

Saving the Shuswap Language

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The English language is still in its infancy when compared to Secwepemctsin, the language of the Secwepemc (Shuswap) people, which has likely existed for as long as archaeological records show, up to 10,000 years. Yet, like most other first nation languages, Secwepemctsin is on the verge of extinction as there are less than 250 elders left who speak it fluently. Thankfully, major language revitalization efforts have been underway for nearly two decades, including the Secwepemctsin language immersion school, Chief Atahm, on the Adams Lake Reserve across the river from Chase.

Back in 1987, a group of parents began a pre-school immersion program modelled after a successful Maori initiative where infants and pre-school age children were exposed to elders speaking only Secwepemctsin. This language-nest program included activities such as nature walks, crafts, story-telling, cooking, singing and playing. With no external financial support, the parents raised their own funds for the project.

When the children reached school age, the parents helped to create the Chief Atahm School in 1991, which has since expanded to a full immersion program up to the 3rd grade and a bilingual program up to the 7th grade. The school, according to its website, “is grounded in the belief that knowledge of the language, traditional practices and beliefs of the Secwepemc will help develop a strong and healthy community. Individuals will be prepared for today’s world and will help to protect the earth for future generations.”

The school’s circular shape is based on the ancient pit house design with 4 round classrooms which can be used for story telling and drama. Since many of the teachers are not fully fluent, they are assisted by elders in the classrooms. One of the key features of the school’s curriculum has been the preparation of special Secwepemctsin language textbooks for many of the courses at various grade levels. And every year the school sponsors a language conference to share their successes and foster efforts to teach indigenous languages within a cultural context.

The school's curriculum involves far more than just the full range of core content such as math and science, as students are involved with hands on projects, including building sweat lodges, sewing, fishing, and organic gardening during the summer months. The students also participate in many cultural activities, such as, outdoor survival; fishing; smoking salmon; making baskets, drums, moccasins, and crafts; camping; hiking; and running. The school’s principal, Robert Mathew, and the parents value the school for more than just providing skills and knowledge, but for also providing graduates with a stronger sense of identity that gives them more self confidence.

Despite the success of the immersion program that includes over 60 students from the three nearby bands, the Secwepemctsin language is still not common use in the community due to the overwhelming nature of popular culture dominated by the use of the English language. However, every year more Secwepemc community members want

to learn and practice their language, which is the key component of their culture. And some participate in the language immersion camps held by a number of bands during the summer months.

Secwepemtsin had always been an oral language, until 1974, when Dutch linguist Aert Kuipers developed the present writing system for the language. This system consists of 43 consonants and 5 vowels, but even these letters do not represent the Secwepemc sounds accurately. The language is difficult to learn, as many of the sounds are not found in the English language. And there are three main dialects, in the east, the west and the north; and most of the words are either similar or the same, but with different pronunciations.

While Chief Atahm is the only full immersion school, there are Secwepemtsin language courses available at local provincial schools and at other schools on reserves. In addition, the Secwepemc Cultural Education Society runs programs aimed to preserve the language, including collecting and recording the memoirs of Secwepemc elders, researching historical records, developing curriculum materials, and working with all the bands to foster Secwepemc culture.

The Secwepemc people have faced an enormous uphill battle to recover from the many decades of injustice they have had to endure, including the years of abuse at the Indian Residential Schools that had tried to eradicate their culture and language. While many bands have now achieved financial successes with major land developments, there is still the realization that more work is need to revive their culture and language. And with some Chief Atahm School graduates now teaching Secwepemtsin to young children, there is renewed hope that the Secwepemc culture and language will flourish once again.