Gidizhigiižhewinaanan: Our Languages

Language Transfer Practices in Urban Indigenous Communities

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Language is who you are. That’s one of the first things. If you don’t know your language, how do you know who you are?\footnote{A quote from a group interview with staff members at the N’Swakamok Native Friendship Centre in Sudbury.}

For millennia, the voices of Indigenous speakers have engaged in profound interaction with their communities, lands, waters, celestial bodies, plants, animals and spirits. They encapsulated stories, passed down songs, teachings and ground-breaking ideas which guided countless generations of Indigenous people. These voices now resonate in the cities and strive to be heard within a contemporary urban landscape.

It takes persistence, dedication and resourcefulness of the whole community to strengthen a language and create a nurturing environment in which it can thrive. The goal of language revitalization, positioned within a broad web of relationships, extends beyond restoring linguistic heritage and points towards work oriented to support development of healthy, thriving and resilient communities, which fully acknowledge and articulate their identities and are able to creatively apply their cultural resources to whatever goal they wish to pursue.

We would like to begin this report by expressing our sincere gratitude to the community members whose knowledge, passion and dedication to their languages has guided this research. We hope that this document will initiate further discussion and actions leading to a successful language revitalization process in urban Indigenous communities.
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In October 2013, the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) and Wilfrid Laurier University, together with a group of Indigenous scholars, applied to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada’s (SSHRC) Insight Grant for funding with the proposal Indigenous knowledge transfer in urban Indigenous communities. The application was successful and in April 2014 the project was awarded 3 years of funding. The goal of this research initiative is to examine how a large urban Indigenous institution, the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC), takes up roles and responsibilities as an intra-community knowledge mover, creating necessary conditions for perpetuating socio-cultural memory and rejuvenating Indigenous identity. The present study has been developed as a complementary piece under the framework of the project to address the language component of the knowledge transfer process within urban Indigenous communities.

The following report delineates patterns of urban Indigenous language transmission based on a study conducted in four communities: Midland, North Bay, Sudbury and Timmins. The key findings of this report, as well as guidelines for future research and language development initiatives are summarized in the following sections.

**Key findings**

**General conceptualizations of Indigenous languages and the importance of language to urban Indigenous identity**

In all four research sites language was brought up repeatedly as a gift from Creator and a grounding mechanism that fuels Indigenous cultures and provides the necessary structure for revival of local traditions. It is seen as a basic expression of nationhood and identity which evokes a sense of belonging to a particular place and to a specific community. The importance of language transfer is reflected in the sense of shame, sadness and the feeling of “missing out”, expressed by the study participants who didn’t pursue Indigenous language education or weren’t presented with such opportunity. Furthermore, the rupture of inter-generational language transmission, due to colonization and forced assimilation, and the loss of proficient language keepers are also a significant concern among urban Indigenous communities as they emphasize that urgent measures must be taken to execute language maintenance and revitalization.

The study participants identified the intrinsic connection between language and knowledge as of primary importance. Based on the perception of the community members, Indigenous languages are powerful vehicles and depositories of epistemological beliefs and conceptions, the loss of which would significantly impoverish the native speakers’ cognitive, social and spiritual resources.

**Patterns of language transmission**

Indigenous languages spoken in the four communities include Ojibwe, Cree, OjiCree, Michif, Algonquin, and Potawatomi. The use of these languages varies according to a specific community, based on migration patterns and influx of different Indigenous populations. Communication at the Friendship Centres takes place predominantly in English, however some Knowledge Holders reported speaking Indigenous language with other staff members in a “playful” or “teasing” manner. The Friendship Centres facilitate a variety of language transfer mechanisms such as language instruction within the framework of governmental funding, voluntary language revitalization and education initiatives, performed by the Friendship Centre staff as additional tasks, as well as singing and drumming sessions. It is noteworthy that some of the program workers make substantial effort to introduce the language to clients while delivering specific services and others tutor students in their spare time. The use of Indigenous languages is also included as part of a cultural protocol during traditional openings at ceremonies and social events of relevance.
Strengths and challenges within the past and ongoing language initiatives

When asked about the strengths within the current language transmission, the study participants highlighted the interest and the eagerness of the community members to learn their language. They talked with enthusiasm about dedication and resourcefulness of the community language educators, as well as the willingness of Elders to tutor new learners. Other strengths include the availability of learning resources and benefits related to a multi-generational language instruction setting. The use of Indigenous language is strongly valued and highly respected as a means of communication during ceremonies and some of the young people in the communities have begun to learn their language to be able to take on traditional responsibilities, such as the role of a Fire Keeper. Dialectal diversities and disparities between the old and the contemporary version of some of the Indigenous languages were perceived as both a challenge in terms of standardization, and a strength, as it reflects cultural and linguistic abundance.

The challenges included the lack of stable, long-term funding to secure language programming, difficulties in accessing teacher training, limited translatability of Indigenous languages into English, which is an obstacle to those teachers who opt for translation as the main method of language transfer. Discriminative attitudes towards the Indigenous language speakers in the mainstream society were also reported. Some of the Knowledge Holders mentioned difficulties in creating a long-lasting culture of language learning. Class attendance fluctuation was attributed to a complex situation of the students, who often experience the most marginalization and economic challenges in the community. It is difficult for them to commit to anything full time or at a specific time of the day. Another challenge referred to the pressure to follow the teaching methods promoted by the official school system, such as the implementation of the double vowel orthography in case of the Ojibwe language. The participants also talked about challenges related to living in an urban setting and losing the connection to family members who stayed on reserve where they still speak their language. The all-pervasive dominance of the Western European cultures and languages in the public domain was identified as a major obstacle which impedes successful language transmission.

Language as an essential vehicle within an indigenous knowledge transfer continuum

One of the most prominent findings of the study was that the knowledge carried by the structure of Indigenous languages is highly valued and acknowledged by the speakers in their daily linguistic practice. The language provides blueprints for everyday conduct and carries description of key-cultural components such as family, relationships, connection to the natural world, or notions of animate and inanimate. The spiritual quality of the language, as expressed by the Knowledge Holders, carries important teachings, encoded in words with limited or no semantic equivalents in English. Many participants emphasized the descriptiveness of their languages, a quality that makes them unique and meaningful. The themes which appeared throughout the study included the importance of language as “good medicine” that warms up one’s heart, brings up the feelings of joy and happiness, enhances connection with the spiritual realm and natural world, and perpetuates core cultural values. Language transmission is crucial to securing cultural continuity and preserving Indigenous ways of life. The recognition of a strong spiritual, ancestral and emotional connection to the language, expressed even by the non-speakers, is as remarkable as it is fundamental to future revitalization efforts.

The role of Elders in language transfer

In the opinion of the participants of this study, the presence of Elders and Knowledge Keepers is crucial for language support. Their role as language keepers with a capacity to pass extensive knowledge of diverse communicative domains on to the next generations of speakers is strongly valued. Their participation during language transfer activities provides cultural safety and it is fundamental, not only in terms of counselling and traditional guidance, but also in language planning and programming. The recognition of Elders as individuals who can explain culturally-relevant etymology and transmit complex teachings on word meaning, root words and stories is integral to successful language transmission. Elders are also acknowledged as source of inspiration and qualified guides and tutors with skillful means to encourage the youth to pursue language education.
Wise practices and recommendations

- **Increasing exposure to Indigenous languages**
  The participants spoke about the importance of seizing every opportunity to increase exposure to language learning in the Friendship Centres. This can be achieved by promoting language visibility (labelling and signage), setting up “language booths” with audio and video language materials, the use of recordings with basic phrases, played to visitors and clients, practicing the language during sharing circles and fostering the use of introductory phrases and short prayers at staff meetings. Another idea involved establishing a language day on a weekly or monthly basis to encourage the staff and the community to speak the languages as much as possible.

- **Fostering language immersion environments within Friendship Centres**
  When asked about initiatives that would ensure desired outcomes in language revitalization, some of the Knowledge Holders suggested creating language immersion spaces within daycare and after-school programs provided by the Friendship Centres to help children learn their languages from a pre-verbal age.

- **Creating intergenerational environment for language transmission**
  The information we collected indicates the importance and benefits of creating culturally safe language instruction, such as intergenerational language classes where children, parents and Elders have a chance to learn together and support each other. Bringing together students with different levels of language proficiency in a family environment, provides the community members with an opportunity to benefit from multiple teachers and internalize the value of learning from Elders. Another related idea involves “language nests” where infants and young children, together with their parents, have an opportunity to interact with language speakers.

- **Strengthening the oral traditions**
  A number of participants emphasized the necessity to prioritize oral language transmission in the practice of teaching. Maintaining oral language transfer was recognized as an important part of cultural legacy. Moreover, the Knowledge Holders stressed that frequent conversations with experienced language keepers help the learners with to grasp the correct meaning of words.

- **Land-based language initiatives and culture programming**
  When asked about wise practices in language transmission, the study participants frequently opted for more wholistic, culturally-rooted and contextualized methods, grounded in outdoor, land-based activities that strengthen traditional domains of language. Examples of specific activities, as described by the participants, involved nature walks, plant and animal naming, telling stories, learning survival wisdom and skills, participating in ceremonies, traditional naming practices and rites of passage.

