

Once upon a time there was a young child. This child spoke English. When the time came for this child to go to school, there was no school around in which the Anishnawbe language was taught.

Why was it important that the Anishnawbe language be taught? Many things can be explained in the Anishnawbe language, but lose their meaning, colour, or humour by translating them into English. The English language is everywhere: on television, radio, on signs and billboards, newspapers and magazines. It tells of many things that are important. It also tells us of many things that are not important. The English language passes many useless messages to us every day. One of the biggest messages that the English language has tried to pass on to us was that Anishnawbe culture, history, political heritage, language, and the place of Anishnawbe people in Canadian society, was unnecessary and burdensome.

That is not so. How do we know that that is not so? It is not so because of what the Anishnawbe historians, elders and teachers have told us. The Anishnawbe society has a long and honourable history. The Anishnawbe language is precise and descriptive. The Anishnawbe customs are sensible, practical, sensitive and useful.

So a school was founded which taught in a language other than English. If this child could not be taught in school in the Anishnawbe language, then the teaching was to be in a language other than English. It was important that the child be able to learn a new language, so that when the time came for learning the Anishnawbe language, it would not be so hard to learn.

The school year went by. The child learned this new language and passed to the second grade. The reason that the child learned this new language well enough to pass to the next grade was because it was used 100% of the time in school.

The Anishnawbe community in Birch Island has in its people strengths and talents that the non-Native communities around it do not have. For one, the Indian history of this area is one which should be passed on to the children. For another, the culture and customs (for example, Indian music and dance, use of natural foods, natural fibres, legends, etc.), which were once a part of everyday life could once again be used with respect and pride. Lastly, one of the greatest strengths local teachers

Anishnawbe Language and Culture

Essential Use and Practice

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have is their ability to speak the Anishnawbe language. This is a talent that most non-Native teachers do not have. This is a talent and a strength which should be encouraged, and passed on to the children, by its use in the local school. The Anishnawbe language can be taught by Anishnawbe teachers in the local school. But, for this to be successful, it needs to be taught in total immersion style, that is, 100% of the time in school.

But, some would say, what about being able to learn English properly in school or out of school? The reply would be: English is used at home, on television, and on radio enough so that children could still learn what they need to know to communicate with non-Native society. So, the learning of a new language in school is possible even when English is used at home.

What will happen if the Anishnawbe language is not taught in school? It will be just as it is now, the English language is

used more and more, and the Anishnawbe language less and less.

It can be thought of this way: non-Native teachers have had experience with the English language for a long time. The Anishnawbe teachers have had experience with both the Anishnawbe and the English language for a long time. For local teachers not to teach in the Anishnawbe language would be like taking a shining light and hiding it under a bushel-basket when the surroundings are in darkness.

The number one choice in the case of the young Anishnawbe child who spoke English would have been for the child to be taught in the Anishnawbe language in the school. Since there was no school which taught in the Anishnawbe language a second choice had to be made: to learn in a new language other than English until the time came when the Anishnawbe language could be taught in school.

It is very hard for parents to practice and teach the Anishnawbe language in the home, since many of the parents' own educations took place in English. Add to that the amount of influence English language television and radio has on our lives.

The choices need to be considered very carefully. To decide in favour of a non-Native language and curriculum when one is in a position to choose the Native language and Native curriculum could be detrimental. The children in the Native community today will be the leaders in the Indian Self-Government tomorrow. They will need all the strength, wisdom and support that the Native community can give. The Native community can give them the Native language, values, and traditions to guide them through the years ahead. That is why the use of the Anishnawbe language and culture needs to be practiced in the school.

