

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL  
*Foundation*  
FOR  
RESEARCH INTO TEACHING



# TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH EXCHANGE

## Elders and Teachers are Cree-ative Collaborators!

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Project #186  
October 2009

This research was partially funded through a grant from the McDowell Foundation. However, the points of view and opinions expressed in project documents are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

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# Executive Summary

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In the spring of 2008, Elders from the northern village of Cumberland House shared stories of lived experiences with staff at the Charlebois Community School. They were invited to share their wealth of untapped Indigenous knowledge in the comfort of our Cree language. The link between the community and school served as a segue to a summer collaboration between Elders and school staff. Supported by the McDowell Foundation, the *Elders and Teachers are Cree-active Collaborators* project was designed as a crucial part of a community-based action research project on *Decolonizing the Curriculum “Cree-atively” Through Elders’ Stories* (McKay-Carriere, 2009). The goal was to develop and broaden the field of Aboriginal language education for students while insisting on the integration of Aboriginal Elders’ knowledge as a distinct way for learning and teaching Cree. Significant events around the collaboration between teachers and Elders and the interconnection between our school and community made a tremendous impact on how we learned from practice.

# Acknowledgements

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My heartfelt appreciation goes out to the 29 Elders who shared their stories of lived experiences. They handed down language and culture to our students through the gift of story. In particular, I wish to thank the 11 Elders with whom we had the opportunity to collaborate. Their stories became units of study for Cree language programs. Without the valuable information they provided, to fit into a structured language acquisition method, the development of Cree sequences would not have been inclusive of our local traditional knowledge. They all bring new meaning to the saying that in order to know where you are going, you have to know where you come from. I also want to thank the Elders from the Spirit World, including Dr. Stirling McDowell.

I acknowledge all the Cree-ative collaborators from the school and the community. Their involvement has given a voice to the Cree people and language in the curriculum. They bring hope to survival of an eroding language and ways of knowing. *Ninanaskomaw* Bertha McKay for her instructional leadership during the summer project.

*Tenigi* to Dr. Olenka Bilash, who provided us with a second language acquisition structure that literally came alive in our summer project and for encouraging us in our struggle to hold on to our language. I also thank Laura Burnouf for her interest in what we did. Both women provided me with guidance throughout my journey and as such, are collaborators of this research project.

I wish to thank the educational and political stakeholders for supporting the Cree immersion/bilingual program at our school. It is essential for leaders to believe that we can continue to build on the foundation that has been established. Thank you to Director Ralph Pilz of the Northern Lights School Division No. 113 and Principal Garry Finlay of the Charlebois Community School. Thank you to Community School Coordinator Wilma McKay and the volunteers who made gift baskets and provided snacks for the Elders. Thank you to the Community Reference Panel for hiring a summer student to work with the summer team and to the Gift of Language and Culture for assisting us with some illustrations.

*Ninanaskomaw* Dr. Friesen who taught me that action research means deep reflection on finding the question to ask of a situation: one which I needed to take action on. My proposed question on how to support teachers in Cree immersion/bilingual classrooms led me on a journey. It was intertwined with the pedagogies of hope and culture in shaping our educational landscape. My gratitude to all Dr. Friesen's colleagues who engaged us in action research projects throughout northern Saskatchewan as part of the 2007-09 Community Based Masters Program.

Our gratitude to the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation and the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for believing in grassroots work by supporting our community-based research initiative and to Verna Gallén for her ongoing guidance.

I acknowledge the love and support given by my family and extended family members who demonstrated incredible patience and understanding toward my research project.

*Ninanaskomaw Manito* ... I thank God that I have finished this report for the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation. It is my hope that this report will contribute to professional knowledge and enable others on a similar journey.

# Four Phases and Four Seasons

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The action research project on *Decolonizing the Curriculum Cree-atively Through Elders' Stories* occurred in four phases across all seasons. In phase one, the Elders shared lived experiences in our Cree language during *Sigwan (Spring)*. The Indigenous ways of knowing naturally flowed into the second phase of the action research and into a *Nipin (Summer)* of collaboration. Phase two of the research project was one stretch of the overall action research journey and is captured in the report, *Elders and Teachers are Cree-ative Collaborators!* Submitted to the McDowell Foundation, the report tells how a team of teachers, support staff, community members and Elders unravelled the local Indigenous ways of knowing into a second language acquisition framework. Made into student friendly units of study that Bilash (2004) coined as Sequences, 11 Cree stories told by local Elders were sculpted into teaching kits that were based on the Bilash Second Language Instructional Model (BSLIM). The collaboration resulted in the integration of Elder lived experiences into curriculum development and classroom instruction. The Cree-ative collaborative project resulted in a process that we learned from and in products to help us improve upon our practise in Cree language instruction. What started as a sharing of lived experiences by community Elders ended as a lived experience for all the participants who were part of the journey. In *Tagwagin (Fall)*, the Sequences were taught in the classrooms during the third phase of the action research journey. As the fourth and final phase, the *Pipon (Winter)* season was a time to reflect on the impact of Elders' stories on my practice.

This report is divided into five sections, each introduced through a proverb or saying that is connected to an action research journey. It tells the story of our lived experience and is our gift to share with other practitioners.

# Section One (*PEYAK*) – Coming to the Question: Messengers of Hope in Reversing Language Shift

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*During the past 100 years or more, nearly 10 once flourishing languages have become extinct [in Canada]; at least a dozen are on the brink of extinction. When these languages vanish, they take with them unique ways of looking at the world, explaining the unknown and making sense of life.*

Norris, 1998

## BACKGROUND

According to the Canadian Census of 2001, only one-quarter of Aboriginal people could conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language. Statistics show that from the percentage of the population who reported an Aboriginal identity, the proportion who reported having an Aboriginal mother tongue dropped from 26 per cent in 1996 to just 20 per cent in 2001, and that corresponding percentages for children under five decreased from 20 per cent to 15 per cent (Norris, 2004, p. 6). Statistics on Aboriginal language loss reveal imminent danger throughout Canada and indicate that Aboriginal language programming in schools needs to be fully supported. Unfortunately, the figures reverberate in communities throughout our country.

In response to the severity of language loss, the Northern Lights School Division initiated an Aboriginal Language Immersion/Bilingual pilot program in 1999. The Charlebois Community School and the parents and guardians of Cumberland House expressed an interest in piloting the program. At the time, Bilash reported that, “The elders in the community all speak Cree, as do their children and some of their grandchildren. However, most people in this community under 40 years of age have limited to no knowledge of Cree” (2004, p. 1). The pilot was an effort towards Reversing Language Shift (Fishman, 1991). The Kindergarten Immersion/Grades 1-3 Cree Bilingual Program was subsequently implemented as a permanent school program that is unique to the school division.

## DECOLONIZATION

In our community, the story of language loss is one of the many negative legacies of oppression and is the result of the demeaning process of colonization. We belong to the Indigenous people of North America who were colonized by Europeans. The fur trade, the influence of Christianity through the churches and the assimilation efforts of educational institutions have left our Indigenous languages in a critical state. Unless ongoing action is taken to reclaim Aboriginal languages in our communities and schools, hope for language revival in the next generation may disappear. In other words, we must seek ways to decolonize the curriculum in order to prevent further erosion of Aboriginal language and culture. When Aboriginal languages vanish they take with them unique ways of looking at the world, explaining the unknown and making sense of life (Norris, 1998, p. 1). Reversing Language Shift is a form of decolonization: an enormous task in terms of time, human capacity building, resource creation and financial support. The new process of Indigenous decolonization is where

Indigenous people are bringing back traditional cultural knowledge in the new society and language is on the priority list. Aboriginal languages are at the interface of cultural connectivity and the Indigenous ways of knowing. Since identity is integrally linked to culture and knowledge, it is paramount to reclaim Indigenous ways of knowing that have been lost and to secure knowledge that is endangered.