- **Addressing the needs of diverse language learners**
  The Knowledge Holders recognized that diverse language transfer strategies need to be implemented to meet the needs of diverse learners. Language curricula need to build on goals and interests of different students within a broader framework of their personal, spiritual and professional development. Practical solutions, such as recording telephone greetings in Indigenous languages, may help expose people to a few words and plant seeds for further language development.

- **Preservation of locally spoken dialects in language transfer activities**
  Overall, the participants prioritized language variants spoken predominantly in a particular geographical area. Local language variants are seen as inherent expressions of cultural practices which sustain social systems and create identity-based ties in a particular community. However, based on the findings of this study, we hypothesize that urban Indigenous speech communities in the research sites are composed of various dialectal subgroups with different mobility patterns and thus have different language maintenance needs. Therefore, integration of language diversity in teaching methodology is definitely an issue to consider.
• **Language advocacy**
  It is noteworthy that recommendations stemming from this research study extended beyond the level of local initiatives. It was pointed out that Indigenous language instruction receives far less governmental funding than French language, an issue that needs to be addressed by advocating for equitable services and multi-year financial support for original language development in both community-driven and school-based programs. Furthermore, as observed by the study participants, Indigenous languages, including diverse dialects, should receive official status in Canada.

**Guidelines for future research and language development initiatives**

The Knowledge Holders expressed interest in the following areas of language research:

- Historical background of local linguistic and cultural history. A complementary research focus might involve changes in patterns of modern language use produced by migration to urban centres;
- Wise educational practices and language pedagogies tied to Indigenous ways of being and knowing;
- Gathering and disseminating information about Indigenous language programs available close to specific urban communities (both grass roots and school level);
- Secondary and post-secondary language curricula, their impact on language proficiency of the certified teachers and their ability to successfully teach and benefit Indigenous communities;
- Teaching solutions regarding dialect diversity/language standardization.

It was suggested that a pilot children immersion program be implemented at one of the Centres, combined with an ongoing research and evaluation of the outcomes and their impacts on the community well-being. According to the Knowledge Holders, the project should be preceded by thorough consultations to explore language attitudes and determine if the level of community interest and commitment are sufficient to ensure the support of dedicated caregivers, and successful experience in language immersion. Depending on the results, similar intergenerational immersion programs could be replicated by other sites in the future.

Since some of the participants mentioned the importance of positive reinforcement and the need to create a comfortable language environment with home-like atmosphere that could help students learn through natural immersion. This involves creating an intergenerational, community-based *language nest*, where infants and young children, together with their parents, have an opportunity to interact with language speakers, with the possibility of outdoor activities following seasonal cycle. Such program could potentially initiate small-scale language revitalization.

Last but not least, we believe that developing a set of wholistic, community-vetted and health-related indicators of language immersion outcomes could contribute to further understand these processes. Resources produced would contribute to the development of an evaluation framework by providing culturally grounded community determinants of health, such as the knowledge of Indigenous languages.
In October 2013, the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) and Wilfrid Laurier University, together with a group of Indigenous scholars, applied to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada’ (SSHRC) Insight Grant for funding with the proposal Indigenous knowledge transfer in urban Indigenous communities. The application was successful and in April 2014 the project was awarded 3 years of funding. The goal of this research initiative is to examine how a large urban Indigenous institution, the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC), takes up roles and responsibilities as an intra-community knowledge mover, creating necessary conditions for perpetuating socio-cultural memory and rejuvenating Indigenous identity. The present study has been developed as a complementary piece under the framework of the project, and it aims to address the language component of the knowledge transfer process within urban Indigenous communities.

Language diversity reflects the diversity of ideas and the extent of knowledge pool from which we can draw as human beings (Bernard, 1992; Maffi, 2005, Mühlhäusler: 1995). As Indigenous languages are vehicles and depositories of traditional, generational knowledge and they encompass epistemic beliefs and conceptions, the loss of language significantly impoverishes Indigenous speakers’ cognitive, social and spiritual resources. Many Indigenous communities across Canada “(...) assert that their language and culture is at the heart of what makes them unique and what has kept them alive in the face of more than 150 years of colonial rule” (McIvor et al., 2009, p.6). In their 2005 report to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, the Task Force on Indigenous Languages and Cultures described their work as inspired by “(...) a vision that sees First Nation, Inuit and Métis languages as gifts from the Creator carrying unique and irreplaceable values and spiritual beliefs that allow speakers to relate with their ancestors and to take part in sacred ceremonies” (The Task Force on Indigenous Languages and Cultures, 2005, p.1).

All Indigenous languages in Canada have a high rate of endangerment and most of them are in critical situation, facing the risk of extinction (Brittain, 2002; Shaw, 2001; McIvor, 2009). Only three Indigenous languages - Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut stand a chance to survive throughout this century (Norris, 1998). According to Battiste and Henderson (2000, p.83), “These statistics reflect the Canadian policies of cultural genocide, cognitive and cultural imperialism, isolation, and forced assimilation, which have greatly eroded Indigenous languages and in some cases destroyed Indigenous cultures”. The authors further emphasize the lack of efficient response of the federal and provincial governments in regard to the preservation and protection of the rights and freedoms of Indigenous people to use, practice, and develop their languages.

A study of language trends in the cities, conducted by Norris (2009) between 1998 and 2006, shows an ongoing struggle of urban Indigenous people who face significant challenges in their attempts to preserve and revitalize their traditional languages. It is noteworthy, that stronger, more vital languages tend to be less urbanized. Norris observes that “(...) in 2006 about 15% of the population with a Cree mother tongue resided in cities, whereas the less viable Ojibwe was more urbanized with about 22% of speakers residing in cities” (Norris, 2011, p.251). The analysis of 2006 census data on Indigenous languages within 116 Friendship Centre areas in Canada reveals that almost 10% of the population considers an Indigenous language as their mother tongue; 12% reports the ability to speak an Indigenous language, 4% speak an Indigenous language as a major language at home, while 3.4% speak it on a regular basis at home (Norris, 2011). A study on urban Indigenous task force in Ontario shows that although only half (50.5%) of the community survey respondents can speak and Indigenous language, the vast majority of key informants (92.5%) believe that it is important to speak one (OFIFC, 2007).

In November 2014 the OFIFC published the AKWE:GO Wholistic Longitudinal Study Baseline Report (OFIFC, 2014). The objective of the AWLS is to follow the same group of Akwe:go participants (at risk and high risk Indigenous children) for a period of twenty years in order to better understand how the program, which is currently offered at all 28 Friendship Centres, impacts the children involved. According to the surveys collected within this study, 56% of the children involved in the study speak Indigenous languages to some extent, however the speaking ability of the majority of the children is poor (2-3 on scale of 1-10). In conclusion, the overall rates of fluency in Ontario are low in urban centres, and efforts must be supported to study Indigenous language transmission and fluency development, as well as initiatives to build new Indigenous language lexicons (OFIFC, 2007).
Indigenous languages play an important protective role in reducing behavioral risk factors, enhancing educational opportunities, building resilience and maintaining healthy, violence-free communities. The study conducted in the province of British Columbia reveals that the First Nations communities with higher language abilities had fewer suicides than those with lower levels, and that the use of Indigenous language is an important predictive indicator of the community health and well-being (Hallet, 2007). These findings are further supported by a considerable number of publications and reports regarding the collective needs and interests of urban Indigenous people, elaborated or co-authored by the OFIFC. The reports address the need for and the benefits of culturally appropriate practices and culture-driven models on Indigenous language transmission, incorporating respect for linguistic diversity of Indigenous urban community. Language development has been identified as an important factor in the implementation of many strategies and programs which are vital for the healing and well-being of the urban Indigenous communities, and its use in program delivery and policy is consistently recommended (OFIFC 2007, 2008, 2011, 2012).

Together with Elders, traditional teachings, and culturally-grounded practices, Indigenous languages channel the flow of traditional knowledge in urban communities. Further studies are required to examine the extent of Indigenous language transfer within the Friendship Centres as well as to determine its role among the knowledge transfer mechanisms applied by the OFIFC.

The following report explores the ways in which urban Indigenous communities transmit their traditional languages in the intra-institutional environment, and identifies both the community needs and strengths in terms of language transmission. It attempts to broaden the compendium of intra-community knowledge transfer tools and provide recommendations to set up empowering conditions for Indigenous language revitalization in a contemporary urban context.

This component of the larger IKT project was designed to meet the following objectives:

1. Determine the role languages play as Indigenous Knowledge Transfer mechanisms and provide insights into the knowledge perpetuated through these languages;
2. Examine wise practices, tools and mechanisms applied to transmit Indigenous languages within the OFIFC;
3. Identify specific strengths, challenges and needs of urban communities regarding Indigenous language transfer.
3. Methodology and Orientation to Research

The language component has been carefully aligned with the IKTUAC project to understand the specific language transmission practices and responsibilities which respond to the line of inquiry within the broader context of the Indigenous Knowledge Transfer.

The study adopted the OFIFIC’s USAI Research Framework (2012), based on the principles of Utility, Self-Voicing, Access and Inter-Relationality to guide its work and support community-driven research. The OFIFIC’s Research Procedures were followed to ensure culturally-safe, respectful, productive and beneficial working relationships with the community members. The research proposal went through an internal OFIFIC’s process of ethics review and was also approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Wilfrid Laurier University, the collaborating institution within the framework of the IKTUAC project.

