This booklet provides information to First Nation parents and communities on the First Nation languages in Manitoba and explains various programs and why we need to support language programming in our schools and communities.

Virginia Arthurson
September 27, 2012
FIRST NATION LANGUAGES: WHY WE NEED THEM

LANGUAGE IMMERSION

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**INTRODUCTION**

Language is the means through which we communicate our culture. If, as First Nations people, we want to retain our identities and transmit our values and our cultural practices to future generations then we must do whatever we can to keep our languages alive.

Teaching our languages in the classroom for 20 to 30 minutes two or three times a school cycle is not resulting in language fluency as demonstrated in many of our schools. Immersion programs have proven more successful especially where they are supported by parents and the community (i.e. Language Nests in New Zealand, French immersion in Manitoba). Students taught in more than one language also do better in school (Fredeen, 1988; Pacific Policy Research Center, 2010).

In our communities, some parents did not teach their children or turned away from their language as a result of negative experiences they had as children in the school system. Past government practices and our peoples experiences have devalued our languages and many people in our communities are not strong supporters of language immersion programs in their local schools.

While they may want their children to retain or learn their language, they do not support an immersion program because they fear that the program will negatively impact their children's ability to succeed in their academic programs which are written and delivered in English. This misconception must be addressed if we are to move toward the retention, revitalization and acquisition of our ancestral languages in our communities.

“Canadians are coming to understand the traumatic impacts of the residential school system, an assimilationist system that failed to educate Aboriginal children and deliberately disconnected them from their language, cultures, and traditions, ripped them from their homes, and, in far too many cases, brutalized Aboriginal children. Government after government continued this vicious cycle...killing the spirit, the heart and soul, of Aboriginal people.”

(Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2011)

Assimilation: the process used to force First Nations to take on the culture of Europeans in order to civilize them.
The purpose of this booklet is to encourage support for our languages, to explain the importance of our culture, and our language as a vehicle for the transmission of our culture. It will provide information on what the research says is the best way to teach language. The booklet will look at language immersion as a way to teach the language and address concerns about the academic performance of students in immersion programs. Finally, the booklet shares research findings to give First Nations parents and schools factual information that promotes support for language programming in the community.

WHAT IS FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION?

The culture of any nation is reflected in the spoken language. Children are taught their culture, practices and beliefs through the language. First Nations education includes values, spiritual beliefs and ways of living passed down from generation to generation. Since First Nations were oral societies the language was a critical component of education.

Education or teaching the young focused on the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical needs of a child while preparing the child to become a contributing member of the society. Learning was a natural part of life and children learned what they needed to know to have a good life.

Children learned through watching, then by doing the activities with help and finally by practicing on their own until they learned the intended lesson or skill. They learned by listening to stories told by the grandparents and other family members. Stories addressed the knowledge the children needed to become contributing members of the community.
The stories also carried deeper meanings that the children grasped as they matured and grew in understanding.

Each child was considered a gift from the Creator. The people believed that each one had a unique gift; something they were good at. The parents, grandparents and community recognized and respected and nurtured the gift each child carried. Everyone in the family and the community was responsible for looking after and for teaching the young.

**WHAT IS LOST WHEN A LANGUAGE IS LOST?**

The loss of language can be attributed to the distress people suffer when they lose their land or when they move and live with other people losing their language in the process. Aboriginal language speakers may be forbidden to use their languages or the language is devalued in favour of the language of the people with more power and greater representation in
the national government. Languages are also lost when the native language is condemned by religions as “the devil’s speech”. Some speakers choose not to pass the language on to their children because they see no economic benefit in it and think that it will prevent them from getting a good job (Westfall, 2001). First Nations shared these experiences as our lands and people were colonized.

First Nations people know the damage that colonization [when the Europeans came to our lands and began to impose their ways on our people] has had on our communities. The loss of our language caused by government policy such as the residential schools, forbidding the use of the language in day school, and the “60’s Scoop”[the wide spread adoption of First Nations children out to non-native families in the 60s, 70s and early 80s], prevented the transmission of our languages, our cultural beliefs and values to our children.

When you lose your language, you do not just lose the words you speak; you lose thousands of years’ of cultural understandings, rituals and practices. Language contains ideas about how you look at the world and how you live in your community. It reflects family and community relationships, knowledge about food and health, art and music, spirituality, history, and the environment (Katenies Research and Management Services, 2011).

The loss of our languages and the knowledge that is contained in it has contributed to poor health in our communities. In order to restore healthy communities we must restore our language.


**Why is Language Important to First Nations People?**

Language tells us who we are. Our identity is tied to our language; it connects communities and defines our territories. Our language also sets us apart from others who speak another language (Katenies Research and Management Services, 2011). We need our language so that our children know who they are and are secure in the knowledge of their place in this world.

Language holds cultural, historical, scientific and ecological knowledge. First Nations people know what happened in their community in the past and what the land needs. Knowledge of the land and survival is important in maintaining good health.

Diversity of languages and cultures is also important on a global scale, as each culture can provide teachings on how to live (Katenies Research and Management Services, 2011).

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**Fewer children drop out of school:** Children who start formal education in a second or foreign language are much more likely to experience frustration and failure, resulting in a higher dropout rate for these children. Worldwide, some 50 percent of out-of-school children use a language at home that is not the language used in school.

**Children have more family support:** When children learn in their mother tongue, parents and families can be involved and support their education. When children are learning in a second or foreign language, families are often excluded from the process.

**Cycles of exclusion are broken:** By including families and drawing on local cultural heritage, mother tongue-based education contributes to communities’ social and cultural well-being and fosters inclusiveness within the wider society.