## THE QUESTION

“How do I support teachers in the Cree immersion/bilingual programs to integrate Elder stories into curriculum/instruction?” was the question that took me on a year-long action research journey. Action research is a form of collective and self-reflective inquiry that is undertaken by participants in an education site in order to better understand our practice, to improve our practice, and to improve where we work (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 2003). The goal of action research is to develop a better understanding of a local issue in order to bring about improvement. When I asked how to support teachers in the Cree immersion/bilingual programs to integrate Elder stories into curriculum/instruction, I truly wanted to find ways to support teachers in the kindergarten immersion and grades 1 to 3 Cree bilingual classrooms at our school. At the community level, the question helped us to “cree-ate” products for the Cree language program at our school. Action research immersed us in a process that helped me find a way of giving back to my community. I feel the research I applied is in line with the Cree ethic of reciprocity that teaches, “What you take you must share and give back” (Michell, 2005, p. 37). At the community and school-based level, we acted together to make a start on what Francis of Assisi said of a given situation – start by doing what’s necessary, then what’s possible, and then suddenly you are doing the impossible! Action research was used in the school improvement project and demonstrates how action research can help us reshape our present and our future. It is fraught with Freire’s argument that hope is an ontological need but that it must be anchored with action (1970).



Photo credit: Lana Patterson

### **The Cree-ative School Based Collaborators**

In March 2008, the Charlebois Community School hosted a two-day session where school-based participants listened as Elders shared stories of lived experiences in Cree. In terms of Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, the local staff helped identify and invite Elders who would provide a link to the school. In the end, we laughed with them, cried with them and thanked them for sharing their stories. The Principal, Garry Finlay (front left), and action researcher, Lily McKay-Carriere (front right) witnessed the powerful gathering. Participants in the back row from, left to right included: Audrey Fiddler, Penny Settee, Hilda Thommes, Donna Goulet, Jodi Shaw, Kevin Wadell (technician), Bertha Young, Helen Sayies, Darlene Carriere, Bev Cheechoo, Bertha McKay, Freda Carriere, Debbie Thomas, Rhoda Buck, Wilma McKay and Debbie Deschambeault. Missing are Lana Patterson and Ethel Dorion.

# Section Two (*NISO*) – Reconnaissance: “*Ekawina ceskwa pagicik*”

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*A community Elder that I interviewed about revitalizing Cree in our school insisted “Ekawina ceskwa pagicik.” It was a quiet command (for all of us) not to give up yet.*

*Louisa Buck, 2008*

## BACK TO THE CIRCLE

In our semi-remote northern community, Elders are known for the oral stories they share. They are the keepers of traditional knowledge. Through oral tradition, their powerful messages continue to be passed on from generation to generation. Goulet (2007) validates the unique role of oral tradition as a practice in Aboriginal cultures and as a foundation of teaching which has shaped identities for centuries. “*Ahcunoogehinu*: legends, myths ... *acimohinu*: stories of activities ... and *ahtotumohinu*: stories of event” are examples of Cree narrative structures that have specific purposes in Cree oral tradition. According to Goulet (Guest Speaker, La Ronge, 2008), they are stories that develop a sense of identity. We wanted to invite students, the next and most recent generation, back to the circle of teachings but soon realized that the biggest challenge confronting us was intergenerational language loss. Transmission of knowledge in the Aboriginal language from Elder to child is impossible when the child is disconnected from the language. The collaboration between Elders from our community and staff from our school played a significant role in seeking a way to integrate Elder stories into the kindergarten to grade 3 Cree language curriculum and instruction. By providing support to teachers, we helped welcome students back to the circle of Aboriginal ways of knowing.

## *EKAWINA CESKWA PAGICIK*

Community-based research meant an opportunity to incorporate local cultural practices into the curriculum. The Cree and Métis community of Cumberland House is well known for its natural habitat. For over three centuries of recorded history, the people have relied on the land for survival. The water, the forest and the land have provided generously to traditional resource users. They are marks of a historical lifestyle that had not been seen as offering Cree print resources in our classrooms or catalogued in our library. Steele (1991) found in Lipka et al. (1998, p. 67) that schools can no longer remain as isolated structures within Indigenous communities but should rather be seen as representational of the people, as centres of what he calls “wise schooling.” One of the Elders I interviewed expressed that, “When there is no language, the culture fails to be transmitted: the feeling, the language, the advice.” In terms of the language, she also said, “*Ekawina ceskwa pagicik*” (Community Elder Louisa Buck, personal communication, February 2008). It was a quiet command (for all of us) not to give up yet on the Cree language. Encouragement from the community Elder gave me hope.

### Louisa Buck

Action Researcher Lily McKay-Carriere listens as the Elder shares stories of lived experiences. Along with few others who carry on the traditional art in the community, Louisa Buck (seated left) is well known for her bead work. *Nimigistahigan* or I Am Beading (see Figure 7) will carry on the cultural art through the curriculum. Along with other Elders, she gave a quiet command (for all of us) not to give up yet ... "*Ekawina ceskwa pagicik.*"



Photo credit: Lana Patterson

## PROTOCOL

The protocol in approaching Elders as underscored by Friesen (University of Regina, 2007), was applied in all our actions:

*Elders may take issue with being asked to sign a consent form. They value an open and trusting relationship that does not need a formal agreement. The researcher will need to negotiate the role of the Elder in community-based research in such a way that the Elder is not offended but is clear about what the researcher wants (advice about the research, collaborative participation in the research, or participation as a subject of the research). The most commonly-used terms in the Aboriginal ethics literature are respect and reciprocity. Action researchers involved in community-based research need to demonstrate how they will show respect for the realities of the community, the cultural values, and community structures. And they need to show how the research will benefit the community not only the researcher. (p. 6)*

We adhered to local Aboriginal protocols in engaging Elders. Local staff identified Elders from the community according to age, Cree language fluency, demonstrated skills and practices. With little deliberation on what constituted an Elder and consideration of language loss, they were personally invited to link with the school. Our Elders speak fluent Cree, have rich land-based life experiences and remember stories, legends and traditions.

*They preserve a rich history, while living and embodying Aboriginal knowledge.*

*Cordoba, 2005*



Photo credit: Lana Patterson

### Josephine Carriere

Josephine Carriere (left) is another skilled bead worker but it was her Rabbit Snaring or *Tapagewin* story that was developed into a Sequence Unit (see Figure 10). It teaches that a bowl of rabbit soup for two little girls meant skilled outdoor survival!



Photo credit: Lana Patterson

### **Evelyn Kadachuk**

Evelyn Kadachuk shared a lived experience of a duck hunt. In the Three of Us Hunting or *Ninistinan Easwaygeyak* (see Figure 11), a popular fall activity is depicted. By chance, Evelyn's accurate shot landed a duck right into the boat!

## A CIRCLE OF COURAGE

The two-day Elders' Gathering was a powerful experience where all four components of the *Circle of Courage* (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Bockern, 1990) were at play. The Elders modeled mastery by sharing knowledge through oral tradition in the Cree language. They displayed generosity in giving of their time and lived experiences in response to our invitation. The narrative evaluations completed by the participants at the Elders' gathering indicated that a strong sense of belonging had been created. In terms of teaching, the Elders had fostered independence by permitting us to represent their stories in a teachable classroom format. Developed by a group of North American Aboriginal professors, the *Circle of Courage* is a model representative of traditional North American Aboriginal teachings. The storytelling had created a strong base in terms of how to support teachers in the Cree immersion/bilingual programs to integrate Elder stories into curriculum and instruction. The *Circle of Courage* model served as a natural frame of reference.

## BILASH SECOND LANGUAGE INSTRUCTIONAL METHOD

When local Elders agreed to collaborate with our school, their stories would ultimately become classroom resources that we could collectively call our own. For resources to be made for, by and with the Cree people of our community, we required support in terms of a second language acquisition model. We drew on the work of Bilash (2004), whose second language acquisition approach is similar to that of Supahan & Supahan (2001).

When Supahan & Supahan researched ways to revitalize a dying language, they used a five-step communication-based instruction based on a *Redwood Area World Languages Model Project*. Their approach was to emphasize the traditional oral form of the native language, with a focus on natural communication between people. The five steps include: setting the stage, comprehensible input, guided practise, independent practice and assessment. They remind teachers "that there is a process we can follow to learn or teach a language" and that "we cannot expect students to know a part of language until we as teachers have first modeled it many times and then given our students an opportunity to practise it, first with our assistance and then on their own." (p. 197)

The Bilash Second Language Instructional Method (BSLIM) (2004) expands on the work of the Supahans (2001). It is a method that incorporates activities that appeal to Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (1993) and integrates many applied theories and concepts of learning. The Sequence uses a structured spiral curriculum of daily review and recycling of vocabulary in familiar and new contexts for 5-15 minutes per day over an 8-10 day span. In our school, the Cree teachers have been involved in the creation of Sequences. For each Sequence, they select seven

words that are then generated into visuals, flash cards, games, songs and activities in the Cree language (see Appendices 2 and 3). These resources are used not only to introduce the new content, but also to practice, review and use it in fun ways. Various forms of carefully selected teacher guided student engagement are required in the initial days. Then the student is slowly weaned away from the teacher guidance and is expected to create pair and individual output projects as proof of learning.

