ojibwe and two to teach Cree. The team had decided that the language ability, cultural knowledge, and commitment of the four women outweighed their lack of teaching qualifications. Their decision, a short-term strategy in effort to revitalize Aboriginal languages, is supported in a report prepared for the Department of Native Studies in Manitoba that states “there is a need to concentrate on fluent people and groom them rather than certifying people that do not have the fluency, history, and cultural understanding” (Lee, 2001, p.7).

The district accepted the recommendation of the interview team despite the policy guideline to hire qualified teachers. There was a precedent for hiring individuals who were not qualified teachers if they demonstrated a high level of language fluency. In the heritage language programs these individuals had worked as the second teacher; in the Aboriginal language programs, all four women were novices. To begin classes as quickly as possible, the district was prepared to “groom” the four women by providing professional development sessions

throughout the year.

Hiring: Whose Decision Is It?

Although there had been wide participation from several Aboriginal organizations in implementing the language programs and in hiring instructors, their involvement had not been visible to the community. Several months after the language classes had begun, a mother asked one of the liaison workers to explain the organization and implementation process the district followed for the language classes. The initial question led to another, more pointed one: "What right does she, a White administrator, have to hire teachers for our children?" Her question underscores how "the personal and social psychology of loss" (Shaw, 2001, p. 2) manifests itself in the separation between many parents and schools and a distrust of district policies and procedures. Shaw claims that the psychology of loss, which she defines as "a progressive layering of devastating losses which are intricately linked to the erosion of language (p. 2)," often manifests itself in interpersonal conflicts and inability to work collaboratively to resolve contested issues.

The liaison worker, herself a member of the interview team, was able to describe the involvement of the Aboriginal community members, Aboriginal educators from other districts, and community agencies in the implementation process. She stressed that the interviewing team, and not the Co-ordinator of Languages, had recommended hiring the instructors.

Partially as a result of this mother's question, the liaison worker realized the importance of her role in the channels of communication within the school district. She encouraged her colleague to discuss the classes in Cree and Ojibwe during home visits with families. In these discussions, the workers discovered that many families distrusted initiatives sponsored by the school district. These families believed that the district made administrative decisions without involving them and without considering the educational implications for their children.

When the mother's questions were brought to the attention of the advisory council, they realized that members of the community needed to understand how the school district established policy as well as to

know that their concerns would be heeded. This group recommended the introduction of regularly scheduled sharing circles. The circles would create a space for the exchange of ideas and perspectives between the community, advisory council, and school district personnel. The introduction of a traditional cultural practice not only demonstrated a willingness on the part of the school district to honour Aboriginal traditions but also signified a shift in the material and discourse conditions within the district.

Curricular Materials

The second organizational challenge faced by the advisory team was the lack of curricular materials available for Aboriginal language programs. The school district invested in curricular and support materials by purchasing books, posters, recordings of music and stories, and by borrowing materials and resources from schools in districts with established programs in Aboriginal languages. Purchasing materials and making them accessible to the instructors was only the first step in addressing the lack of curricular support for the language program. Teaching the instructors how to use the materials in ways that would foster student language learning became part of my professional responsibilities.

Efforts to engage the language instructors in curriculum development proceeded very slowly during the first year of implementation. The instructors, without adequate preparation in instructional techniques or understanding of curriculum development and theories of language acquisition, found it difficult to design instructional activities and to manage and monitor student learning. Although we originally viewed the lack of curriculum materials as an organizational challenge, we soon discovered that the pedagogical implications of the lack of curricular materials were extremely difficult to address.

PEDAGOGICAL AND LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES

Before we fully realized how seriously the lack of curricular support would influence classroom progress, we encountered the question of

regional differences in dialect. The instructors of Cree were raised on reserves located several hundred miles from each other. They spoke with different accents and occasionally used different words to describe common objects. Each of them had studied Cree at different institutions. The instructors met to plan their lessons before each class. They struggled to find a way to reconcile the linguistic variations they were discovering.

My understanding of language acquisition had developed during my studies of second language acquisition as well as through my experiences as a teacher and administrator in French immersion schools. In these situations, whenever variations in pronunciation or idiomatic expressions occurred, teachers would probe them to help students understand the dynamic nature of language. They would explain how languages are fluid and how people adapt their choice of words when they move to new areas or respond to new conditions, such as meeting speakers of other languages. I encouraged the instructors of Cree to use their linguistic differences to demonstrate how words and expressions change as speakers encounter words from other languages and adapt their vocabularies to new conditions.

