SEEKING CULTURAL EMPOWERMENT: 
TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE SM'ALGYAX LANGUAGE PROGRAM 
IN THE PRINCE RUPERT SCHOOL DISTRICT 

by 

Wael Afifi 

B.Sc., Zagazig University (Egypt), 1987 
Teaching Certificate, Université du Québec, 1992 

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Abstract

After many decades of colonialism, First Nations suffer from cultural disruption and the majority of First Nations children are not experiencing success in the public school system in most districts in British Columbia. Aboriginal communities are struggling to effect changes and to regain control of their future and their own cultural identity. Through a qualitative analysis of the perspective of teachers in a Sm’algyax language program in Prince Rupert, this project looked at the role that a school-based Aboriginal language program could play in such cultural revival. The general framework of this work was based on a socio-cultural approach to language that asserts that language and culture are intertwined. The study examined teachers’ perspectives on several aspects of the Sm’algyax language program in the Prince Rupert School District. Analysis of responses revealed that the educators believed that the program has managed to ameliorate the learning environment in the classroom by enhancing the sense of pride and belonging of the Sm’algyax students.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

After many decades of colonialism, Aboriginal peoples continue to suffer from cultural disruption and the majority of Aboriginal children do not experience adequate success in the public school system. In response, First Nations communities are struggling to effect changes and to regain control of their future and their own cultural identity (Ministry of Education, 2002; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; The Royal Commission on Aboriginal peoples, 1996).

What is the role of language in such a cultural revival? Is cultural identity important to school success, and, if so, can language programs contribute to stronger cultural identity and thus enhance the success of First Nations students? In considering these questions, it is useful to start by formulating an understanding of how language develops and intertwines with culture and cultural identity. Language competence does not develop without social interactions, and these social interactions always happen within a cultural context.

Vygotsky (1978, 1987) understood the importance of such contexts. He credited children’s development to their social and cultural interactions. Children’s learning occurs in what Vygotsky referred to as a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), in a dynamic process of mediating adults’ teachings and children’s capacity to learn. Adults’ language, instruction and teaching in their interactions with children are primarily cultural tools that reflect their society’s norms and acceptable behaviours.

After exposing “the long-term historical effects of assimilation policies, [and the] marginalization of First Nations culture” (p. 13), Wilson and Martin (1997) argued that losing language is losing culture because language serves as a mental map that guides culture.
They linked language, learning, and culture by explaining that "learning is a social, dynamic, and holistic process that occurs within a cultural context" (p. 29). This socio-cultural perspective on language and learning provides a better understanding of the dynamics that govern the interactions between students and their school's culture and environment.

The practical implications of this view suggest that the re-introduction of the native language and the revitalization of the indigenous culture in a safe and culturally relevant learning environment could be key elements in enhancing Aboriginal students' school success.

**Significance of the Topic**

Improving their overall achievement in school and, in particular, increasing the high school graduation rates of First Nations students in British Columbia, has been the focus of many recent educational initiatives (see British Columbia Teachers' Federation Task Force on First Nations Education, 1999; Ministry of Education, 2002; The Royal Commission on Aboriginal peoples, 1996; Wilson and Martin 1997; Wilson and Napoleon, 1998). Language must be a key element of this focus.

Howatt (1997) revealed how education for assimilation heavily relies on teaching "not only through language but also in language" (p. 32). Howatt also defined how language offers a means for explaining and understanding the world. He argued that English, the colonists' language, proved its effectiveness in the exploitation and acculturation of the First Nations of this country.

Hence, in the geographical context of the North Coast of British Columbia, it is important to study the potential, as well as the limitations, of school-based teaching of the native tongue -Sm'algayax- in the particular case of the Tsimshian - to lead the fight against a legacy of injustice and to try to secure a better future for those who are currently attending our public schools.
Specific Focus of this Study

In this project, I will examine the perceptions and beliefs of a number of Sm'álgayx language teachers in the Prince Rupert School District. This program has been offered for over five years at both the elementary and secondary levels. The general framework of this study is based on the premise that language and culture are intertwined, thus a socio-cultural approach to language will be used as the foundation for this study.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This study will address the potential of a school-based aboriginal language program to enhance the cultural identity and school achievement of aboriginal students. The efficacy of a language program in this regard is based on the intensely social nature of language, and specifically on the social functions of language. In this review of the pertinent literature, I will start by examining functions of language as presented in social interactionist and socio-cultural approaches to language. After a brief examination of the theoretical framework of Halliday and Vygotsky, I will focus on schools and educational discourse.