As a classroom teacher, I had personal experience with the Bilash Second Language Instructional Method. I had witnessed the spiral learning process of the instructional method that goes from simple to complex and understood it as a design to help students learn in any language. Some of the other school-based Cree-ative collaborators had also received previous Sequence training and experience using BSLIM. For other practitioners, the summer project would be a new experience. By tapping into the Indigenous ways of knowing in our community and harnessing the knowledge into Sequences, we hoped to expand our understanding of language and culture in education. For certain, we wanted to provide an array of literary resources for our students.

## CREE LITERACY

One way of breaking down the barriers to ongoing Cree language instruction is to increase the amount of reading materials for students and teachers, and Sequences make it possible to generate booklets. “From our Aboriginal Elders we learn our histories, languages, traditions, cultures, arts, medicines, sciences, and how to survive; their stories and experiences teach us who we are, where we come from and guide us in visioning for the future” (Cordoba, p. 2). Storybooks that build identity and increase Cree literacy are needed. Australian researchers estimate that children who encounter print in their homes and make a smooth transition to reading in the school have read and remembered almost 200 books before they enter kindergarten (Holdaway as cited in Bilash, 2004). In contrast, “There are not even 200 stories written for children in any Cree dialect” (Bilash, pp. 8-9). An inclusive approach to education gave promise to booklets to serve a dual purpose.

## GRADED INTERGENERATIONAL DISRUPTION SCALE

While funds from the McDowell Foundation supported Elder involvement in the three-week summer project, decentralized Second Language and Community School funds were earmarked for the summer work. The financial support at the school, divisional and provincial levels deems recognition for the support of the short-term high-impact project. It was an opportunity to empower our school and community to increase literacy support at stages 4 and 5 of Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (Fishman, 1991). The eight stages of Fishman’s Scale help communities locate the range of language use in their community:

Stage 8 – The minority language is used in selective workplaces. Only seniors speak the minority language.

Stage 7 – minority language is used in selective workplaces. The minority language is used by seniors, for rituals and in modest intergenerational visiting; language users are beyond child-bearing age.

Stage 6 – The minority language is used in selective workplaces. The minority language is used in interfamily interaction between generations and between families.

Stage 5 – The minority language is used in selective workplaces. There is guided literacy development in the home, school and community in the minority language.

Stage 4 – The minority language is used as the language of instruction in the elementary school complying with compulsory education laws.

Stage 3 – The minority language is used in selective workplaces.

Stage 2 – The minority language is used in lower governmental services and in the media.

Stage 1 – The minority language is used in many occupations, in governmental and media efforts and as the language of instruction at the post-secondary level.

## STORY UPON STORY

Clandinin, Pushor and Orr (2007) underscore the power of narrative inquiry as an insightful research method for it is in telling our own stories that we learn more about ourselves. In dialogical situations, it is essential for people to critically examine their world. Stories that grab the attention of “who cares?” and “so what?” situations and make justifications clearly visible to others are at the heart of narrative inquiry and changing landscapes. Narrative inquiry is a conceptualization that is based on the “Deweyian (1938) notion that life is education” (Clandinin et al., p. 22). It helps practitioners examine their own practice in terms of educational landscapes and provides insight on how the research method addresses “who cares?” and “so what?” situations.

# Section Three (*NISTO*) – Methodology: The Seasons of the Project

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*The universe is revealed to me not as a space, imposing a massive presence to which I can adapt, but as a scope, a domain which takes shape as I act upon it.*

Freire, 1970

## ACTION RESEARCH

Through action research, I facilitated a working relationship between Elders and teachers. The gathering was reminiscent of storytellers from the past who taught through oral tradition while we listened. It propelled me into community-based research that Reitsma-Street, Peredo, Chen and McHugh (2003) describe as knowledge that “comes from and belongs to many; so too does the search to understand complex issues and to promote social justice become the responsibility and accomplishment of many” (p. 39). I drew on school and community-based expertise where the methodological approaches to anthropology endorsed by Menzies (2001) dispels the “me” notion of a researcher who comes in, gets information and leaves without truly experiencing life at the community level. Rather, it creates the “me to we” concept of fulfilling research needs that “will only make a meaningful contribution if researchers change their approach so that it becomes part of a process of decolonization” (p. 21).

Action research includes local stakeholders as co-researchers who participate in weaving together local and professional perspectives to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a community. The approach also tests and validates knowledge through iterative cycles of reflection and action, increasing people’s capacities to act on their own behalf to improve their lives, and seeking to create a more just, more democratic world (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). This type of research is carried out by those involved in it, by the insiders, those who are engaged in and who are committed to the situation, thus impacting reflection, our own practice and engagement. Talking about my research with “critical colleagues” (Holly, Arhar & Kasten, 2001), provided me with challenging and useful feedback. The interaction engaged me in reflective practice and helped me analyze the situation as it unfolded.

## NARRATIVE INQUIRY

A method known as narrative inquiry encouraged dialogue and helped us make sense of our collaboration. Narrative inquiry is a complex design defined as:

*A view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful.*

Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 22

The research method begins with justification; a personal, practical or social reason for the work. It is a process that wrestles the researcher into seeing from a multiplicity of lenses and requires careful analysis of the situation from all angles. Wakefulness to

the phenomenon, or “the what,” ultimately shapes educators and positions them in the landscape. Through careful analysis and meaningful interpretation, the collection of field texts helps researchers understand their own work. Understandings heighten when researchers position their own work alongside the work of others with themes that connect with and give strength to their narrative inquiry. The final result of the researcher’s work and a time for ideas to come alive is the unique conceptualization of ideas chiselled out of being part of the story.

The stories must give special consideration to ethics, and representing the story has to be inclusive of the three commonplaces of: temporality – to understand that people and events have a past, present and a future and are always in transition; sociality – to be concerned with personal and social conditions; and place – the exact location. Narrative inquiry is a concept that borrows on the notion of the four common places developed by Schwaab (1978): “teacher, learner, subject matter and milieu - to deal with the complexity of curriculum” as found in Clandinin et al. (2007, p. 23). For practitioners, the commonplaces of narrative inquiry are at simultaneous interplay with an instructional landscape. Upon critical reflection and study, they move into action to transform the situation with which they are not satisfied. Freire (1970) explains it by saying that the universe is revealed to me not as a space, imposing a massive presence to which I can adapt, but as a scope, a domain which takes shape as I act upon it.

## PHASE 1 – SPRING (*SIGWAN*): REACHING OUT TO ELDERS

*For every Elder who dies, an entire library burns down.*

*Author unknown*

### **A DECOLONIZING APPROACH**

In the 21st century, there is an increased and panic-like interest in gathering up information from Elders so that their stories can be written down and passed on to future generations. The panic is understood because for every Elder who dies, a slogan reminds us that an entire library burns down. In contrast, a library can be built from stories collected and written.

### ***TELLING STORIES FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS***



Photo credit: Lana Patterson

#### **Melanie Deschambeault**

The *Epigitek Ciman* (Steamboat) is a sequence (see Figure 9) which covers the steamboat era of transportation. It was a period of history lived by Melanie Deschambeault.



**Napoleon McKay**

*Wanigeskanawa* is a unit about Traditional Place Names (see Figure 4) based on Napoleon McKay's knowledge of the land. He shared mapping expertise, Cree place names of traditional territories and stories associated with the areas that have long been known to tradition resource users in our families.

Photo credit: Lana Patterson

When we invited Elders to our school (see Appendix 1) in the spring of 2008, we were captivated by their stories. We listened to them, laughed with them, cried with them and thanked them. The Elders consented to have their stories electronically captured on video for the purpose of Cree language classroom material development.