The USAI Research Framework is premised on four principles of Indigenous ethics, as defined by the OFIFIC:

* **Utility:** research inquiry is practical, relevant, and directly benefiting communities;

* **Self-voicing:** research, knowledge, and practice are authored by communities, which are fully recognized as Knowledge Holders and knowledge creators;

* **Access:** research fully recognizes all local knowledge, practice, and experience in all their cultural manifestations as accessible by all research authors and Knowledge Holders; and,

* **Inter-relationality:** research is historically-situated, geo-politically positioned, relational, and explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is generated (OFIFIC, 2012).

Four Friendship Centre communities were involved in this research project: Midland, North Bay, Sudbury, and Timmins. The methodology for data collection within the qualitative research approach included environmental scanning of the current language transfer practices within the research sites, based on 7 one on one open-ended interviews, 2 group interviews and 1 sharing circle with Knowledge Holders. Study participants included the Friendship Centre staff, Elders and community members who provided a variety of perspectives on Indigenous languages and recommendations for both future research and language planning. These generously shared insights facilitated further understanding of language transmission mechanisms, challenges and opportunities faced by the urban Indigenous communities that struggle to preserve and revitalize their linguistic heritage.

Informed consent was obtained by explanation of the project’s goals and an Information Package was provided to the study participants. An OFIFIC’s consent form at the end of this package was signed by the study participants.

The information included in this report is anonymous. The quotes are not attributed to the individuals from which they are sourced and they include “Elder”, “worker”, “Knowledge Holder”, “study participant” and “community member” label if applicable (the last four labels were used interchangeably).

All material was recorded and transcribed. The data from transcribed interviews were grouped around major thematic categories used in two different questionnaires developed for the purpose of this study. The environmental scan questionnaire was used to guide general conversations about the mechanisms of language transfer as well as strengths and challenges within the past and ongoing language initiatives. The Knowledge Holder open-ended interview questionnaire was applied in more detailed conversations with language keepers, intended to gain an in-depth perspective about the knowledge transferred through Indigenous languages (see Appendix 1: Qualitative interview questions). The data analysis and the identification of relevant topics was performed through the use of open coding within a thematic analysis approach. The following section of the report is based on topics that emerged from qualitative data.
4.1 “Language fuels our culture”: the significance of language transfer in urban indigenous communities

General attitudes about Indigenous languages demonstrated in all four research site communities were very positive. Language was brought up repeatedly as a gift from Creator and a grounding mechanism that fuels Indigenous cultures and provides the necessary structure for revival of local traditions. It is seen as a basic expression of nationhood and identity, which evokes a sense of belonging to a particular place and to a specific community.

For some of the Knowledge Holders, Indigenous language is the first and foremost step in the process of preserving cultural continuity. It jump-starts cultural revitalization and forms the basis for renewing Indigenous identity and restoring traditional teachings, as noted by this Elder:

“Our language is what fuels our culture. It fuels our traditions, our stories, our knowledge, our intelligence. Without the language we will lose everything. Our history will be gone. There’s too much at stake.”

Some of the non-speakers remarked on their strong connection to the language, expressed in spiritual understanding of the speech (“we may not understand it but our Spirit does”), and the need to retrieve the linguistic legacy that was left behind. Rather than talking about the need for language revival, the Knowledge Holders referred to this process as “part of picking up the bundle”.

The importance of language transfer is reflected in the sense of shame, sadness and the feeling of “missing out”, expressed by the study participants who didn’t pursue Indigenous language education or weren’t presented with such opportunity. One of the frontline workers described a personal journey in search of identity and the process of understanding what it means to be “an Indian”. Over time, this person came to realize the importance of language as an intrinsic part of Indigenous identity, a component she was not aware of before, nor had she taken particular interest in:

“(…) I hit a certain point where it didn’t bother me not to know my language. I knew I was an Indian, that was it. Because I didn’t understand what it was to be an Indian. As I got older, I started to learn more because you know, with time, everything changes. And now I’m saddened by the fact that I don’t speak my language.”

The rupture of inter-generational language transmission due to colonization and forced assimilation, and the loss of proficient language keepers who pass away every year, is a significant concern among urban Indigenous communities. Study participants expressed a sense of urgency and fear, coming from the realization that individuals who are now in their fifties or sixties, and were somehow able to preserve their language despite devastating effects of residential schools, might be the last fluent speakers in their communities. On the other hand, some of the participants expressed deep conviction and faith that their language will not be lost due to perseverance of language keepers who will pass it on to the next generations of speakers. In the worst case scenario, the language will be revived on the basis of written records.

The intrinsic connection between language and knowledge was identified as of primary importance by the study participants. Some of the Knowledge Holders attributed the loss of connection to nature and land, the loss of traditional ecological knowledge, teachings and beliefs related to the sacredness of the mother Earth, as well

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2 Interview with a community member, Timmins.
3 Group interview, Sudbury.
as environmental degradation directly to the loss of language. As Indigenous languages are powerful vehicles and depositories of epistemological beliefs and conceptions, the loss of language significantly impoverishes Indigenous speakers’ cognitive, social and spiritual resources. Being taught the language at a young age ensures the transmission of traditional values, concepts, and skills embedded in the thought system which emphasizes a healthy way of life as opposed to “commercialized culture”, symbolically represented by the use of English. The essential elements of this worldview, as mentioned by the study participants, included respect for Elders, meaningful and positive community relationships based on love and trust, as well as traditional survival wisdom and skills.

Moreover, the importance of language lies in its quality as a primary medium of spiritual expression during sacred ceremonies. Through language flows people's connection to their ancestors and the Creator. It facilitates communication with the spiritual realm and provides access to millenary wisdom and teachings. Language exposure is also crucial for individuals who assist Elders as oskapew (helper):

“I was oskapew and one of my teachers only spoke the language. Some of it I could understand because it was repetitive and he had explained it to me, however it would have been nice to understand what he was saying when he was speaking to the Spirit. For me, that made me long for my language a lot more.”

Many participants referred to the Indigenous language as “good medicine” because it brings people together while inducing humour and laughter. Speaking the language is perceived as a highly enjoyable activity. A young passive speaker with a very limited language knowledge, referred to Cree as being “animated” in comparison to English:

“I just think of English as just being plain and boring. And Cree, whenever I hear what it translates as, or when I hear people talking, it is so animated. It’s not boring. People are always laughing and stuff when they are speaking Cree.”

One of the participants identified the Friendship Centre as a safe and comfortable space for language transmission. Although she doesn’t speak any Indigenous languages herself, she takes pride in listening to the people speaking their mother tongues in urban settings.

All the participants acknowledged that keeping Indigenous languages alive is part of their responsibility to ensure the well-being of the seven generations into the future.

4.2 Language transmission landscape: Strengths and challenges within the past and ongoing initiatives

The Indigenous languages spoken in the four communities include Ojibwe, Cree, OjíCree, Michif, Algonquin and Potawatomi. The use of these languages varies according to a specific community, based on migration patterns and influx of different Indigenous populations. Communication at the Friendship Centres takes place predominantly in English, however some Knowledge Holders reported speaking Indigenous language with other staff and community members in a “playful” or “teasing” manner. The Friendship Centres facilitate a variety of language transfer mechanisms such as language instruction within the framework of governmental funding, voluntary language revitalization and education initiatives, performed by the Friendship Centre staff as additional tasks, as well as drumming and singing sessions. Some program workers make substantial effort to introduce the language to clients while delivering specific services and others tutor students in their spare time. The use of Indigenous languages is typically included as part of a cultural protocol during traditional openings at ceremonies and social events of relevance.

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4 Sharing circle, North Bay.
5 Group interview, North Bay.
4.2.1 North Bay

The Indigenous languages most commonly spoken by the North Bay Indian Friendship Centre community members include Cree, Ojibwe, OjiCree and Michif, although the study participants did not elaborate on any Michif-related initiatives.

Starting in 2015, the Friendship Centre, in collaboration with Canadore College, has offered a two-hour Cree class once a week, conducted by a professional teacher. This initiative was possible due to the help of one of the community members who generously donated the funds received from Education Grant for Residential School Survivors. There are 15 adult students (high school and college students, as well frontline workers from the Friendship Centre) attending this class and the participants are both Cree and Ojibwe. The language variation taught during this class is the new Cree. The Centre also organized Ojibwe classes for children in 2014, however these are no longer offered. There are a few fluent speakers who use their languages during ceremonies and social events. Hand drumming circle also offers a space and an opportunity to learn original languages through songs.

When asked about the strengths within the current language initiative, the study participants highlighted the eagerness of the community members to learn the Cree language. This interest is believed to conquer obstacles impeding successful language transmission, despite the reportedly low number of fluent speakers. The concept of language death was firmly contested by one of the participants:

“There might only be 10 speakers (of Cree) but we don’t look at it like that, that there are only this many people. We don’t think about things like that, it’s a completely different way of thinking. People from around here have the eagerness to find the language. People do speak it, people get excited. So I don’t think it’s going to die. Also I feel people here are really excited to learn Ojibwe.”

The diversity of dialects (in both Cree and Ojibwe) was recognized as a challenge because some of the Cree class participants have requested that the teacher delivers classes in their variation. The dilemma of choosing specific dialect as a vehicle for language transmission in the classroom clearly forms part of a broader discussion about language standardization.