This chapter will address the following questions: How do language and culture interact and intertwine in what Vygotsky has termed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)? What is school culture? What does it represent and who does it help? Why do children from some socio-cultural backgrounds face difficulties at school? How does Vygotsky’s theoretical socio-cultural framework explain these difficulties?

The last part of this section will inspect the impact that the public school culture of British Columbia has had, and continues to have, on First Nations students. Two key questions will be addressed in this part. Has English, the formal language of education, proven its effectiveness in the exploitation and acculturation of Aboriginals? And, perhaps more importantly, what kind of changes need to be implemented to enhance the success of First Nations learners?

Language Functions and Social Interactions

Language serves several purposes – it is multifunctional. Shafer, Staab and Smith (1983) examined some aspects of this multifunctionality through an analysis of language functions for school-aged children. They concluded that all of these functions evolve around
and are characterized by one crucial element: social interaction. When children request something from their parents, ask their teacher a particular question, share a story with others or even engage in a shouting match with their friends on the playground, they are using different functions of language to express a variety of social needs through these different interactions.

In an earlier work, Halliday (1975) suggested a set of language functions that describe how children learn to mean:

"-Instrumental 'I want'
-Regulatory 'do as I tell you'
-Interactional 'me and you'
-Personal 'here I come'
-Heuristic 'tell me why'
-Imaginative 'let's pretend'
-Informative 'I've got something to tell you'" (p. 37).

As Halliday’s categories illustrate, all these functions have a socially interactive aspect. They constitute the foundations of children’s socialization and the essence of social interactions. Thus, they reflect the social environment and the child’s place in it.

A social function can be attributed to almost every utterance, and the whole process of language development could be viewed from a social interactionist perspective. Language, with its specific functions, is the basis of social interaction and at the same time it thrives through such interaction.

Yet, some scholars disagree. Hicks (1996) indicated that many psychologists and educators decline to see language through the social interactionist lens. Instead they limit language to being a tool or “a catalyst for cognitive development” (p.4).
Conversely, Wells (1994) demonstrated how Halliday (1975) and Vygotsky (1978, 1987) shared a perspective of “language as a cultural tool that has been developed and refined in the service of social action and interaction” (p. 49). Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik (1999) also maintained that language “is used for different purposes in different social contexts” (p. 228). McNeil (1985) took a dynamic, social interactionist view of language and its functions, stressing the continuity between language and actions. Perhaps the most convincing argument for the social nature of language is that of Bates, Bretherton, Beeghly-Smith, & McNew (cited in Bohannon and Bonvillian, 1997) who concluded that since humans are social organisms, it would be odd if there were no relation between language and social context in the acquisition and development of a communicative system.

**Language, Culture and the Social Order**

Wertsch (1985) wrote about the ideas and contributions of the Soviet semiotician Vygotsky who attributed children’s cultural development to a long, complex and dialectic process where adults’ mature cultural behaviour conflicts and collides with children’s primitive or natural behaviour.

Halliday (1975) referred to these interactions between adults and children as occurring in a sociological context that possesses its own chain of dependence. He explained that this sequence of connected links starts with the social order, and its transmission to the child. Halliday also outlined the role of language and its functions, as well as the meanings derived from these functions in this transmission, arguing that:

Since language develops as the expression of the social semiotic it serves at the same time as the means of transmitting it, and also of constantly modifying and reshaping it, as the child takes over the culture, the received system of meanings in which he [sic.] is learning to share. (p. 60).
Culture is defined here, as a semiotic system or a system of meanings and information encoded in the linguistic system of behaviour as well as in its verbal framework.

Wells (1994), who analyzed the theories of Vygotsky (1978, 1987) and Halliday (1975), managed to show how their work shared the same socio-culture frame of reference. Under their adult-child interactionist model, language and culture are inseparable; children develop culture as a result of acquiring language and shape their language through cultural dimensions. As Halliday put it, learning language and learning culture are closely interdependent:

Not only in the sense that a child constructs a reality for himself [sic] largely through language, but also in the more fundamental sense that language is itself a part of this reality. The linguistic system is a part of the social system. Neither can be learnt without the other. (p. 120).