A school-based collaborator recognized that, "Elders in their wisdom play a vital role through their magnificent stories rich in language and culture ... I also learn from each story, as it validates my understanding and reinforces the importance of continual exposure to the language" (school-based collaborator #1, March 2008). In other words, the ways of knowing demonstrated by the Elders inspired the staff. Narrative evaluations revealed that participants with generational language loss (Fishman, 1991) looked within themselves and acknowledged language loss but expressed the importance of holding on to our language.

*It gave the Elders a chance to share personal experiences in their own language Cree, which many times might be hard for them to do because there are so many people who don't understand Cree. I sense that they took great pride in being a part of helping to get our language back ... Although I didn't understand the stories, I enjoyed being part of listening and watching the Elders. I take pride in being part of this. I feel a greater sense of importance for our language. Many times, younger people don't understand because they have lost their language, how important it is. This whole experience has given me more respect for my language.*

*School-based collaborator #2, March 2008*

### **THE GATHERING LINKED THE SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY**



**Clifford Carriere**

Clifford Carriere shared his lived experience of an encounter with a bear in *Maskwa Acimowin* or Bear Story (see Figure 1). He credits Elders from another generation for teaching him safety measures that he applied in the situation.

Photo credit: Lana Patterson



**Bella McGillvary**

Bella McGillvary shared her childhood duties about life on the trapline in *Wanigewaskihk Atoskewina* or Trapline Chores (see Figure 2). Survival meant that everyone in the family helped out with the work.

Photo credit: Lana Patterson

The spring/sigwan gathering of Elders to tell stories of lived experiences was carried out as a concentrated plan designed to link the school and the community. It created awareness of a situation and helped us understand that further action could lead to change. The event left me in awe of how the Elders naturally inspired the staff. Inclusion was not just about transmitting information but about instilling hope. “I do realize how much we have lost our language and culture and how we need to give every effort to bring it back to our people. If we could work on bringing our language back, we would benefit from it” (School-based collaborator #3, March 2008).

Prior to reconvening as a group for the summer project, the school-based collaborators gathered to carefully revisit the digital videos. The exercise helped them generate discussion about Cree-ative ways of incorporating the stories into units of study. There was also a recommendation for continued Elder involvement into the summer. In other words, it was deemed important for the Elders as storytellers to collaborate with the school-based staff. Filled with Aboriginal ways of knowing, the stories held promise of becoming innovative work.

## PHASE 2 – SUMMER (*NIPIN*): COLLABORATION

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

*Mead as cited in Bopp & Bopp, 2006*



Photo credit: Lana Patterson

### **Thomas Laliberte**

The *Inini Maskigi* or Indian Medicine Sequence Unit (see Figure 5) is based on the traditional Indigenous knowledge shared by Thomas Laliberte. The sequence unit provides a snapshot of ways to treat various ailments using natural products.



Photo credit: Lana Patterson

### **Les Carriere**

Les Carriere demonstrated tools that are used for trapping. Sharing a lived experience led to the creation of the *Wanige Apacitawina* or Trapline Tools Sequence (see Figure 6).

The summer/*nipin* season was a demanding but enjoyable phase of research. As the action researcher in the project, I was charged with coordinating the on-the-ground research in the development of eleven BSLIM Sequences and organizing the collaborative process between Elders and staff. The participants in the school-based staff collaborator category included local musicians, artists, teachers and support staff.

In view of the multitude of stories that had been captured, our summer task was enormous. It required school-based collaborators to select stories for construction into classroom material. The stories provided insights into the history and culture of our community. They told of lifestyle patterns and overcoming adversity through sheer determination. They recalled traditional technologies and survival. There were stories of a spiritual interconnectedness with *Ogicitipenicigew*, the Master Creator and provider of all things. Memories recalled the sport, recreational and cultural activities practised by the Cree-Metis.

## SHARING INDIGENOUS WAYS OF KNOWING



### John Carriere

*Ninanaskomaw* or I Thank Him (see Figure 8) captures themes of interconnectedness and spirituality that came across in John Carriere's stories.

Photo credit: Lana Patterson

### Horace Greenleaf

In *Nigiskisin* or I Remember (see Figure 3), a collection of memories shared by Horace Greenleaf provides a glimpse of historical and traditional practices that we identify with.



Photo credit: Lana Patterson

By allowing us to tap into the Indigenous ways of knowing in our community and harnessing that knowledge into Sequences, the Elders helped all of us expand our understanding of education. It was clear that we had taken action in order to improve our situation and by doing so, our efforts held Mead's promise to "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has" (Bopp & Bopp, 2006, p. 64).

## SHARING CIRCLES

Narrative inquiry was utilized in addressing the question of how to support teachers in the Cree immersion/bilingual programs in the integration of Elder stories into curriculum/instruction. School-based participants were asked to log experiences, activities and meetings with Elders. The daily reflections served as a spin-off for focus group meetings known as sharing circles. They were held at the start of the day. Each morning, we opened with a prayer to ask for guidance in doing our work. Inquiring into stories and narrating them is an art based on perspectives, reflections and emotions in two different ways. First, there was literal inquiry into the stories and reflection on how to fit them into a structured Sequence Unit. Secondly, there were personal and group narrative inquiries which created knowledge that belonged to a team. Smith (2000) in Reitsma-Street et al. (2003, p. 39) argues such knowledge belongs "to the whole group 'who hold it' for the benefit of the whole group."

The sharing circle was utilized as a technique to share ideas or to brainstorm for solutions. On some days, it felt like we were operating at a Hollywood pace in a northern village. The incorporation of video, audio and print was an enormous production and the school-based collaborators were all at different learning planes. In terms of training others, the experienced classroom teachers took a leadership role in the production!

## **TEAMWORK**

Six school-based staff with experience in teaching Sequences naturally gave leadership. They emerged as community action research mentors to others in the collaborative summer project team of 15 workers. For me, it was another critical step, “whereby the direction of the research project can be steered toward a collaborative or integrated process, rather than becoming hierarchical or disjointed” (Moorlag et al., 2008, p. 199). A strength-based pattern of help emerged, and I observed how those with Sequence training subsequently turned around to share their knowledge with others. It was at this point where I felt that I had gained meaningful entry as a researcher; it was a powerful experience to witness the members move from being a committee to being a team (Personal journal, 2008).

# Section Four (*NEWO*) – Learning From the Action Research Cycles: The 11 Sequences

*If you don't tell your children who they are and what they are, they won't know. How can they be proud of what they don't know?*

Salish Elder, 1980

## CROSSING NEW PATHS

Curriculum development required community Elders and educational developers from the school-based team to cross paths on a regular basis. Elder input was essential at all levels of curriculum development. Other than seeking word meaning from community Elders, we had never included them in curriculum development. In contrast to the widespread practice of transcribing Elder stories into English print and the televising of Elder interviews with Aboriginal language subtitles, the team took a completely new approach by incorporating the Elders' ways of knowing into a second language acquisition model and structure. Throughout construction of the Sequences, interviews between Elder and school-based collaborators took place. It was a new format (see Figure 1) and when the first Sequence was shared with an Elder, we did not know what the outcome would be. The following is an excerpt of a collaboration meeting between an Elder and a teacher:

*I met with the Elder to explain how his story inspired a sequence. I explained the planning process, its limitations of seven key vocabulary words which were excerpts from his storyline. I think he may have been slightly disappointed that the story in its entirety could not be told. I shared how the words included an action to help with kinaesthetic learners as well as the production of a song for musical learners. I told him I attempted to include a safety component in the verse based on the teaching of the Elders. I felt it went well. I look forward to the next visit where I will get to share the visuals. We discussed his encounter with the bear to get more details so the sequence can closely parallel the actual experience and be realistic.*

School-based collaborator #4, 2008


<b>Maskwa Acimowin</b>	<i>Maskwa Acimowin</i> (Sung to the tune of Itsy Bitsy Spider)
	Maskwa, maskwa, maskwa Ni-papetawaw Tapwe ni-mana waskawin Egosi keteyak Kagi witamawick Maskwa, maskwa, maskwa Ni-papetawaw
The <i>Maskwa Acimowin</i> or The Bear Story is a lived experience of a young hunter who takes a nap during a goose hunt. He hears a bear sneak up to him, sniff, drool, breathe over him and touch his chest. Remembering the words of Elders, he remains still and the bear eventually backs away.	<i>Note: A sample verse from the song written for the Sequence Unit is seen above.</i>