The participants were aware of the differences between the old and the new version of Cree. The latter adopts new vocabulary such as English loanwords. The existence of different versions of the Cree language is perceived as both a strength and a challenge. The new version of Cree is seen as the accurate expression of changing times and a consequence of cultural contact. More and more language programs are delivered in the new Cree, therefore using the old version of the language may pose a challenge to efficient communication. Lack of training in Indigenous language teaching methodology and curriculum development was also brought up as a difficulty that needs to be addressed.

Nonetheless, the progressive loss of the old Cree is a major concern. One of the participants and a proficient speaker of the old Cree, was reluctant to accept the language change and expressed strong criticism towards an “artificial quality” of the new vocabulary combined with intents to replace the already existing old Cree words with simplified and modified English calques, which seem to be perceived as easier to pronounce.

“I think it’s better to learn the old Cree. I know time changes but why should we change from the old to the new? That’s my opinion. What was given to us, that’s the Cree we should be using. They find it harder, the old Cree. In the new Cree they add things like sôkâw (sugar). Because back then we didn’t have sugar. Or milk. But we say tohtôsâpiy (milk). So I try to tell them it is not “melek” it is tohtôsâpiy. You take your time to say it, it just flows.”

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6 Group interview, North Bay.
7 Group interview, North Bay.
Despite this criticism, the notion of language endangerment itself was linked to stagnation and a lack of language change. The participants acknowledged the necessity to adapt to current circumstances even if it means borrowing vocabulary from adjacent, dominant language systems to enrich the existent language structures with words that reflect technological and scientific development. Learning the old Cree is perceived as an ideal solution which could bring desirable outcomes in successful language revitalization. However, if this possibility is not available, studying the new language version might be the only viable option for second language learners.

One of the challenges noted through this study was the discriminative attitude towards the Indigenous language speakers, a bias which is still widespread in the mainstream Canadian society. This trend may be changing (however slowly) and nowadays more speakers feel encouraged and safe enough to use their language in public spaces, however the study participants still reported having witnessed an ongoing, negative reactions to the use of Indigenous languages.

In terms of the support needed to address the language needs, the participants suggested promoting language visibility by the use of labels all over the Friendship Centre as well as designing specific activities aimed at enhancing the community’s connection with the language. The latter might be achieved by learning about the cultural history of the region to strengthen the links between the community’s ancestry, cultural identity and linguistic heritage.

The Friendship Centre currently offers translation services in both French and Cree and, according to the participants, more emphasis should be put on promoting services in Indigenous languages:

"I have an issue with a sign downstairs. Because it says French first. The French language is first. And Cree is available. But our language should be first, we need to promote our languages. Because this is North Bay Indian Friendship Centre, everybody should be speaking the language."

The current Cree class initiative finishes by the end of April, 2015. Funding is therefore an issue that needs to be urgently addressed to ensure the continuity of language instruction, to provide the community teachers with adequate wages and expand the current educational offer to other languages spoken in the area.

4.2.2 Midland

Ojibwe was reported as the most widely used language in Midland and surrounding areas with some dialectal variations such as the Odawa dialect and the variation spoken on Christian Island. The Knowledge Holders also mentioned the use of Potawatomi language.

Overall, the Ojibwe language is occasionally spoken in a playful manner among some of the Friendship Centre staff as a “secret language” and in a “teasing way”, while the speakers pretend to conceal their conversations from the rest of the group. Some introductory phrases and prayers are used during traditional openings at ceremonies and staff meetings.

In 2013, the Centre offered Ojibwe classes, held once a week for two, up to three hours with a group of approximately 15 people and with both adults and children assisting. The class came to be thanks to the initiative of one of the staff members who managed to gather funding for potluck. The lessons were delivered by two committed volunteers (a staff member and an Elder) who are fluent language speakers but do not have a formal teacher training. The participants represented different levels of language proficiency, varying from complete beginners to fairly fluent speakers. Some of the students used this learning opportunity to enrich their existing vocabulary base, while others focused on acquiring basic language skills. The initiative went on for approximately two years and is currently on hold because the teachers were temporarily absent or took on additional responsibilities in the Centre. The teaching methodology included speaking and writing exercises as well as translations.

8 Sharing circle, North Bay.
When it came to identifying the strengths, which may assist in setting up future language initiatives, the study participants mentioned the interest of the community members who frequently ask about the possibility to learn Indigenous languages at the Friendship Centre. The availability of trained teachers coming from the Beausoleil First Nation on Christian Island which is located near the Centre, was also considered an asset.

The study participants talked about a number of obstacles which need to be overcome in order to ensure successful language transfer. Although the language learners demonstrated a lot of commitment in the beginning of the class, the dropout rate in the winter season was considerably high due to difficult weather conditions as well as barriers to transportation or lack of thereof. It was also relatively difficult to establish a class schedule that would accommodate the time requirements of all students. Occasionally, the volunteering teachers were forced to cancel the classes because of the workload and other responsibilities. One of the language teachers and an Elder reported to have observed a lack of long-term commitment on the students’ part (especially the youth), whose motivation would gradually decrease. Despite considerable efforts made by the teacher, he was not able to create a long-lasting culture of learning that would encourage students’ commitment to language.

Another difficulty, identified by this Elder, concerned having to follow the teaching methods promoted by the official school system, such as the implementation of the double vowel orthography. He did not consider this language transfer method fit for Ojibwe - a language which has traditionally relied on oral transmission. This concern was shared by another first language speaker:

“It’s hard to read and write in the language because typically it was an oral language. I grew up with a language. It's not a written language, it is an oral language. So when they did start to write it, it was more phonetic. Writing it is going to be good in some ways. But personally, my feelings are we never had to write it before and I don’t know what benefit it's going to be. Unless it was another language that was incorporated like French, English and Ojibwe into Canada, I don’t see really the purpose in writing it.”

A barrier which affects successful language transfer has to do with translatability. As expressed by one of the language keepers, the Ojibwe cannot be translated into English without significant damage or distortion:

“It’s more about listening. From what I know, when my teacher speaks I know what he is talking about. But I can’t put it in English, because there is nothing that compares to that in English or maybe I don’t understand English enough to translate it because I don’t have enough English.”

What became evident in terms of language support, was the need to secure stable funding and employ a professional Ojibwe teacher who would take over the responsibility of the staff, busy with their regular obligations as program workers.

4.2.3 Timmins

The study participants identified Cree (LN dialect), Ojicree, Ojibwe and Algonquin as major Indigenous languages spoken in the community. The use of Indigenous language is strongly valued and highly respected as a means of communication during ceremonies. It is considered a medium that connects the two worlds, making it possible to talk with the ancestors. Interestingly, some of the young people in the community have begun to learn their language as a requirement to take on traditional responsibilities, such as the role of a Fire Keeper.

At present, there are no language classes held by this Friendship Centre. The community members recalled two former language initiatives: a language class for children, offered within the Little Beavers program approximately 15 years ago and a Cree learning initiative in the day care site where the children under 12 years old were being taught the language.

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9 One on one interview, Midland.
10 One on one interview, Midland.
The study participants differentiate between the “young, the middle and the old Cree”. The old Cree is the version of the language used in ceremonial contexts. Another cultural practice which enhances and facilitates language transmission is drumming:

“There are some young people who attend drumming, they are not fluent in Cree but they are able to pick it up through drumming. When there is somebody who does the teaching, he or she teaches them the meaning of it. Before you can teach a song, there has to be a teaching.”

One of the staff members talked about making as much effort as possible to use the language in her area of work. She speaks Cree with children and parents who are clients in the Indigenous Children’s Wellness Program. These interlocutors are offered a choice to speak either in Cree or in English and some of the younger children prefer to communicate in their first language due to the lack of sufficient fluency in English. It was also mentioned that some of these children owe their proficiency in Cree to a major role their grandparents have played in their upbringing, providing them with a unique opportunity for language education, despite being exposed to the dominance of English in the school system.

When asked about strengths in the context of language transfer practices, the Knowledge Holders named a number of elements such as a strong interest of the community members in language learning opportunities and the existence of the syllabic system which supports and accurately reflects the phonetic structure of Cree. Another asset is the access to the Wawatay radio network that provides radio programming broadcast in three Indigenous languages Ojibway, Oji-Cree, and Cree. Furthermore, one of the Knowledge Holders declared readiness to share her knowledge of the language and expressed certainty that other Elders would be also willing to tutor community members, interested in their linguistic heritage.

There were a number of comments about challenges in language transmission. One of the participants highlighted the role of historical factors which contributed to disruption of the intergenerational language transfer. The fear instilled in children, who were not allowed to speak their mother tongues in residential schools, heavily affected the language skills transfer from parent to child. The participants also talked about challenges related to living in an urban setting and losing the connection to family members who stayed on reserve where they still commonly use their mother tongue. The all-pervasive dominance of the Western European cultures and languages was identified as a major obstacle which impedes successful language transmission. The mainstream media were perceived as distractive factors, diverting children’s and youth’s attention away from their language and culture, and making it difficult for them to value Elders and their teachings. Similarly, one of the participants expressed his concern about the fact that some Elders are reluctant to pass down their knowledge to the younger generation.