According to Vygotsky (1978), this learning takes place during interactions where adults try to “negotiate meaning” with the children by structuring activities within what he termed the children’s Zone of Proximal Development. Gradually, children gain social and cultural awareness by accepting adults’ situational definitions. Every once in a while the negotiation breaks down. In these cases adults impose “deliberate remediation tools for intervention with children from the same culture” (Schneider & Watkins, 1996; p. 158). Yet, even in these cases the child is still learning. Halliday (1975) illustrated how learning takes place after failed negotiation:

If his [sic] mother tells him off he not only knows that he is being told off but also learns something in the process about the value systems of the culture he is participating in. This presupposes that the linguistic system must be coherent not only within itself, but also with the culture (p. 129)
School Culture, Classroom Discourse and the Zone of Proximal Development

As discussed, the children's Zone of Proximal Development demarcates a dynamic process: a process that mediates adults' teachings and children's capacity to learn. Adults' language, teaching and instruction in their interactions with children are primarily cultural tools that reflect society's norms and acceptable behaviours.

The above is also largely true in the school setting where "children are expected to learn and abide by the cultural norms of the school, cultural norms that are consistent with the values, traditions, and expectations of the dominant group in society." (Iglesias, 1985; p.81).

Iglesias exposed how the drafting of educational policies within a society is congruent with the dominant culture's childrearing practices. As a result, some children's home backgrounds may mesh relatively well with the school environment. At the same time, many others do not. Freire (1984) argued that school is not neutral or context free. School is the preserver of existing political structures and socio-cultural relations, a place where the economically disadvantaged, and the culturally different are oppressed and are often submerged in a culture of silence.

Silence is often the result of a process where the child interacts with teachers, administrators and educational support workers who attempt to teach an established school culture that is vastly different or even contradictory to that child's native home culture. The child is silenced in front of what "appear to be very foreign ways of talking and acting" (Ballenger, 1997; p.1). Instructional practices reflect socio-political values or as Gee (cited in Hicks, 1996; p.22) put it "discourses are always embedded in ideologies". It is not surprising that students experiencing an unfamiliar mismatch of values respond in negative ways such asa becoming silent.
Language and classroom discourse have been the focus of many studies. For example, Schiffrin (1994) examined different types of discourse analysis and concluded that despite their varying methods and concepts, they are all united at a general level by the same basic principle: language as social interaction. Adding Schiffrin’s (1994) analysis of discourse to Vygotsky’s (1978, 1987) and Halliday’s (1974) social interactionist assertion that language and culture are interwoven, ultimately leads to one conclusion: classroom discourse is a socio-cultural discourse. If this is the case, then children’s level of comfort, hence their ability to participate and succeed in school would largely depend on the compatibility between their socio-cultural background, and their school’s discourse mediation of the different learning tasks. (Ballenger, 1997; Howatt, 1997; Iglesias, 1985; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Wells, 1994; Wilson & Martin, 1997).

A deeper understanding of the kind of difficulties that children from different socio-cultural backgrounds face at school necessitates further exploration of Vygotsky’s ZPD. Vygotsky (1978) defined the ZPD as: “the difference between a child’s actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.” (quoted in Schneider and Watkins, 1996; p. 157).

The language needed to “solve a problem”, the very nature of that problem, and adult-child interactions are not constant statics that just happen in a valueless, neutral vacuum. They are always an integral part of a social context reflecting the socio-economic status and cultural background of the interacting or guiding adult. Instead of continuing to learn their own home cultural values through parental discourse, children are suddenly expected “to learn and abide by the cultural norms of the school, cultural norms that are consistent with the values, traditions, and expectations of the dominant group in society” (Iglesias, 1985; p. 81).
Children from minority or socio-culturally different backgrounds face difficulties because they are expected to bridge a huge gap. All the development that occurred at home, through a ZPD characterized by a particular set of problems, solved through the guidance of well known faces, using familiar discourse, can be lacking in efficacy or may even be irrelevant at school.

In this new environment, the guiding adults are strangers using unfamiliar discourse to solve very different problems. But, the difficulties faced by these children does not mean that their potential learning development level is deficient; rather the difficulties are a direct result of the school’s inability to relate to their formative domestic experience. It is a case where the school caters to a standard level of development in a pre-set, normalized ZPD that is often very different from and very foreign to the experience and background of many students.