Who Decides What is Taught?

From a home visit by a liaison worker, the advisory council uncovered a tension between some members of the community and the language classes. While waiting for the classes to begin, some of the students had overheard my discussions with the language instructors about differences in pronunciation and word choice. The students reported these discussions to their parents who began to question the linguistic competence of the instructors. The liaison worker, herself a speaker of Cree, was able to reassure the parents by affirming that she had spoken Cree with both instructors and that both women spoke fluently and well. Because she understood that languages evolve over time and distance, she supported my approach to the issue. She explained the difficulty faced by linguists when they attempt to codify languages, such as Cree and Ojibwe, that have traditionally been oral languages (Blair, 1997; Burnaby, 1996).

Instructional Strategies

All four instructors had responded to questions about language teaching during the hiring interviews by stressing how important language was as a tool of communication. All of them mentioned how learning lists of vocabulary was not an effective way of learning to communicate. None of them, however, was able to suggest instructional strategies that would encourage language development.

This was not surprising. All four instructors had learned English when they began school. Their personal experiences learning English by memorizing lists of words had channelled their mental model of language teaching and determined how they would teach their classes. When the classes in Cree and Ojibwe began, the instructors approached language teaching as the transmission of grammatical rules and vocabulary words. Because I wanted to foster a learning environment with the instructors and students in the Aboriginal language classes similar to the ones I had experienced in French immersion settings, I encouraged them to speak only in the target language and to teach the students traditional crafts, games, or dances using the language.

The instructors, for their part, viewed themselves as speakers of the language within a small circle of family and relatives and not as “teachers” of the language. For them, their language was private, spoken only within their family circle. Language classes, on the other hand, were public. The instructors had not yet taken on either the role or the responsibilities of “teacher” of language. Their early experiences learning English initially interfered with their ability to become effective teachers and inhibited their developing a teacher identity.

Some students, sensing that classes were not functioning smoothly, began to miss classes. Others refused to participate in classroom activities. Parents complained to the liaison workers and to school administrators about the quality of instruction. The instructors, feeling that they lacked control of their teaching, began to arrive late. We all knew something needed to change.

CULTURAL CHALLENGES

The Relationships Between Language and Culture

Candidates were invited to talk about the relationship between language and culture during their pre-employment interviews. Each candidate carefully separated language from culture. Members of the interview team recommended that I include discussions of this relationship during my professional development sessions. During one of our sessions, when we were focusing on effective instructional strategies, I asked two questions: "How do we use language? Why do we use language?"

Brenda¹, one of the instructors, responded: "It's a way of communicating."

After a long silence, she continued: "My language is my soul . . . when I speak my language, I feel at peace."

Brenda's insight into the power of her language led us to read together and consider the words of Elder Eli Taylor, who in his address to the Assembly of First Nations, spoke of the importance of language:

Our language embodies a value system about how we ought to live and relate to each other . . . it gives a name to relations among kin, to roles and responsibilities among family members, to ties with the broader clan group. There are no English words for these relationships because our social and family life is different from theirs. (Elder Eli Taylor, 1996, p. 10 in Assembly of First Nations)

Elder Taylor mentioned a value system that provides the moral focus for people as they live and relate not only to each other but also to nature, the Great Spirit, and the order of things. He mentioned relations, roles, and responsibilities and implied that by participating in the life of the community, people know how to live, work, and care for each other and their way of life. Ruiz (in Blair, 1997, p. 10) suggested that when people view languages as resources, there is greater potential for them to survive. Taylor's words echo those of the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who maintained that to "know a language is to be able to participate in the forms of life within which it is expressed and which it expresses" (Wittgenstein, 1972, in Walsh, 1991, p. 31).

This notion that language is a resource that enables participation is

extremely important in understanding the role that language plays in both human and cultural development, suggesting that language is more than a system. In fact, language is both an activity and a tool that people use to get things done in the world. Language, as activity, is purposeful, performed by people as they engage in social interaction and fuelled by their motivation to participate in the activity.

Children build their perceptions and conceptual frames of the world through family interactions during the daily tasks of living. This socialization process is ongoing and shaped by children's own lived experiences, by the stories told about them by those important to them, and stories they hear and tell about the experiences of others. These family and community stories provide much more than a chronicle of people and events; they create images of the possible, of ways of interacting with others, of the heroic, and of the courageous and honourable. They also suggest ways to reach and extend notions of the possible.