Although the Cree syllabics was identified as an accurate writing system, the participants are aware that it might pose a challenge to the second language learners. Therefore, they recommended applying the adapted Latin script to accommodate the needs of an English speaking community members and to attract as many new speakers from the younger generation as possible. Another relevant issue that came up in this discussion, concerned standardization and the necessity to choose a specific Cree dialect for educational purposes.

Funding is the first priority that needs to be addressed in the context of language planning support. The participants’ observations and recommendations revolved mostly around the idea of an evening course that would accommodate the language needs of an adult population. The support of the community’s Elders was identified as an essential factor in any future language initiative.

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“One on one interview, Timmins.”
4.2.4 Sudbury

The languages spoken by the urban Indigenous community in Sudbury include Ojibwe with Odawa dialectal variation and Cree.

The site has hosted a community based Ojibwe language program for the last 5 years, starting in September and finishing in March annually. The course methodology is family oriented and representatives of all generations are encouraged to attend the classes. The 2 hour language classes are offered to approximately 30 students, including both beginners and more advanced speakers on a weekly basis. Language classes delivered at the Centre begin with traditional opening and smudging. The participants have an opportunity to learn an opening player in Ojibwe.

The site has recently applied for funding from the Indigenous People’s Program (Department of Canadian Heritage), to continue the Ojibwe instruction program with the following objectives:

- Provide the atmosphere to practice the 7 Grandfather Teachings of respect, kindness, honesty, love, humility, courage and wisdom - a place where Indigenous people feel safe to learn their language
- Provide an opportunity for Indigenous people to strengthen their traditional worldview as evident through the structure of Indigenous languages
- Provide language instruction using wholistic learning methodology that considers the learning style of many Indigenous people
- Provide language instruction in a location that is easily accessible to Indigenous people living in Sudbury
- Provide language instruction in a multi-generational setting that is common to Indigenous everyday living to stimulate the learning process; encourage the younger learners, and practice the value of learning from Elders
- Provide language instruction that incorporates all aspects of the medicine wheel (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual)
- Provide language instruction to increase exposure to the Ojibwe language and culture
- Provide language instruction to demonstrate the “joy” of learning by offering classes at a time when it is convenient for many families.

The course methodology involves word listing and conversational dialogue groups for different levels: beginners, intermediate and advanced. The workbook is used as a support resource by the students. The thematic areas include the vowel system; days of the week, months and special days; numbers and counting money; birds, farm and forest animals; plant life, trees, herbs, flowers, insects and fish; mental thoughts; peoples, chores, responsibilities; occupations; public buildings; knowledge integration through conversation and storytelling; household belongings; human anatomy; sickness; items used in classroom. The participants’ progress will be evaluated through monthly surveys.

Some of the study participants implement language initiatives of their own accord. One of the workers has tutored two university students as a volunteer. Another person decided to bring the language to some of the families she provides the services to. She uses an Ojibwe resource manual, pictures and photocopied materials to work with children and parents. This worker intends to expand her initiative and include more families in the following year:

“I’ve just started working with two families so far and for the upcoming fiscal year I’d like to try to teach more families (...) I’ve actually put it into my service plan for my program Cause I’ve been going to a language conference in St. Sault Marie. And I didn’t want to just go there and not bring anything back to my community. So I guess that’s my way of contributing to the community by doing that.”

12 Aboriginal People’s Program Funding Application submitted by the N’Swakamok Native Friendship Centre, 2014.
13 Group interview, Sudbury.
General feedback about the current language instruction program was positive. The participants highlighted a long-term commitment of the students as some of them have been attending the Ojibwe classes for several years now. Other strengths within the program included the presence of a qualified teacher, with many years of experience, as well as the availability of fluent native speakers and learning resources. The participants' concerns revolved around the gradual loss of Elders who are considered the last, truly proficient language speakers. They have also observed a high attendance rate in the beginning of the course, which has decreased significantly towards the end of it, with one third of the initial turnout. It is also hard to attract the new learners, as noted by one of the participants:

“All the years that we had that program we had almost the same people, the same participants and they have been coming every year and they are the ones that stayed right till the end. Every year there are newcomers but they don’t stay long”.

Attendance fluctuation was attributed to a complex situation of the students, who often experience the most marginalization in the community, economic challenges in the community. It is difficult for them to commit to anything full time or at a specific time of the day.

Another challenge brought up by the participants was related to the double vowel system. Some students struggle to understand the writing while they are reading aloud. Others, who study the language at the university, are criticized for using a dialect which differs from the standardized double vowel orthography developed by Charles Fiero, as emphasized by this Elder:

“One student came to me and says: I'm being told I'm speaking wrong or I'm being told that's not how you say it. Because they come from a different community. When she writes it she leaves out the ending. And she says: They tell us it's wrong. Because of that Fiero system, the double vowel system. Those people sound a little bit different than we do but we still understand them”.

The same Knowledge Holder recalled being told in his childhood that the Ojibwe people will lose their language once a writing system is developed. When asked about the culture around language transfer in the Friendship Centre, one of the study participants referred to Ojibwe as a “secret language”, which is used as a medium to maintain confidentiality. Interestingly, according to this Elder, this quality of the language will be lost if more and more non-Indigenous people will start speaking Ojibwe.

The use of the double vowel writing system was subject to an extensive discussion. The participants perceive Ojibwe as a language which should primarily be transmitted orally. Some of them hypothesized that the dropout rate might be related to the fact that the students who have already achieved certain fluency in speaking get discouraged by getting marked on their spelling and being compelled to pass written exams.

One way to overcome this obstacle might be the support of parents and children who can mutually assist each other in language tasks. One of the Ojibwe speakers who struggles to improve her reading skills talked about working together with her daughter who is a fluent reader but has limited knowledge of the vocabulary.

The need to have Cree classes and to take into account the community's linguistic and dialectal diversity was repeatedly brought up. Limitations in translatability as well the lack of semantic equivalents were also reported to be a challenge in terms of teaching strategy implementation. Finally, the participants attribute challenges in language transmission to living in urban environment, where the Indigenous language is not a priority, as opposed to living on reserve.

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14 Group interview, Sudbury.
15 Writing systems associated with particular dialects have been developed by adapting the Latin script, usually the English or French alphabets. A widely used Roman character-based writing system is the Double Vowel system, attributed to Charles Fiero. (Wikipedia)
16 Idem.
As for the language revitalization support, the study participants expressed interest in securing funding for a pilot immersion program. This issue will be discussed in further detail in the context of recommendations. Language documentation of the older language versions was also brought up as a potential source of support for dedicated learners.

One of the participants provided a wider spectrum of analysis by making reference to current employment opportunities for the Indigenous population and the pressure to pursue dominant language education. However, this demand might shift if knowledge of Indigenous languages skills were to be included and supported as part of the job requirements in certain facilities.

4.3 “The way we carry ourselves”: Language as an essential vehicle within an Indigenous knowledge transfer continuum

One of the most prominent findings in this study was that the knowledge carried by the structure of Indigenous languages is highly valued and acknowledged by the speakers in their daily linguistic practice. Many participants emphasized the descriptiveness of their languages, a quality that makes them unique and meaningful. Languages mirror local environment and encode significant plant and animal knowledge. One of the Knowledge Holders talked about how a mere description of a natural phenomenon such as a tree (mitig in the Ojibwe language), encompasses its life cycle, its nurturing relationship with the soil and its aliveness. The language provides blueprints for everyday conduct and carries description of key-cultural components such as family, relationships, connection to the natural world and the notions of animate and inanimate among many others:

(…) the language is more meaningful than English, it is more descriptive. The words, the way we look at our lives, the way we carry ourselves, the description of everything (…). In our language everything is alive for us. The grass, even the rocks, the water, the way we give them names. It’s everyday life. And everyday thing that you do it’s a connection. In the morning you greet the mishoomis (grandfather in the Ojibwe language) that’s walking across the sky in the mornings and you have that connection with him. Even though it’s cloudy, the clouds are hiding its face. And if it’s raining, you make that connection with the rain. So that’s the way our language is, we go day by day 17.

An important part of the worldview is transmitted through ceremonial language which reflects a deeper, more profound way of speaking. For one of the Knowledge Holders, speaking the language during ceremonies is essential to communicate with the ancestors, because “people that left they spoke the old Cree”. When people speak, sing and pray in their original languages, they communicate directly with the Spirit. Furthermore, this spiritual quality of the language carries important teachings, encoded in words with no equivalent in English:

All our sacred teachings are carried by our language. But usually it is not shared to anybody because these are more ceremonial teachings. When my teacher speaks, I know what he is talking about. But I can’t put it in English, because there is nothing that compares to that in English 18.

This way of thinking is expressed in the meaning of particular words. The word miigwech means so much more than just a mere act of giving thanks. Traditionally, it is just assumed that one is thankful. As observed by one of the Knowledge Holders, the concept means rather “giving yourself”. When an individual receives a spirit name, by “giving oneself”, one offers something to a divine being to maintain continued guidance and direction.