As Purcell- Gates (1995) put it:

> All communities have appropriate cognitive abilities, albeit different ones to fit varied life situations. Similarly, language variation between groups reflects community use and norms, resulting in dialects and registers that must be judged not relative to some ‘perfect’ language but rather to their effectiveness in varying contexts. (p.4).

This should serve as a reminder that communities’ cultural differences should never be viewed as deviations from an artificial standard norm.
The Implications for Aboriginal Students

After many decades of colonialism, the schooling experience of Aboriginal students in British Columbia continues to prove how schools have been slow to respond to Aboriginal values and traditions (Ward, 1996; Wilson & Martin, 1997). Wilson and Martin also exposed the historical effects of assimilation policies and the marginalization of First Nations culture. They argued that losing language is losing culture because language serves as a mental map that guides culture. They linked language, learning, and culture by explaining that “learning is a social, dynamic, and holistic process that occurs within a cultural context” (p. 29). Purcell-Gates (1995) agreed and emphasized the importance of understanding the social context within which learning occurs.

Howatt (1997) made the argument that language has always been defined in terms of its relation to the power involved in its creation, dissemination, and imposition. “The ability to name the world and the privilege to define societal norms is simultaneously the power to displace other meanings.” (p. 36). He described English as “the vernacular of those who colonized the greater part of the Occidental world” (p. 30). He revealed the relation between language and colonialism, where language creates the illusions of truth and reality:

It is language, after all, which offers a means for explaining and understanding the world and from which conceptions of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’, though culturally specific, are derived. Language then, is the vehicle through which the generally accepted axioms and standards of a culture originate and are expressed and legitimated as truths and the real. (p. 33)

Classroom language is an integral part of education for assimilation because students progress as they master more sophisticated meanings. They are taught “not only through language but also in language” which, according to Howatt makes such language immersion
“a cardinal tenet of education for assimilation” (p. 32). Howatt also explained that the written word in textbooks often misrepresents, even demonizes “the other”, yet the information in these same textbooks is considered and interpreted as the ultimate truth. In the classroom, teachers are another source of ultimate truth which strengthens their authority and enhances the imbalance of power between teachers and students. In this educational process, the values of the dominant culture are upheld and the subversion of First Nations cultures continues. As a result, the author concluded that such pedagogy affirms the values of what he termed the “settler society” and legitimizes the reality of the dominant majority.

Writing textbooks is an active, biased proceeding coloured by value-laden words, thus it is a “social meaning-making process” (Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 1999, p. 245). Kirkness (1977) discussed the biased content of social studies textbooks. She gave examples of each type of the following biases: omission, defamation, disparagement, cumulative implication, lack of validity, inertia, obliteration, disembodiment, lack of concreteness, and lack of comprehensiveness. She concluded that subtle prejudice still exists in recent textbooks because the same sources are still used for referencing material and that Aboriginal peoples “receive the worst treatment in textbooks of any class of minority, either by omission or commission.” (p. 600).

Aboriginal Language, a Practical Initiative and a Possible Solution

If English, the language of the colonists, has proven, through textbooks and classroom discourse, its effectiveness in the exploitation and acculturation of the First Nations of this country, then it is crucial to study the potential as well as the limitations of the various native tongues to lead any fight back against a legacy of injustice and to try to secure a better future for those who are currently attending our public schools.
Sm'alkyax is the language of the Ts'msyen (Coast Tsimshian) people of the North Coast. It “is seen by contemporary elders and community members as an important vehicle for cultural identity and self-expression” (Ignace, 2001, p.10). Its study was introduced as a Second Language Program in Prince Rupert in 1997 and is now offered in every school in the district.¹

According to the Sm’alkyax 5-12 Integrated Resource Package, the introduction of this second language program is intended to:

- Contribute to the revitalization of the language among the younger generation;
- Foster the appreciation of Ts’mseyen culture and language;
- Encourage and initiate the revival of Sm’alkyax among children and young adults;
- Lead to an increased appreciation of the language among non-Ts’mseyen students.

In their field study of this community, Wilson and Napoleon (1998) recommended that the Tsimshian students get the opportunity to develop an understanding of the cultural richness and traditional wisdom carried in Sm’alkyax, their original language. Students “should understand how this worldview is transmitted through storytelling, oral language, adawx (historical narratives), songs, dance, and drama. (p.36). Bruner (1996) elaborated on how narratives promote understanding “by telling a story of what something is ‘about’” (p.90). Sm’alkyax acquisition and classroom use of traditional narratives constitute a cornerstone of what Ward (1996) referred to as cultural rapprochement that must be implemented in order to validate Aboriginal students’ experiences and, thus, enhance their school success. He also added that “culturally responsive pedagogy...must involve cultural revitalization” (p.24).