Figure 1. *Maskwa Acimowin*

## SEVEN WORDS

For the school-based participants, collaborating with Elders was a new experience. Capturing the essence of stories meant careful attention to detail and listening to Elders at another level. Upon collaborating with an Elder, a participant reflected on the *Wanigewaskihk Atoskewina* – Trapline Chores Sequence Unit (see Figure 2):

*I did the first interview with the Elder. She appreciates the effort we, the teachers, are doing in trying to save our language. I think she was a little surprised to see how much work can be done with one interview. She only wished that work such as this was “done a long time ago.” I made the sequence with a lot of thought put into it. I wanted the vocabulary, pictures (visuals) and song to portray the life on a trapline as lived by a young girl. I wanted to make sure that I did justice to her story. She was very impressed with the layout of the sequence and all the material that goes with the seven words that I picked from her story. She enjoyed the song that we wrote. I had musicians sing the song for her. She was really amazed by the work that was done from her story.*

*School-based collaborator #5, 2008*


<p><b>Wanigewaskihk Atoskewina</b></p>  <p>Wanigewaskihk Atoskewina or Trapline Chores tells of a lived experience on the trapline in the springtime. They include daily chores of trap setting, hauling water, skinning a muskrat, chopping wood, making a fire and cooking.</p>	<p><i>Wanigewaskihk Atoskewina</i> (Sung to the tune of Are You Sleeping?)</p> <p>Niwanigan, niwanigan Ka-sigwak, ka-sigwak Wanigewaskihk, Wanigewaskihk Nitatoskan, nitatoskan</p> <p><i>Note: A sample verse from the song written for the Sequence Unit is seen above.</i></p>
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Figure 2. *Wanigewaskihk Atoskewina*

## HOME VISITS

Where necessary, flexibility in accommodating collaboration was evident. Home visits were made to the homes when required. In one instance, the Elder’s family was part of the collaboration between the Elder and upon reviewing the *Nigiskisin* Sequence (see Figure 3), the Elder:

*... was very humbled and so proud of the pictures that came out of his story. The pictures capture how it was long ago and how they lived to get food on their table. How they got together for entertainment such as jigging, square dancing and storytelling. He said he was so proud of what we are doing to help our children learn and keep our language alive, through these Sequences ... (“kimamicihinawaw oma ka itotamek ewicihyahigok awasisak aga kita wanigiskisicik”). He especially loved the song. He kept laughing and saying it was such a cute song. He even called his wife and son to have a look at the pictures. He was very proud and said, “Keep it up and teach our children the Cree language.”*

*School-based collaborator #6, 2008*


<p><b>Nigiskisin</b></p>	<p><i>Nigiskisin</i> (Sung to the tune of Mary Had a Little Lamb)</p>
	<p>Nigiskisin emacikik Emacikik, emacikik Nigiskisin emacikik Minsciwacagasihk</p>
<p>An Elder recalls memories of a lived experience in the Nigiskisin or I Remember Sequence. He remembers gardening, moose hunting, duck hunting, dancing (jigging), storytelling and fiddle music.</p>	<p><i>Note: A sample verse from the song written for the Sequence Unit is seen above.</i></p>

Figure 3. *Nigiskisin*

## TRADITIONAL MAPPING

The Elders also shared knowledge and ownership of traditional territories and mapping expertise. Cree place names were given to areas long known to tradition resource users, and stories were associated to the place names such as in trapline place names or *Wanigeskanawa* (see Figure 4). The need for accuracy in place names required more than three visits with the Elder as described in the following excerpts:

*First visit to the school – When he saw the video for the first time, he was pleased to be able to provide so much information for us to use ... the life style concerning language and culture that we need to get back. But the main thing he wanted to do was to name where people lived, trapped, fished, hunted, travelled, and to be a hard worker.*

*The second visit to the school consisted of him seeing the vocabulary and song that were made from his story. He confirmed that, “This is the way it should be taught.” The rest of his visits were done at home confirming map areas, being accurate, using large and small maps, and having him repeat the names over and over for the correct pronunciation and spelling.*

*The third school visit was meant to confirm and show sentences. Aside from the sequence, the Elder requested a story book to be made from his stories. That means to take one particular trapline area, an important meeting place that was so significant to trappers at that time, and pass that knowledge on and remember that is the way of life of a trapper, Nehinaw pimatisiwin.*

*School-based collaborator #7, 2008*


<p><b>Wanigeskanawa</b></p>	<p>Sequence.</p>
	<p><i>Wanigeskanawa</i> (Sung to the tune of This Old Man)</p>
<p><i>Acini Sipihk, Kwaskwepiciganansihk, Mescacagani Payistigohk, Minscigwacagasihk, Paskisigan Ka-agotihk, Sagitawatagahk, Sasagi Sagahiganihk</i> are the Cree names of mapping areas known to the Elder who recalls them in the <i>Wanigeskanawa</i> or Trapline Place Names Sequence. The places are identified in English on government maps but known to traditional resource users in Cree. The Unit Sequence is about a Cree trapper who lives off the land and travels by dog team to trap in these areas. A storybook was created to accompany the</p>	<p>Nehinaw owanigew Nehinawe pimatisiw Sipwetapastimew Wanigew Acini Sipihk</p>
	<p><i>Note: A sample verse from the song written for the Sequence Unit is seen above.</i></p>

Figure 4. *Wanigeskanawa*

## DEEPLY ROOTED

Information on medicinal use of plants from the land was also retrieved but not directly from the woman who practiced. Rather, the woman’s husband came to speak.

*The Elders used our natural surroundings to make medicine that helped cure so many adults and children from so many ailments. The Elder is especially proud that his wife still uses it and that even strangers go to her for help. He shared how he uses his visions to help each and every family in times of need. I have a lot of respect towards this couple and to all Elders. This is one thing my parents taught us.*


*School-based collaborator #8, March 2008*

Using natural products as medicine is a “deeply rooted” local tradition as revealed in the *Inini Maskigi* or Indian Medicine Sequence (see Figure 5). The application of one form of knowing confirmed that we were decolonizing the curriculum through story and narrative inquiry.

*From the CD I picked up several medicines that were used by gifted Elders that used local plants and roots to make medicines long ago, before they had access to white man’s medicine. These medicines were widely used to treat everyone from babies to Elders. The reason why I chose this was because of my own grandmother who was taught some of them by her friend. But, because she lived in the village, the local authorities at that time warned her not to use them. She was given a fine of \$35.00 to promise not to use them. It was thought at the time that they were practising witchcraft. I developed a keen interest in this, because of the local Elder, Lena Stewart, who had saved my youngest daughter’s life by using this one particular medicine when she had whooping cough. I am forever grateful to her, even though she has since passed on. Before I started I did a lot of research on the net and library for medicinal purposes of certain plants. There were many times I felt so discouraged and just about gave up but I just couldn’t let it go. My grandmother never gave up and neither would have Lena.*

*School-based collaborator #9, August 2008*

***Inini Maskigi***



The *Inini Maskigi* or Indian Medicine Sequence gives a snapshot of ways to treat various ailments using natural products such as plant roots, bear grease, spruce gum, skunk gland and powder from spruce and birch trees.

***Inini Maskigi***  
(Sung to the tune of *Kispin Kisagihin*)

Kispin ki-otagigomin  
Wigesapoy apacita  
Kispin ki-otagigomin  
Wigesapoy apacita  
Kispin kitagosin  
Inini maskigi apacita

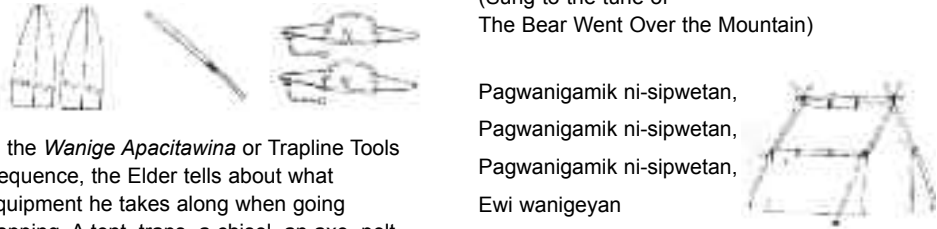
*Note: A sample verse from the song written for the Sequence Unit is seen above.*

Figure 5. *Inini Maskigi*

## ELDERS AS INSPECTORS

A big challenge in our summer work came in finding or illustrating visuals for the Sequences. Many of the visuals about the lived experiences are not commonplace. Image searches for many of the *Inini Maskigi* or natural Indian medicines items were not found. The trapline tools visuals for the *Wanige Apacitawina* Sequence (see Figure 6) were also hard to locate. Therefore, the role of the Elders as supervisors and inspectors of the artwork for accuracy was of paramount importance in the development of the Sequences.