Another example given by the study participants is a typical greeting in Cree which literally means “you are a kind person”. These words have transformative power and enable individuals to orchestrate their speech so that it automatically changes the way their interlocutors feel about themselves. The values embedded in this philosophy, such as bringing out the best in people and strengthening their confidence, have an intrinsic connection to the structure of the language. Even such basic Cree word as wachiiya (“hello” and “see you later”) reflects a cyclical nature of life and relationships because there is no word for “goodbye”:

17 One on one interview, Midland.
18 One on one interview, Timmins.
The teachings tell us that when we came to this Earth we came from the Spirit world (...) and we came to learn what our purpose on Earth is, what we need to work on from Creator. So once we have done our purpose here, that’s when we go back to the Spirit world. There is no such thing as goodbye because it’s always in a circle 19.

The Ojibwe language was described as “loving” and compared to a “wave of a song” that brings up feelings of comfort and happiness when it is spoken and heard. Its musical quality enhances emotional expression and because “it comes from the heart”, it does not contain swear words or harsh words. The study participants emphasized that the language is based on verbs and it focuses on expressing action and relationships. Some of the words that emerged from the data collection in reference to language included “laugh”, “utilitarian”, “good”, “smile” “happy”, “respect” and “honesty”. The Indigenous language is one of the kind, it has healing and soothing properties because of the joy it brings:

“\textit{In our language we laugh a lot. There is a lot of joking and there is a lot of laughing. Respect, honesty. It’s a one of a kind type of language. It’s a comforting language, it’s a loving language. When I speak it I feel it in my heart, I feel it in my soul and I can’t say that about any other language, English, French, whatever. I think with this language, it wasn’t made for us to be sad. I think it was made for us to be happy. I just want to carry on life and immerse myself in it} 20.”

The challenge of limited translatability emerged repeatedly upon reviewing the data, especially in terms of language-induced categorical perception. One of the Cree speakers talked about her struggle to translate some concepts into English. For instance, in order to transmit the concept of “weather”, instead of saying a particular word, one rather describes meteorological conditions experienced at particular time and place. Similarly, the color continuum differs from English classification and a speaker needs to make reference to particular object when describing a color name: “When you describe blue, you almost have to describe the sky when you are saying it”.

An interesting experience that was brought up by one of the participants who is also a Cree teacher, involved explanation of locatives and four directions, which she compared to transmitting “our way of life”. In order to explain direction terminology, she needed to provide the students with core cultural teachings:

“The way we say it in Cree, it describes almost our way of life because we are from up North and when we say “North” we are saying “we are going home”. So the East is “where the sun comes up”, so you describe what it means. So it made me really happy to be able to explain it because when I was describing the four directions I was describing our way of life 21.”

Embedded in the descriptiveness of the Cree language is the notion of time. Participants remarked on how speakers of the new Cree tend to shorten the words or “drop” the endings and do not take their time to thoroughly describe an event or tell a story. The importance of the old language lies precisely in its ability to give detailed description and to enhance the power of the spoken word, for example when telling the Creation Story. Shortening the words takes an important quality away from the language. As one of the participants put it:

“You know, our creation story told in the language takes more than a day. So actually we rob ourselves of our language because we are shortening it to accommodate time, to accommodate whatever 22.”

When asked about the knowledge carried by Indigenous languages, one of the Elders responded by making reference to the Creation Story and the gift of language given to all races. As described by this Elder, according to the Ojibwe oral tradition, the language was a tool that was supposed to be used by all nations, including animals, to communicate among each other, with the Mother Earth and the Creator. As the human population

19 One on one interview, Timmins. 
20 One on one interview, Midland. 
21 Sharing circle, North Bay. 
22 Sharing circle, North Bay.
grew, the races started to gradually lose the ability to communicate with all of creation, but most importantly, they lost the connection with the Creator and the natural world. This gradual disruption affects one’s identity and the very sense of self. Therefore, to retain the old version of the language means to restore access to what was an original gift from the Creator and what was spoken when humans could communicate to all of the Creation. This connection is still cultivated though certain ceremonies such as the horse ceremony, mentioned by one of the participants.

As the most proficient language keepers emphasized, the deeper one goes into the structure of one’s language the more complex vision unfolds and the knowledge of the language becomes part of one’s spiritual journey. The structure of Indigenous languages outlines teachings about the very nature of Creation, and learning the language is just the first step that leads to cultural and spiritual awakening. This Knowledge Holder differentiated between everyday language, ceremonial language and the language used in songs. These different linguistic expressions reveal diverse layers of knowledge. The way these stories are told or sung in the language is strikingly visual and generates vivid images in the minds of the people who partake in ceremonies:

And when you sing it, it draws a picture in your mind and you can literally go there in your mind while they are speaking. You can really see what’s happening (...). All four races, they had that. They all did. They were able to imagine those places when they spoke their language. They would see an actual picture of an event happening.

The Elder highlighted that the ceremonial language is always remembered and understood by one’s spirit and it makes one experience feelings of warmth and comfort. Although this speech is heard only on special occasions, its transformative power always stays within the community. The term used by the knowledge keepers in reference to words used during sacred ceremonies is “vast” and “wide” because they encompass complex teachings which are “heard visually”. This way of speaking was also compared to “feeding” other people in a circle of energetic exchange which culminates in community members reaching the same conclusion and being of “one mind” or led by “one force stream”. Language is one of the most significant vehicles conducting this energy flow. One of the Knowledge Holders expressed sadness that contemporary people often reject this knowledge as they only learn what is necessary to perform their jobs.

Furthermore, there are various obligations related to language and knowledge transfer and one of them is connected with the naming tradition. Once an individual receives the spirit name, one is constantly saying it and thus practicing the language. According to the Knowledge Holders, original languages play considerable role as describers of societal and family roles and carriers of clan terminology. They are gateways to teachings, directions, guidance and information transmitted by clan animals who carry extensive, prehistoric knowledge. Spirit name and clan name form a linguistic “make-up” of one’s identity and provide a sense of belonging. Language is therefore one of the most essential vehicles within an Indigenous knowledge transfer continuum. One of the language transfer mechanisms, especially highlighted in this context is singing. When a song is performed during a ceremony, it is the melody that carries the Spirit, the words describe the place and what the participants see:

When we sing that song most people listen to it with their eyes closed during the ceremony because everybody goes wherever they need to go in that song. We don’t all go to the same place. We go to the separate places. That’s when your hair stands up and your eyes are closed and you feel so happy. Then you sing it louder.

Singing in the language touches one’s Spirit and reveals multiple layers of meaning which are gradually discovered as the song is repeatedly played in one’s mind. The flow of information does not cease for a long time and it means something else as the time passes and one moves from place to place.

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23 Group interview, Sudbury.
24 Group interview, Sudbury.
4.4  “The ones that we listen to”: The role of Elders in language transfer

The presence of Elders and Knowledge Holders was considered crucial for language support and their role as language keepers with a capacity to pass extensive knowledge of diverse communicative domains on to the next generations of speakers was strongly valued.

The Elders’ and Knowledge Holders’ participation during language transfer activities provides cultural safety, it is significant in terms of counselling and traditional guidance. One of the Knowledge Holders emphasized that it is a matter of great urgency to ensure Elders’ involvement in language planning and programming:

“It would be good to have a language program at the centre and bring the Elders here that still have the language and help. They are very few, better get them now. I could probably think of four in this community who still speak.”

One of the Knowledge Holders pointed out that the Cree language has been sharply restricted in its domains, and it is contemporarily used mainly for basic communication. The Elders are carriers of extensive semantic knowledge and complex patterns of communication. They are keepers of a specialized educational program, expressed through, and encoded in the structures of the language. The Elders can explain the culturally-relevant etymology and transmit traditional teachings on word meaning, root words and stories. This meaningful role was described as follows:

“We’ve lost environmental language, animal knowledge, spiritual aspects, our sacred knowledge. A lot of the language right now is very basic forms of the language used to communicate, this is what the Elders are saying. Ancient, older forms of a language, those forms are not being used anymore. Those are highly advanced words that we have lost. But the Elders still have that knowledge. Something we call TEK knowledge, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Indigenous science. The old Cree was very traditional, everything had strong meaning about the way of culture, beliefs, animals, stories that came with it. All these stories are part of our educational program. The Elders would practice that when the child was growing up.”

This comment underpins the importance of the older version of the language as an embodiment of the cultural heritage of a specific area, reproduced during ceremonies and sacred events. One of the Elders talked about regularly visiting one of his relatives whom he sees as a primary source of language expertise. These language sessions have significantly enriched his vocabulary to the extent where he is able to provide several alternatives to the words used by the speakers of a more contemporary version of Ojibwe.

Elders are recognized as source of inspiration and qualified guides who “offer themselves” as tutors and have skillful means to encourage the youth so that they can pursue language education. The study participants remarked on how beneficial it would be for Elders and children to spend time together and engage in meaningful language activities within the afterschool day care program.

One of the participants shared a personal story of how being raised by her grandparents benefited her in terms of language skills:

“Language starts in the home from my own personal experience. I was raised by my grandparents and that’s probably the only reason why I’m able to speak my language. And my siblings who were raised by my parents do not speak the language. So I would say that the key ingredient to learning to speak the language is to have the children involved with the grandparents as much as possible because they are the language keepers.”