The repetition of stories creates shared understanding of events and procedures, and provides oral histories of events and deeds. The stories connect generations and sustain and celebrate particular forms of life and value systems. They provide the means to negotiate meaning in dialogue and in relation to others. Individuals draw on these shared meanings in order to create a sense of personal identity.

The language instructors in our program had been able to sustain their languages, speaking them with their husbands and the Elders in their communities. They had not, however, been able to maintain the language with their children and mourned the fact that their children were not able to speak to the Elders in their ancestral language. Fishman (1996) claims that loss of the intergenerational contact in heritage languages quickly leads to language loss. When children can no longer participate fully in the life of their home communities, they lose elements of their ancestral customs and traditions. The results of our survey indicated that at least two generations had not been able to participate fully in the activities of their home communities. Few families in our community had regular opportunities to hear their ancestral languages spoken.

Elder Taylor also focused on the losses that accompany the

destruction of language:

. . . Now if you destroy our language, you not only break down these 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. (Elder Eli Taylor, 1996)

When we finished reading Taylor's words, the instructors remained silent for a long time. Finally, in a tight voice, Shirley said: "I was told I had no culture, that my family was a bunch of heathens. We spoke Cree at home but never in school or in church."

Her words made me realize how sensitively we would have to tread to find approaches to teaching that were culturally appropriate for both the instructors and their students as well as foster pride in the languages and traditions.

A few days after this discussion, Brenda phoned me at home one evening. As she talked to me about how difficult it was for her to control and motivate her students, I heard pain and uncertainty. She loved her language and wanted her students to love it as well. However, she feared they were learning to hate it and think of it as simply an inert list of words to memorize. Her phone call, a reaching out for help, became a turning point in our work together.

I asked her to think back to her childhood, to the games she had played, to the time she spent with her mother, and to the stories she enjoyed.

She didn't respond immediately; then "We didn't play games or tell stories."

"What do you mean — you didn't play games?"

Our life was very hard. My mother died when I was born. I was taken away to school when I was five. I was away at school from September until July. When I came home there was work to do. In winter, when the animals have gone south and the nights are cold and long, there is time to relax and tell the stories of our past. But I was sent away to school. I wasn't home during the winter months. I didn't learn the games and stories. Then, when I came home in the summer, I had to work. I had to catch fish, gather eggs, and pick berries. Each task had to be done at specific times. If we didn't catch enough fish or pick the berries before the animals ate them, there would be no

food for the winter. (Brenda, Cree instructor)

I still didn't completely understand.

But when you were working, you must have been talking and being taught how to fish and gather food.

No—if we talked the bears would come. We learned by watching the others and by trying it ourselves, not by being told what to do.

The phone conversation highlighted the need to find a more integrated approach to addressing the three types of challenges facing the implementation of the Aboriginal language programs. The advisory council had addressed each challenge when it surfaced, not realizing that each challenge was but a symptom of the underlying tension and potential conflict in the community. By focusing on the structural and organizational challenges, we had neglected the needs of the language instructors, their students, and the community.

The conversation also helped me glimpse a different notion of pedagogy, one in which learning occurs after observation and participation, not after explanation. Understanding this difference highlighted the internal struggle of the instructors, the clash between what they had experienced as language learners and the instructional approaches they were now being asked to adopt. Their early learning experiences of observing and participating in the work of the home and community was at odds with their experiences at school and church. The learning that occurred in the institutional settings of school and church was more passive: they were to sit quietly and follow directions. Now, in a different institutional setting, they were being asked to divest themselves of both these ways of learning. My suggestions for teaching languages were too far removed from their experiences. We needed to find a sheltered environment to develop their understanding of language teaching.

TOWARDS A RESOLUTION

Shortly after the conversation with Brenda, we were able to find a

qualified teacher who was also a speaker of Cree. Joanne, who had developed a language curriculum in her home community, brought her knowledge of language acquisition, her experiences as facilitator of professional development workshops, and her access to a network of Aboriginal language teachers to our school district. She recommended that we follow a thematic approach to curriculum development and implementation in the Aboriginal language programs. If the instructors identified themes and developed their own instructional resources and methods, the students would develop vocabulary, acquire linguistic structures in the respective target language, and learn aspects of their cultures. The instructors would use the target language as much as possible. The instructors, by jointly developing learning activities and instructional strategies, would feel less isolated than if each language program had proceeded independently. Joanne brought her curricular materials and during our professional development sessions, modelled how to use them effectively. Guided by Joanne's knowledge and skills, the other language instructors developed teaching strategies that honoured the cultural and linguistic conventions of their languages and that built on students' prior knowledge.