***Wanige Apacitawina***



In the *Wanige Apacitawina* or Trapline Tools Sequence, the Elder tells about what equipment he takes along when going trapping. A tent, traps, a chisel, an axe, pelt stretchers, a knife and a spear are among the tools and equipment he needs for trapping.

***Wanige Apacitawina***  
(Sung to the tune of  
The Bear Went Over the Mountain)

Pagwanigamik ni-sipwetan,  
Pagwanigamik ni-sipwetan,  
Pagwanigamik ni-sipwetan,  
Ewi wanigeyan

*Note: A sample verse from the song written for the Sequence Unit is seen above.*

Figure 6. *Wanige Apacitawina*

# A LEGACY

Sheer appreciation was expressed for the work accomplished by the team when the Elder for *Nimigistahigan* (see Figure 7) saw the final Sequence kit. The Elder’s legacy as a traditional artisan had been sculpted into the educational landscape by local practitioners. The life story of a bead worker will now be remembered in visuals, song, games and story. In other words, the team managed to capture a living legacy of a local traditional artist in a Cree-ative way.


<b><i>Nimigistahigan</i></b>	<i>Nimigistahigan</i> (Sung to the tune of A Hunting We Will Go)
	<i>Nimigistahigan</i> <i>Nimigistahigan</i> Tante? Tante? pogo migisak
<p><i>Nimigistahigan</i> is a story about a bead worker who is wondering where all her beading items are; beads, needle, thread, moose hide, scissors, vamps and thimble.</p>	<p><i>Note: A sample verse from the song written for the Sequence Unit is seen above.</i></p>

Figure 7. *Nimigistahigan*

# ATMOSPHERE

Central to the research method throughout the three-week summer project was the interaction between the researcher, Elders and school-based Cree-ative collaborators. Development of the teaching material had to meet the expectations of all streams. Therefore, changes to Sequences were made in response to Elder input at any given stage or upon recommendation from team members or the researcher. For example, the Elder preferred *Ogicitipenicigew* over *Gise Manito* (Great Spirit) in the *Ninanaskomaw* Sequence (see Figure 8). The term alludes to the Grand Master of all creation, and the substitution of one word had a domino effect on the entire Sequence Unit. Changes had to be made on all the computerized files and hard copy sets of the Sequence Unit that had been considered complete. Despite the intensity of tasks that demanded completion over a short time frame or the challenges we faced, there was a positive atmosphere.

*The experience that I receive from the other team members is comforting because at certain times we laugh at our mistakes which make us even stronger in our determination to complete the project. I also was listening to the social interactions of each person. If we didn't have a good time with each other, there would be a cloud over us. I really enjoy my time spent here and all the new words I am learning.*

*School-based collaborator #10, 2008*


<b><i>Ninanaskomaw</i></b>	<i>Ninanaskomaw</i> (Sung to the tune of He's Got the Whole World in His Hands)
	<i>Ninanaskomaw askiy ohci</i> <i>Ninanaskomaw askiy ohci</i> <i>Ninanaskomaw askiy ohci</i> <i>Ogicitipenicigew</i>
<p><i>Ninanaskomaw</i> is a story that acknowledges God for the earth, animals, trees, water, Elders and children. It emphasizes interconnectedness and spirituality and recognizes <i>Ogicitipenicigew</i> as the One in control of all things.</p>	<p><i>Note: A sample verse from the song written for the Sequence Unit is seen above.</i></p>

Figure 8. *Ninanaskomaw*

## RELIVING THE PAST

In reliving the past, a mother and daughter reminisce about the steamboat era in the *Epigitek Ciman* Sequence (see Figure 9). As a child by her mother's side, the teacher recalls the sights, sounds and excitement of the arrival of a steamboat in the village.

*When I was seven, my mother and I went down the river to meet the steamboat. They used to unload lots of things like flour, sugar, crates and lots of utensils that we could use. Passengers were coming in, resting, continuing on their journey and others were getting on from here. You could hear them coming by the cut-off or just before they started, tooting the horn.*

Reliving the past with an elderly mother helped the teacher “Cree-ate” a unit for future generations. With support from the school-based team, the Steamboat Sequence was essentially developed in the Elder's home. She took pride in her daughter's work at all stages of development.

*I was able to share my work with her and she was extremely pleased to see that I was drawing images of her story. She realized that her story or stories are important and that they have value and will be more willing to share in the future. I sang her the tune and she giggled and laughed and explained in more detail.*

*School-based collaborator #11, 2008*



<b><i>Epigitek Ciman</i></b>	<b><i>Epigitek Ciman</i></b> (Sung to the tune of The Wheels on the Bus)
	Epigitek ciman petagwan, petagwan, petagwan, Epigitek ciman petagwan, Kaministigominahikoskahk
The <i>Epigitek Ciman</i> or Steamboat Sequence tells of a young girl and her mother as they hurry to meet the steamboat. They see the people arrive, see the goods and food unloaded and hauled away. In the end, they both get on the steamboat.	
	<i>Note: A sample verse from the song written for the steamboat Sequence Unit is seen above.</i>

Figure 9. *Epigitek Ciman*

## HUMAN CATALYSTS

When I asked how I could support teachers in the Cree immersion/bilingual programs by integrating Elder stories into curriculum/instruction, I discovered the power of including Elders in my practice.

The collaboration proved that Elders “can be tremendous human catalysts in the pursuit of culturally relevant and dynamic programs which are created in concert with the communities they serve. They can provide a voice that will enable schools to become more aware and responsive” (Goulet, 2001). We invited Elders into our school to serve as resource people on previous occasions, to showcase culture, to be guest speakers in classes or to help as Cree language helpers in the classrooms. They remembered stories and legends, traditions and life on the land, and preserved

a rich history, while living and embodying Aboriginal knowledge. However, I had never engaged with Elders in inclusive curriculum practice within a school setting until I started to conduct research. A rabbit snaring story (see Figure 10) shared by an Elder now illuminates knowledge in a unit that is part of a language program.


<p><b>Tapagewin</b></p>  <p><i>Tapagewin</i> is a story about two girls who go rabbit snaring in the bush. When they are checking their snares, they discover that they snared rabbits. They make tasty rabbit soup and go snaring again.</p>	<p><i>Tapagewin</i> (Sung to the tune of Found a Peanut)</p> <p>Natagwewak iskwesisak Natagwewak iskwesisak Nitotanan nocimihk Nitotanan nocimihk</p> <p><i>Note: A sample verse from the song written for the Sequence Unit is seen above.</i></p>
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Figure 10. *Tapagewin*

## CIRCLE OF COURAGE

In several daily entries, the school-based collaborators reflected on the learning atmosphere. One teacher who had been taught about the second language instructional method in turn taught another team member. She recalls, “I went over what a Sequence is and what goes inside the package. I showed her my material (Sequence) and explained how it is used” (school-based collaborator, 2008). It was the true practice of the *Circle of Courage* (Brokenleg et al.) whereby those with mastery helped others. An entry posted on Monday, 21 July, 2008, was evidence of this.

*The task that I was assigned to was to get the real idea of what a Sequence consists of and what materials are needed in order for it to be considered a Sequence. I was put to work by Mrs. M. She told me what to cut out and paste. Little did I know that I was making a Sequence, which indeed was a great learning experience and also a hands on activity. There are many learning activities that are included such as songs, games, flashcards and visuals.*

*School-based collaborator #12, 2008*

In light of intergenerational language loss, the role of seasoned teachers was crucial in building a mentoring environment. Experienced members of the school-based team helped a young collaborator with the *Ninistinan Easwaygeyak* (see Figure 11) Sequence.