25 One on one interview, Midland.
26 One on one interview, Timmins.
27 Group interview, Sudbury.
4.5 “Bringing back the pride in our speech”: wise practices and recommendations to strengthen language transmission

Based on the data collected in this research, the following wise practices were identified:

- **Increasing exposure to indigenous languages**
  The participants spoke about the importance of seizing every opportunity to increase exposure to language learning. It was mentioned in a previous section of this report that some of the Friendship Centre workers make substantial efforts to introduce the language to the families they provide services to. Other ideas involved increasing language visibility by labelling different rooms and objects in the Friendship Centres as well as setting up “language booths” with audio and video language installations. These language spaces would offer the community members a possibility to listen to stories and enjoy videos in their languages. Another recommendation involved the use of recordings with basic phrases, played to a visitor upon entering a Friendship Centre. Similarly, the participants proposed that the reception staff should be trained to greet the visitors using Indigenous languages. Another way to trigger interest in language would be to promote introductory phrases and short prayers at staff meetings where the workers would take turns to give thanks or say a few words about how they feel that day. Some of the study participants suggested mandatory language classes for Friendship Centre workers as well as establishing a language day on a weekly or monthly basis to encourage the staff and the community to speak the languages as much as possible.

Another idea involved promoting the languages during sharing circles. One of the Knowledge Holders reported that the sharing circle she attends is composed of more Cree speaking women than English speakers, however they do not use their first language and it is sometimes hard for them to express in the mainstream language.

- **Fostering language immersion environments within Friendship Centres**
  When asked about initiatives that would ensure desired outcomes in language revitalization, some of the Knowledge Holders suggested creating language immersion spaces within daycare and after-school programs provided by the Friendship Centres in order to start children learning Indigenous languages from a pre-verbal age. The collected data indicate that some of the child care programs provided by the Friendship Centres include elements of Indigenous language development, giving children a possibility to access books and flash cards with basic vocabulary and commands. Nonetheless, the goals of immersion programs extend beyond limited language exposure, as the former aim to not only teach languages but to create fluent speakers. One of the workers stated that “(...) doing everything in the language would be good for the little ones because they pick up so easily. It’s easy to teach the little ones, they are just so full of knowledge and they are like a sponge”.

Clearly, having Elders and experienced speakers who are willing to participate in language immersion on a daily basis, is fundamental to successful program delivery. Another critical factor in this context has to do with securing parents' involvement in the intergenerational web of language speakers. It is essential to support caregivers (and especially new parents) in providing opportunities for young children to practice language at home so that they can experience language continuity throughout the day.

To achieve the desired outcomes, the participants suggested that parents should participate, at least to some extent, in the on-site immersion activities:

> “I think you would have to do that not just with the kids. The parents would have to be committed to stay as well at the same time, rather than just dropping their kids off and then they are here for three hours and then they go off and do whatever. It would have to be parent and child are here and they are learning together. So that they could help each other.”

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28 Group interview, Sudbury.
Further long-term language continuity can be supported by engaging in conversations with local school boards to strategize how language immersion can be fostered in schools.

- **Creating intergenerational environment for language transmission**
  The information we collected indicates the importance and benefits of creating culturally safe language instruction, such as intergenerational language classes where children and adults have a chance to learn together and support each other. Bringing together students with different levels of language proficiency in a family environment, provides the community members with an opportunity to benefit from multiple teachers and practice the value of learning from Elders. The opportunity for interaction between the Elders and children was recognized as essential to assist the young speakers in expanding their language fluency. Furthermore, parents’ and caregivers’ commitment to learning was seen as crucial in ensuring that the language is spoken in the home setting on a daily basis.

- **Strengthening oral traditions**
  A number of participants emphasized the necessity to prioritize oral language transmission in the practice of teaching. Maintaining oral language transfer was recognized as part of the cultural legacy and described as “following in our ancestors’ footsteps”. The Knowledge Holders highly valued listening skills which they considered as vital to the learning process. Language used to be a “way of life”, therefore wise learning practices involve immersing oneself in a language and listening to proficient speakers as often as possible without relying too heavily on a written word. Spending a lot of time with a language keeper ensures that the learner receives the correct language transmission and truly grasps the meaning of the words. According to the majority of the community members, these results cannot be achieved by learning through translation or memorizing vocabulary lists without meaningful participation. When asked about the utility of writing, some participants talked about “desecrating the language” which is not adequately expressed through a written word and highlighted the value of oral transmission of knowledge as an intrinsic aspect of their cultures and societies, reflected in a language that is “caught by mouth” or flows through a song:

> “I used to struggle a lot with my tongue to make certain sounds. I can do it now but through music. And that's where it begins. That oral language is really important. Society has its writing down things, but we need to go back to our original way and we are oral people. That's how we tell our stories, that's how we sing our songs, that's how we say our prayers.”

Writing implies standardization and the loss of dialectal diversity. Some of the Knowledge Holders stressed that there is no “correct way of spelling” and that the language is encapsulated in the sounds. Writing is not as crucial for the language transfer as identifying the root words which help to build up sentences. One of the community teachers interviewed in this study, sees writing as a mere memory technique and encourages the learners to write down strings of letters as subjective phonological representations of the sounds they hear, without being forced to follow spelling rules of any standardized writing system.

One of the young speakers expressed distrust in books which have misrepresented historical accountings and spiritual traditions of Indigenous people. This is the main reason why this individual prefers to be taught the language orally.

- **Land-based language initiatives and culture programming**
  Land was acknowledged as one of the primary sources of language teachings. Because language is perceived as a living entity rather than an abstract communication system, it requires certain conditions to be successfully transmitted. A classroom setting rarely meets these conditions because it does not facilitate communication in worldview-based language domains. When asked about wise practices in language transmission, the study participants frequently opted for more wholistic, culturally-rooted
and contextualized methods, grounded in outdoor, land-based activities that strengthen traditional domains of language. Examples of specific activities, as described by the participants, involved nature walks, plant and animal naming, telling stories, learning survival wisdom and skills, participating in ceremonies, traditional naming practices and rites of passage. Communication in Indigenous languages is crucial to keep these traditional skills and knowledge alive. The recommendations focused on creating an experiential learning environment and introducing hands-on techniques such as modelling, practice and animation connected to specific cultural moments and places of significance. These ideas were described accurately by the words of this Elder:

“Our language is with actions. Even when I go to the ceremonies, when they say something we do it. And we know what’s being said and we know what we have to do. That’s the way people learn. We could sit here and try to learn but we are not doing action. Because our spirit has to go. Whatever is being thought, our spirit has to go there. So spirit and you are learning together. It is the same with our ceremonies.”

Sensory experiences and stimulating imaginative memory by storytelling were also valued by the participants. These learning opportunities could be provided within the framework of immersion camps, ceremonies and other cultural events of relevance where language goals overlap with teaching culture.

Again, also in this context, the Knowledge Holders stressed the significant role spirituality plays in language revival. Learning the language is sometimes an essential step in gaining access to spiritual insights within particular religious traditions such as the Medicine Society, as described by this participant:

“You want to be Midewiwin? Learn your language. Because when you go into that lodge there is no English spoken. You go into that lodge you have a translator if you don’t know the language and you learn the language. I have a girlfriend that’s Midewiwin and before she was Midewiwin she didn’t have the language at all. She can speak the language today because that was important to her. Ceremony is important to her. Knowing what they are speaking about in the lodge is important to her. So she worked really hard to learn the language. And now she is pretty good. And that’s preserving our way of life.”

This Knowledge Holder also expressed her appreciation and gratitude to the Midewiwin society for keeping the language alive by preserving the teaching scrolls and passing along history to succeeding generations.

- Addressing the needs of diverse language learners

The study participants recognized that diverse language transfer strategies need to be implemented to meet the needs of diverse learners. Language curricula need to build on goals and interests of different students within a broader framework of their personal, spiritual and professional development. One example given by the community members refers to the youth who have begun to explore their languages in order to better understand traditional roles and ceremonial responsibilities such as the one of a Fire Keeper. The Knowledge Holders also spoke about specific learning needs of the Friendship Centre frontline workers who provide services to speakers of different Indigenous languages. Furthermore, some of the individuals who participated in this study are residential school survivors who were forbidden to speak their language and have lost it or have been barely able to use it after being exposed to traumatic experiences. These dormant speakers, or “sleepers” as they call themselves, require special help to bring their language knowledge back to life and regain the ability to speak it. It was suggested that the solution might be a short-term immersion in a First Nation on-reserve community (lasting between a few months up to a year) that would provide them with an opportunity to communicate with fluent speakers on a daily basis and quickly recover their language knowledge and skills.

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30 Group interview, Sudbury.
31 Sharing circle, North Bay.
• **Preservation of locally spoken dialects in language transfer activities.**

Overall, the participants prioritized language variants spoken predominantly in a particular geographical area and expressed negative attitudes towards the fact that some learning materials are published in variants which are not even used in Canada, such as the Minnesota dialect of Ojibwe, spoken in the United States. Local language variants are seen as inherent expressions of cultural practices which sustain social systems and create identity-based ties in a particular community. Urban Indigenous speech communities in the research sites are composed of various dialectal subgroups with different mobility patterns and thus have different language maintenance needs. Dialectal diversity (even within a small geographical area) was clearly perceived as a challenge in language transfer practices, one that could possibly be addressed by developing community-crafted pedagogical responses to accommodate students' language choices. Given that some learners are criticized when using their dialect of choice and corrected when “dropping” word endings or “making grammatical mistakes”, integration of language diversity in teaching methodology is definitely an issue to consider.