The instructors gained confidence in their ability to teach and took pride in designing lessons to engage their students. They built on Joanne's materials and improvised methods based on what they observed during her demonstrations. They introduced the traditional teachings of the medicine wheel to their classes and conducted research to discover the roots of these teachings. They learned new pedagogical techniques that combined demonstration with explanation and guided practice for students. As much as possible, the instructors focused on using words from the target language to express the important values they wanted to teach. Throughout the second year of language classes, they introduced stories to help students understand how respect is manifested, what courage, honesty, kindness, and knowledge look like in traditional teachings and linked these values to current issues. They culled examples from their own lives and those of the liaison workers to reinforce their lessons and helped the students find ways to connect with the elders in the community.

The students, for their part, became excited to learn about their

culture. They connected traditional values to their suburban environment through discussions and careful observation of people around them. They began to take pride in their heritage and eagerly shared traditional stories and crafts with their classroom teachers.

The curriculum, no longer simply a series of arbitrary activities, took shape as a collaborative construction of the instructors. They claimed ownership of the program through the decisions they made about content (what to teach) and method (how to teach). They began to view themselves as teachers, taking pride in their increasing skill and classroom performance.

When their schedules permitted, the liaison workers attended the curricular planning sessions, sharing their knowledge of customs and stories for the instructors to use with their students. They also attended the classes, adding their voices to the classroom and modelling the target language for students. Both groups began to take pride in discussing student progress, especially when students whom they had perceived as difficult or unmotivated, became excited about learning.

The classroom teachers who taught the students during the day, supported the work of the after-school language instructors and asked for professional development to learn about Aboriginal cultures. Some attended traditional ceremonies, such as sweat lodges, in order to understand them. Others incorporated Aboriginal teachings and narratives into their classroom activities. Principals in two schools hired artists and dancers from the community as 'artists in residence.' These artists and dancers spent extended periods of time in the school, explaining the significance of colour, of symbol, and of movement to teachers and students. They worked beside the classroom teacher, modelling custom of interacting that honour Aboriginal ways. Some artists have since been hired as instructional assistants and are very successful in working with students who find it difficult to adjust to life in school, those children who are labelled "at risk."

CONCLUSION: CHANGED CONDITIONS IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT

The request of one parent pushed the school district to establish

Aboriginal language classes in Cree and Ojibwe. What began as an attempt by school district administrators to respond to community needs by expanding heritage language programs to more completely represent the cultures of the community, led to more productive collaborative arrangements between the school district, community organizations, and government agencies. The Aboriginal language classes became viewed as another component in an integrated and more culturally respectful approach to working with a growing segment of the district population.

Several changes have occurred with the school district. Many families, especially those who had not attended school sponsored activities, now consider the liaison workers as advocates for their children and their interests. Teachers and principals work closely with the liaison workers and language instructors to maintain channels of communication with these families. Gradually, parents have begun to attend parent-teacher conferences and other school events. Many of them volunteer in the classrooms and supervise field trips. Some have agreed to teach traditional crafts to their children's classmates.

The language instructors and the community liaison workers have brought needed skills and knowledge of traditional values to the school district. They grew into their newly created positions and responsibilities as they learned about district procedures and the strengths and needs of the community. For their part, district personnel also learned how to adapt to the new positions and programs.

As individuals worked together to improve conditions for students, they began to develop shared interests. Groups of community members, liaison workers, language instructors, and teachers collaboratively orchestrated pow-wows for the community. The liaison workers, language instructors, and the Native Studies teachers introduced sharing circles for district administrators and board members to discuss policies and plans with members of the community.

The integrated approach to communicating and responding to the community demonstrates the implementation of "an approach that is open, flexible, and responsive" (Burbles, 1993, 12). The process is both time intensive and recursive. Tensions do remain. The school district, by including traditional narratives into the district curriculum, by creating new positions and programs, and by transforming organizational

structures, has demonstrated its willingness to talk across differences and to fashion richer notions of working and living together within the school community.

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ENDNOTE

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

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