**Children receive a good foundation:** When taught first in their own languages, children learn better, are more self-confident and well equipped to transfer their literacy and numeracy skills to additional languages.

**Children perform better:** Evidence from languishing diverse countries world-wide shows children taught first in their most familiar language are more likely to thrive and excel at school.

**Fewer children repeat grades:** Studies have found that children who start formal education in a second or foreign language are more likely to repeat school years.

(Fontaine, 2012)
STATE OF OUR FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES IN MANITOBA

A study of the rate of language loss in the five Manitoba First Nation language groups conducted by the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs found that:

- Four out of the five First Nation language groups were in a declining and/or endangered state in most of the communities.

- There was a decline of language speakers for the 16 – 29 or younger age groups, and many were unable to utilize the roman orthography and/or the syllabic writing systems.

- Fifty-one out of 62 communities responding to the surveys expressed a strong desire to retain and revitalize the First Nation languages (Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, 2001).

The results were analyzed to determine the strategy that would be of the most benefit for each of the participating First Nations, based on the information provided by the community.

The strategy that came out of that study involved all sectors of First Nations communities and suggested how they could work together to bring the First Nations languages back to life in Manitoba. The goal was to assist communities plan and implement programs to revitalize the language in conjunction with Elders, educators and other resources in the community. Since many of the First Nation communities were utilizing some of the strategies and not others, the report recommended a more comprehensive plan be developed, implemented and supported (Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, 2001). Data from the 2001 and 2006 Census show that First Nations language knowledge and use is declining in Manitoba, underling the importance of this work.

**Definitions used in the language survey:**

Declining: The number of speakers is declining in each age group. There is more emphasis on bilingualism with members using both the First Nation language and English.

Endangered: Only the older adult population is fluent with few or no speakers in the younger age groups. English is used most of the time in communication.

(Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, 2001)
**HOW IS LANGUAGE TAUGHT?**

Language is taught in the home. When Aboriginal languages are lost through the effects of colonization and can no longer be passed on by parents and grandparents, research shows that schools can play a vital role in developing a language and in teaching young students to speak, understand and use a language (Katenies Research and Management Services, 2011).

There are three main ways to teach language and culture in school:

**LANGUAGE AS A SUBJECT**

Language may be included as a subject in any or all of the grades from K to 12. Instruction is limited to 20-45 minutes for each lesson. It doesn't require every teacher to speak the language and avoids the need to develop new curriculum and teaching materials. There is a lack of reporting on the impact on language retention. The time spent on instruction of the language may be too short for students to learn it well (Blair, Okemow, & Zeidler, 2010).
**Bilingual Program**

Bilingual programs use both the Aboriginal language and English for instruction. Bilingual programs are developed to maintain the Aboriginal language while teaching English, maintain the use of both Aboriginal and English languages, or teach the Aboriginal language while continuing use of English. The amount of fluency in the Aboriginal language that is hoped for determines the type of bilingual program that is used (Blair, Okemow, & Zeidler, 2010).

**Language Immersion**

Language immersion uses only the language that is to be learned in the teaching of all subjects. All communication and classroom activities in the school is in the language. Immersion programs are used when language loss is so great that more comprehensive exposure is required to maintain it (Blair, Okemow, & Zeidler, 2010; Katenies Research and Management Services, 2011).
Papahana Kaiiapuni

Papahana Kaiiapuni is a K-12 public school program in which the Hawaiian language is used to teach the children.

After the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, a ban was placed on the use of Hawaiian in public schools and corporal punishment was used if children spoke the language. The ban led to the rapid decline in Hawaiian language use. Hawaiian families encouraged their children to use English, believing that it was necessary for their success. The ban on the Hawaiian language continued for nearly 100 years. It was not until the late 1960s to the early 1970s that there was resurgence of pride in the Hawaiian culture and language.

The Papahana Kaiiapuni program was started in 1987, by parents and language activists because of the shrinking number of speakers as a result of the long ban on the indigenous language. Participants in the program also encourage youths and their family members to become politically active around Hawaiian cultural issues. Unlike the more typical process in which culture is passed down from the older to the younger generations, participants viewed Kaiiapuni students as the carriers of the culture and language, teaching older family members about these topics.

The findings of a study done on the program suggest that as those in the broader community learned more about the Kaiiapuni program and related language revitalization efforts, the stereotypes and stigma may have diminished. Participants noted that Hawaiian Kupuna (elders) began using the Hawaiian language more openly and became politically involved. Students’ successful mastery of both the Hawaiian and English languages dispelled myths about the detrimental efforts of bilingualism.

(Luning & Yamauchi, 2010)
FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES AND IMPROVING STUDENT OUTCOMES

The benefit to students from the use of First Nations languages in school is proven through many successful examples around the world and is validated through research.

The information presented in this booklet suggests that immersion programming is the most successful way of maintaining a language. It also shows that children enrolled in this type of program develop a strong sense of cultural identity and have better self-esteem. Learning in other subjects is stronger, children are better able to succeed and stay in school, and families and communities are strengthened by the value placed on the language and culture.

As parents and community members, each of us can play a role in supporting the maintenance of our languages and cultures through practice at home and in school programming. Where schools are not offering language programming, we can become active in pushing for its inclusion. Where language programming exists, we must be diligent in making sure it is a quality education delivered by qualified teachers fluent in the local language. We must support the school by helping our children at home. In supporting our schools we must remember that language and cultural retention is a community effort.

Our First Nations languages are critical to our cultural survival as First Nations people. If they disappear, there is nowhere else our children can go and learn them.
**First Nation Education Policy Timeline**

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¹ Indian Residential Schools
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_Indian_residential_school_system#History

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