<p><b>Ninistinan Easwaygeyak Etagwagihk</b></p>  <p>Ninistinan Easwaygeyak is a story about three duck hunters. One of them shoots at a flock of birds flying by and her accurate aim lands the bird right into the boat!</p>	<p><i>Ninistinan Easwaygeyak</i> (Sung to the tune of Michael Row Your Boat Ashore)</p> <p>Ninistinan Easwaygeyak, etagwagihk Ninistinan Easwaygeyak, etagwagihk Cimanihk niposinan, etagwagihk Cimanihk niposinan, etagwagihk</p> <p><i>Note: A sample verse from the song written for the Sequence Unit is seen above.</i></p>
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Figure 11. *Ninistinan Easwaygeyak*

# WIDENING THE CIRCLE OF UNDERSTANDING

The nīpin phase of the research was summarized by school-based collaborators in the form of thick reviews, and the collection of field text revealed a sense of accomplishment. Through teamwork, we created not 10 but 11 Sequences, and the completed tasks instilled a feeling of success. The components of the *Circle of Courage* were vivid in our day-to-day actions and served as key ingredients in making it a summer of successful collaboration. On the last day, all the Sequences were presented by team members. It was an opportunity to showcase and to display the results of three weeks of cooperative learning and genuine teamwork. It was a day of celebration and marked the end of an intensive three-week span. More importantly, it was another historical mark for our school and community. A handful of school-based collaborators from the community had created learning resources that will forever be part of our story. The sense of accomplishment noted by a participant is representative of how others felt.

*All day I wrapped up my Sequence. I am done and does it ever feel good to finally finish my Sequence. I feel that I have accomplished so much. I feel proud that children will be learning what has taken place in the past and now we can utilize the information in a teaching method. This Sequence is used as a tool to educate our young ones and hopefully it will bring a message that we should be proud of our culture and especially our language.*

*School-based collaborator #13, Summer 2008*

The presentations brought closure to the summer project and took me full circle to a comment I read from on the first day we gathered. One of the seasoned teacher participants had noted, “How important we all are to each other, each of us has different skills, knowledge and talents to help hold on to our language” (school-based collaborator #14, Summer 2008). I realized how we had helped each other widen our circle of understanding.

# Section Five (*NIYANAN*) – Discussion of New Understandings and New Insights Into Action Research: In All Seasons

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*The truth about stories is that that's all we are.*

*Thomas King, 2003*

## PHASE 3 – FALL (*TAGWAGIN*): IMPLEMENTATION

*In order to help students know where they are going, we have to teach them where they come from!*

The Sequence Units reflected the traditional lifestyle of the Cree Métis. Stories about beadwork, a bear encounter, trapline chores and tools, rabbit snaring, duck hunting, steamboat transportation, memories, natural Indian medicines, land place names and gratitude to the Creator were implemented in phase three of the overall action research. The *tagwagin* (fall) implementation revealed the impact of the Sequence Units on the students and teachers. At focus group meetings, the teachers became action researchers in their own way by observing, planning, reflecting and acting on situations. They met in PLC groups and the acronym for Professional Learning Community (DuFour, 1998) meetings was also appropriate as Practitioners Learning from Community! As practitioners learning with community, we learned about the emergence of strategies for turning locally eroding ways of knowing into print. The teachers shared observations that affirmed how students benefit from culturally relevant curriculum. The consensus was that in order to help students know where they are going, we have to teach them where they came from. It helped me understand that the process and products of the research project were of equal importance. The blend was an effective way to improve upon our practice and to prepare for students in all seasons.

## PHASE 4 – WINTER (*PIPON*): THE GIFT OF STORY

The fourth phase of my action research journey was in the winter (*pipon*). Reflection upon the gift of story from Elder to child brought me to understand the truth about stories: stories are all we are (King, 2003). The intergenerational connection underscores how inclusion of local knowledge creates a culturally relevant program. The four steps of planning, acting, observing and reflecting that are typically found in action research helped me explore and address issues related to the stories in cycles. The collaborative project on Cree material development gave me the opportunity to discover that in a Cree-ative way.

### UNITY

Revitalizing an endangered Indigenous language is like tying up a lion. The collective strength of unity is analogous to the Cree-ative Collaborators Committee who moved forward to take further action and to turn the stories into a teachable format, in order to help children learn Cree. The action taken at the community level prepared us for Indigenous decolonization where bringing back traditional cultural knowledge in the new society is underscored by Battiste (2000).

The research project helped me understand that applying oral history and ways of knowing into non-traditional and post-colonial contexts involved complex methodological issues and respectful negotiation. Communication was the heart of collaboration between the teachers from the school-based team and the Elders as we strived for balance between story authenticity and creativity in developing the Sequences.

### THE MOOSE IN THE ROOM

The Cree-ative collaborators who rose to the challenge of a summer project included support school-based staff and members of the community. For nine of the 15 school-based collaborators, it meant a new introduction to the moose in the room: the size of work involved in any effort to reversing language shift. Significant leadership by seasoned Cree teachers resulted in intergenerational learning and peer teaching for participants who faced the challenge. Our collective efforts played an active role in training others in the school-based collaborator category. It was an effective way to alleviate the fears of the moose in the room. I was an active participant in welcoming non-teachers and observed that dialogue through sharing circles allowed the circle to widen the understanding about language and culture in our community.

### BEYOND THE SCHOOL

*Sigwan* (spring) helped me understand how Elders “can be tremendous human catalysts in the pursuit of culturally relevant and dynamic programs which are created in concert with the communities they serve. They can provide a voice that will enable schools to become more aware and responsive” (Goulet, 2001). When I asked how I could support teachers in the Cree immersion/bilingual programs by integrating Elder stories into curriculum/instruction, I discovered the power of including Elders in my practice. I knew they remembered stories and legends, traditions and life on the land and that they preserved a rich history, while living and embodying Aboriginal knowledge.

On previous occasions, we invited them into our school to serve as resource people to showcase culture, to be guest speakers in classes, or to help as Cree language helpers in the classrooms. However, I had never engaged with Elders in inclusive curriculum practice within a school setting until I started to conduct research. The action led to inclusive cultural and language practices based on the teachings of Elders and the transformation of the culture of our school. It helped me reflect on Elders as an important part of culturally relevant pedagogy in my practice. Elder teachings had stemmed from my own childhood and I was closely connected to the knowledge. The research helped me realize that the familiarity with the local knowledge had made it hard for me to recognize that I could do things differently with it in my practice. What started as inquiry into stories of lived experiences of Elders ended as inquiry into my own lived experience as a northern Cree person and practitioner. At this point in my practice, I see the connection we make with the Elder stories with a new set of lenses. For many of us, the stories evoke childhood memories and by doing so, they tell our story too, and we feel connected to the curriculum.

## KNOWLEDGE OF THE BIG PICTURE

*Nipin* led us into the creation of authentic curriculum where Elders and school-based participants collaborated. The traditional colonial practices were replaced by meaningful participation of the community in school curriculum. It helped me understand the impact of two critical components of developing culturally relevant curriculum: the power of a committed people who can make change and the power of interconnected supports that helped make things happen.

My focus required a renewed understanding of a marginalized situation and a willingness to articulate the needs of Aboriginal languages at many levels. It is an aspect of my practice that is challenging but if I don't do it, then who will, or who can, or who wants to? I will, but I won't do it alone because I know that closing in on marginalized areas demands the collective strength of practitioners, support staff, community Elders, educational leaders and students. The summer gathering revealed that reversing language shift is an enormous task and confirmed that indigenizing education is rooted in structural change and interconnectedness. In other words, we had to draw support from funding sources which allowed us to set up a temporary infrastructure.

In 2004, Bilash had recognized the need for an infrastructure to support the movement through several stages of reversing language shift in the Cree immersion/bilingual pilot project at our school.

*Implicit in Fishman's eight stages of GIDS is a set of values about literacy and communication that does not entirely fit with Aboriginal cultures. Put another way, the traditions of literacy – built on the assumption that there are writers, illustrators, editors, printers, bookstores, libraries, book clubs, discussion groups – are not present ... But, this small relatively isolated community can in no way afford to build such an infrastructure? Without on-going government grants for up to twenty years creating such an infrastructure will not be possible. (p.14)*

In terms of increasing the content, quality and availability of Cree literacy materials, there is a need for financial support and our summer experience was consistent with the findings of the second language specialist. We improvised with the resources that were available to us and without support from the Northern Lights School Division #113 and the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation, there would have been drastic limitations to the research. When our temporary infrastructure dismantled at the end of the summer, I understood the impossibility of ongoing development at the local level to the degree that I had witnessed over the summer.