• **Language advocacy**

Recommendations stemming from this research study extended beyond the level of local initiatives. It was pointed out that Indigenous language instruction receives far less governmental funding than French language education (the latter is clearly less useful for Indigenous people), an issue that needs to be addressed by advocating for equitable services and multi-year financial support for original language development in both community-driven and school-based programs. Furthermore, as observed by the study participants, Indigenous languages, including diverse dialects, should receive official status in Canada. It is also important to note that Indigenous languages visibility displayed in signage and in broader public domain was viewed by the Knowledge Holders as worth campaigning for.
5. Conclusions and Moving Forward

5.1 What have we learned?

This study examined the ways in which urban Indigenous communities in Ontario transmit their traditional languages in the intra-institutional environment. It also provided insights into the knowledge perpetuated through these languages and identified a set of recommendations to set up empowering conditions for Indigenous language revitalization in a contemporary urban context.

The participants highlighted the interest and the eagerness of the community members to learn their language, accompanied by the enthusiasm, dedication and resourcefulness of the community language educators, as well as the willingness of the Elders to tutor new learners. The availability of learning resources and benefits related to a multi-generational language instruction setting were also valued.

Further support and assistance is required to secure multi-year funding for language initiatives, address issues related to dialectal diversity, challenges in accessing teacher training and creating a long-lasting culture of language learning. In addition to that, the pressure to follow the teaching methods promoted by the official school system, such as the implementation of specific writing systems, was also perceived as a difficulty.

The themes which appeared continuously throughout the study included the importance of language as “good medicine” that warms up one’s heart, brings up the feelings of joy and happiness, enhances connection with the spiritual realm and natural world, and perpetuates core cultural values. Its transmission is crucial to securing cultural continuity and preserving Indigenous way of life. The recognition of a strong spiritual, ancestral and emotional connection to the language, expressed even by the non-speakers, is as remarkable as it is fundamental to future revitalization efforts. More importantly, the knowledge and the vision of life encoded in these languages is not a relic of an ancient era but is practiced in both everyday activities and ceremonial contexts. The spiritual quality of the language, as expressed by the Knowledge Holders, carries important teachings, encoded in words with limited or no semantic equivalents in English. Furthermore, the role of Elders and Knowledge Holders as language keepers with a capacity to pass extensive knowledge of diverse communicative domains on to the next generations of speakers was strongly valued.

It was recommended to increase exposure to Indigenous languages and foster immersion environments within the Friendship Centre programming. The study participants also suggested supporting multigenerational and family oriented language initiatives that strengthen oral language transmission. Preservation of locally spoken dialects was considered to be important, together with addressing the needs of diverse learners and crafting solutions to accommodate different language variation choices in teaching strategies. Last but not least, the Knowledge Holders expressed their support for language advocacy initiatives.
5.2 Guidelines for future research and language development initiatives

One of the key areas of interest in language research, provided by the study participants, is an inquiry about the ancestral roots and historical background of the region/community, as well as its connection to the local linguistic heritage. A complementary research focus might involve changes in patterns of modern language use produced by migration to urban centres. The goal of this knowledge seeking endeavor would be to strengthen linguistic identity by highlighting cultural continuity between the past and present language practices.

Furthermore, research is needed to compile successful language pedagogies and educational practices tied to Indigenous ways of being and knowing. The study participants also proposed to gather and disseminate information about Indigenous language programs available close to their communities, both on a level of school education and grass-root initiatives.

The Knowledge Holders expressed their interest in learning more about secondary and post-secondary language curricula, which impact on language proficiency of the certified teachers and their ability to successfully teach and benefit Indigenous communities. One of the major concerns was related to the fact that some institutions promote language variants which are not spoken in Canada or differ substantially from the dialects used by the local communities.

Elders and Knowledge Holders were recognized as the primary source of language expertise and creativity, and it was recommended that they engage in research about possible teaching solutions regarding dialect diversity/language standardization.

Since some of the participants mentioned the importance of positive reinforcement and the need to pursue comfortable language environment with home atmosphere that could help students learn through natural immersion, an idea of creating intergenerational, home-based language nests with the possibility of outdoor activities following seasonal cycle, might be worth considering. Such program could potentially initiate small-scale language revitalization.

It was suggested that a pilot children immersion program be implemented at one of the Centres, combined with an ongoing research and evaluation of the outcomes and their impacts on the health of the community. According to the Knowledge Holders, the project should be preceded by further consultations to explore language attitudes and determine if the level of community interest and commitment is sufficient to ensure the support of dedicated caregivers and successful experience in language immersion. Depending on the results, similar intergenerational immersion programs might be replicated by other sites in the future.

We believe that developing a set of wholistic, community-vetted and health-related indicators of language immersion outcomes could contribute to further understand these processes. Resources produced in the course of such endeavor could enhance the evaluation framework by providing culturally grounded community determinants of health, such as the knowledge of Indigenous languages. Recent research indicates that language and culture can act as protective factors for at-risk communities (Hallet, 2007; Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Oster et al., 2014). Similarly, the studies conducted by the OFIFC have repeatedly identified the essential role cultural awareness programs and Indigenous languages play in maintaining strong Indigenous identities and supporting urban Indigenous communities. A recently published AKWE:GO Wholistic Longitudinal Study Baseline Report reveals that urban Indigenous children appreciate culture-based learning and an opportunity to practice Indigenous languages, songs, stories, crafts, pow wow, harvesting, smudging and the use of plant medicines (OFIFC, 2014). The key findings of this study further reveal that the knowledge of Indigenous languages can contribute to the overall wholistic health of individuals and communities. Continued research is therefore crucial to determine how language immersion is benefiting the health and the general wellbeing of the community, as well as to design appropriate delivery vessels, prevent dropouts, evaluate students’ progress, expectations and the kind of support and incentives they need to continue with their language education.
An important tool which can support the assessment of language initiatives and indicator development processes is the USAI Evaluation Path, recently developed by the OFIFC. The Path is designed as a practical, community-determined and community-reflexive, highly participatory process that is positioned within the context of relationships to assess the usefulness of a research project, community program, or any development initiative that involves urban Indigenous communities. The Path starts when a project begins and purposefully continues throughout its duration. Its processes aim to support the communities and researchers in establishing whether their project goals are being realized, and provide tools for communities to frame and phrase the generated knowledge so it preserves its independence, without the need to constantly re-affirm itself and re-claim legitimacy vis-à-vis mainstream and often competing types of knowledge (OFIFC, 2015).

The OFIFC continuously pursues new levels of excellence in research while cementing its position as a social innovator. The OFIFC’s innovative use of concepts rooted in Indigenous languages, such as an Ojibwe notion of okwiinowag (moving together as a flock), which describes women’s response to trauma and conceptually guides a ground-breaking study “Breaking Free, Breaking Through (OFIFC & ONWA, 2015), or gaa-niigaanijii, an Ojibway concept of leadership used in research done in collaboration with the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, have a strong potential to benefit both the Indigenous and mainstream approaches. Therefore, more research about Indigenous epistemology, as encoded in Indigenous languages, is needed to expand the knowledge of words and the teachings that come with them, and to support cutting-edge solutions in the field of community development.

Indigenous languages are gateways through which the new speakers from Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural background can access rich and creative cognitive resources embedded in Indigenous ways of being and knowing. For many centuries, Indigenous voices have been shut off, silenced, drowned out and ignored. Now, these voices and knowledges carried within them, are growing stronger and stronger, nurturing the dreams and the everyday good life of urban Indigenous communities.
6. Bibliography


Appendix 1- Qualitative Interview Questions

Environmental Scan Questionnaire

1. Do you speak any Indigenous languages at the Friendship Centre?
   a. What languages do you speak?
2. Do you think it is important for the people in your community to speak an Indigenous language?
3. Who are the language keepers in your organization?
4. What type of programs, services, and projects are currently happening or are upcoming within the centre, with reference to language?
   a. What are the tools used to transmit the language/s?
5. What are the strengths within the current programs, services, and projects that can facilitate language transmission in your community?
6. What are the wise practices for Indigenous language transmission in your opinion?
7. Based on your experience working within the community, what gaps in language programming currently exist (related to knowledge, skill, attitude, or practices)?
8. What are the challenges of language transmission within the current programs, services, and projects?
9. What type of language education and/or training would you like to see?
10. What kind of support is needed in your community to address the language needs?
11. Were you comfortable with this interview process? Any suggestions for improvement?

Knowledge Holder Interviews Questionnaire

12. Does language play an important role as a knowledge transfer mechanism in OFIFC?
13. What Indigenous languages are transmitted within OFIFC?
14. What does your language mean to you and how would you describe it?
15. What are the most important values, beliefs, concepts carried by your language?
16. How would your Elders have shared knowledge of language with you?
17. How are Indigenous languages passed on via Friendship Centres?
18. In what spaces and contexts are the languages transmitted (teachings, ceremonies, storytelling, presentations, staff meetings)?
19. To whom is this language transfer directed?
20. Are there any specific protocols applied when Indigenous languages are used?
21. Are traditional teachings on word meaning, root words and stories engaged in language transfer within OFIFC?
22. What kind of knowledge is transmitted via language (basic phrases for everyday communication, key cultural concepts, stories, teachings)?
23. Were you comfortable with this interview process? Any suggestions for improvement?