In hand with structural support was the participation of a small group of committed individuals known as the Cree-ative collaborators, comprised of school-based collaborators who worked in collaboration with each other and with community elders. To me, the greatest symbol of hope in the continuing effort to reverse language shift truly rests with those who struggle against oppression as exemplified by the Cree-ative collaborators. By seeking justice for an endangered language, I feel that we developed a greater understanding of ourselves by including Elder stories and tunnelling under our own. Through the Elders' stories, we saw ourselves bound by a cultural connection that created a renewed interest in Aboriginal peoples and curriculum development. In this light, inclusivity helped me gain a new perspective in that, by providing solutions to educational inequality, I was also delivering cultural awareness education in an indirect way. St. Denis (2003) cites Hermes, an American Indian educator, in research that explored qualities of effective teachers of American Indians. He found that "more powerful than [teachers'] knowledge of cultural difference is their knowledge of the big picture – the context of socioeconomic and cultural oppression of Native Americans." Simply put, we had participated in a process that created teaching material but, moreover, would forever be able to substantiate the how and why of inclusion to those who shrug their shoulders with a "so what" and "who cares" attitude. In this light, I will forever be grateful to the participants for their willingness to be part of the research. When the team moved forward with the stories, they created a portal for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge through curriculum and instruction. Throughout the summer we continued to reshape our present for the future of students. Elders and school-based staff engaged in active participation fraught with Freire's (1970) argument that hope is an ontological need ... but it must be anchored with action. I am honoured to say that I am part of Cree-ating the curriculum and supporting teachers who are at the front line of decolonizing the curriculum. Ours is a story of how Cree-ative collaboration provides insight into a framework for understanding the possibilities and potential of creative curriculum development in any subject area. My practice rests on working with people who are willing to take risks, have faith and hope in achieving success and are willing to persevere in reclaiming a language in a collaborative manner. The work I have done at our school and in our community is ours and not mine. I have been privileged to work with school and community members in response to language and culture.

Teachers are the passage of traditional knowledge to a new generation and serve as the intergenerational connections between Elder and student. The words of Goulet (2001) embody the actions taken by Elders and teachers throughout all seasons of the action research.

*Effective teachers bring the language and culture of their Aboriginal students into the classroom to enhance learning (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). They learn about the community (Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993), are aware of cultural differences (Deyhle & Swisher), and acquaint themselves with culturally appropriate methodologies and resource materials (Farrell-Racette, Goulet, Pelletier, & Shmon, 1996). Teachers recognize that culture is dynamic and changing, so they incorporate both traditional and contemporary culture in the curriculum (Farrell-Racette et al.; Lipka et al., Miller Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Pewewardy, 1999). Elders help to transform lived curriculum for use in the classroom and school (Lipka, et al., 1998; Tompkins, 1998). Students are seen as assets and their cultural background as strengths (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Pewewardy, 1999). Effective teachers prepare students for life in the modern world without loss of their original culture.*

*Pewewardy, 1999; Tompkins, 1998*

I understood that my role as action researcher helped interconnect the words of an Elder from the spring of 2008 into a school plan that became part of the 2008-09 renewal practices. The Sequence Units affirmed student Aboriginal identity while developing Aboriginal language skills. My personal gratification in knowing that the Sequences created greater levels of language skill development and cultural awareness remain as my greatest reward. Elliot (1991) emphasizes the moral nature of our professional commitment for student learning. In view of ongoing struggles in language revitalization, I concluded that my action was in response to a personal and professional calling.

# Closing – Throwing Pebbles

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In closing, Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed presents a concept of many dimensions that interconnects with pedagogies of hope and culture. His message is one of hope for people who want to assert control over the factors which affect their lives. Like the Elder who told all of us not to give up yet, Friere encouraged individuals to dialogue and take action. Metaphorically speaking, to take action is to throw pebbles into the water in order to create a ripple effect. Within the educational context, action research projects are venues in which to apply Freire's pedagogy and in which to test the waters for change. A radical paradigm shift is needed if we are to truly apply pedagogies of hope and culture to schools and communities, particularly in regards to Indigenous languages. If we are to revive an endangered language, the responsibility is a task that belongs to all of us. Reversing language shift means a shift toward collective ownership of a gap in the educational landscape. Closing the gap requires the application of inclusive practices and collaborative action between the school and the community.

We need to have faith that our actions will create change so that we can revive a dying language. We have to trust that we can work together and that our tasks will make a difference. Of course, we do all of this because of our love for our language. Failure to throw the pebbles of hope, faith, trust and love into the educational waters will see our endangered language become an extinct language. The death of a language is a sign of defeat for all practitioners and especially for the oppressed. It is a sign that an oppressed people and practitioners in the educational landscape have not taken action to give life to endangered languages. I shared my pebble metaphor with a critical friend and her comment was, "Leadership requires all of the same pebbles – only one must take more responsibility for throwing them in the water and helping others see and feel the ripples" (Personal Journal, 2008). By completing an action research project, I feel that I've thrown a pebble into the water and it has created a ripple effect. My hope is that others will throw in more pebbles so that the ripples will continue to be seen and felt in our educational waters so that Indigenous languages keep flowing through all seasons.

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## APPENDIX 1:

# The Invitation

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### **Kiwigomigahin**

#### **You are invited to share a Cree story based on a life experience**

**Date:** Wednesday 19 March 2008

**Location:** Charlebois Community School

*If you don't tell your children who they are and what they are, they won't know. How can they be proud of what they don't know?*

*Salish Elder, 1980-*

This is a 'Cree-ative Collaborators' project involving the Charlebois Community School and Elders from Cumberland House, Saskatchewan.

The children in our community are losing our Cree language and if we don't take action, it will become another dead Aboriginal language. We are asking you to help us teach students by sharing your stories with us. We want to teach Cree by using stories that will connect them to our ways of knowing about our land, our people, our traditions, our history, and our lifestyle. We need stories in Cree that give voice to the life experiences of the Cree-Metis people. We know that the stories will be difficult for young people to understand so we have formed a team of people at the Charlebois Community School who is prepared to turn the collection of stories into a teachable format. Based on your stories, they will prepare material for teachers to use in Cree classes. The young people need to hear stories that capture their interest. They need Cree stories that will make them want to laugh or cry, to feel proud, to wonder, and to imagine. They need to hear stories as told by the parents, grandparents and great grandparents from our community. We invite you to give voice to a lived experience and to become part of an effort to keep our language alive. This is a big job but we believe that taking some action is better than not doing anything at all! By working together, our collaborative efforts will help our children learn Cree.

## APPENDIX 2:

# Contents Page of a Sample Sequence – *Nimigistahigan*

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### **Nimigistahigan**

I Am Beading

Contents:

- Big picture
- Song
- Gestures for words or phrases
- Text only flashcards
- Picture only flashcards
- Picture and text flashcards
- A/B pairs
- Games – What’s on My Head, Circle Switch Game
- Board game – Kwaskoti
- Evaluation checklist
- Storybook

## APPENDIX 3:

# Song With Visuals From a Sample Sequence – *Nimigistahigan*

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### ***NIMIGISTAHIGAN***

(Sung to the tune of A Hunting We Will Go)

Nimigistahigan

Nimigistahigan

Tante? Tante? pogo migisak



Nimigistahigan

Nimigistahigan

Tante? Tante? pogo saponigan



Nimigistahigan

Nimigistahiga

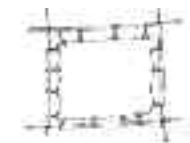
Tante? Tante? pogo secagos



Nimigistahigan

Nimigistahigan

Tante? Tante? pogo pagegin



Nimigistahigan

Nimigistahigan

Tante? Tante? pogo mostowin



Nimigistahigan

Nimigistahigan

Tante? Tante? pogo asesona



Nimigistahigan

Nimigistahigan

Tante? Tante? pogo kasigwaso napisk



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