¹ Sm’alkyax had been offered since the 1970s in Kitkatla, Hartley Bay and Lax Kw’alaams, remote First Nations village schools within School District 52, but was only introduced into the schools in Prince Rupert in 1997.
Ohta (1995) compared first and second language acquisitions in the ZPD and explained that second language acquisition is also “embedded in richly social contexts of human interaction” (p.98). He maintained that the learning of a second language is always a dynamic process that occurs through socio-cultural interactions and takes place as “the gap between what the learner can do alone and with assistance in the field through collaboration.” (p.96-97). Hooper, Mitchell and Brumfit (1994) talked about “the social and cultural empowerment...and the enhanced motivation” that a second language provides to the learner (p.36).

In order to provide that sense of empowerment to the Sm'algyax learners, their teachers have to motivate them by providing instructional strategies that are “closely integrated into teaching the culture, and teaching the traditional and contemporary means and ways of communicating of the Tsimshian people” (Ignace, 2001, p.12). At the same time, teachers must enhance their students’ ability to communicate by enabling them to become functional in understanding and expressing themselves in Sm'algyax. To assist teachers in these important tasks the Integrated Resource Package recommends a communicative-experiential approach: “In this approach, the focus of instruction is the purposeful use of the language to perform real life tasks, to share ideas, to acquire information, and to get things done.” (Ignace, 2000, p.4).

The Curriculum guide lists other strategies including the use of visual and context clues as well as Total Physical Response (TPR) exercises that nurture listening and comprehension and rely on the use of body movement to accelerate second language learning. As illustrated, these instructional strategies stress that Sm'algyax language education should not be viewed as “an object in itself, but as a practical means of communication embedded in cultural contexts and authentic situations.” (Ignace, 2001, p.13)
Still, there are many challenges that lie ahead for First Nations students. Ovington (1994) examined the collapse of a traditional language enrichment program because of the gap between older and younger generations. Due to this gap, the majority of the students resented the language classes, which eventually led to their cancellation from the high school. The experience demonstrated that in the absence of an integrated language perspective that addresses the socio-cultural realities, failure is strong possibility.

Wilson and Napoleon (1998) realized the importance of an integrated approach. They cautioned against fragmented curriculum that separates Aboriginal content into separate units because such a curriculum does not adhere to a holistic approach that understands and respects the socio-cultural background of the students. A language program could not succeed without the full integration of traditional talk structures, historical narratives, in other words a full recreation of the rich aspects of Aboriginal culture. Ignace (2001) encouraged all teachers to address cross-curricular integration between Sm’algyax and other subjects whenever possible in order to enable Sm’algyax “to be regarded as a living language rather than a school subject” (p.14).

Conclusion of the Literature Review

As demonstrated, social interaction constitutes a useful frame of reference for understanding language acquisition and development. A socio-cultural approach to learning and educational discourse helps in formulating an understanding of school culture and how it develops. Such an approach also provides an explanation to the overlapping of language and culture in the Zone of Proximal Development. Students who belong to socio-culturally-different minorities face many difficulties that hamper their success at school. This is especially true for First Nations students who, after decades of colonization and harmful attacks on Aboriginal cultures, find themselves in foreign modes of discourse at school.
Authentic Aboriginal language programs that follow a socio-cultural model which integrates language, culture and traditions in a holistic manner might provide a solution that enhances the success of First Nations students and emancipates them from the culture of silence.
Hypothesis and Research Questions

In their work on naturalistic studies, Smith & Glass (1987) explained that “field studies and qualitative research are two other terms that have been used to characterize the methods we have chosen to call naturalistic.” (p.254). These authors defined working hypotheses as the “potential and tentative explanations for what is likely to be observed in the course of the study.” (p.261). They stressed the need for those pursuing naturalistic studies to write working hypotheses in order to formalize them.

The main working hypothesis of this study is that, even in the context of a second language school program, learning Sm’algyax represents a cultural revival that could help future First Nations generations in re-defining their identity and recreating pride in their own culture. Respecting and supporting students’ native language and cultural heritage should increase these students’ sense of pride and in the process enhance their learning environment at school.

In order to assess the validity of this hypothesis, Sm’algyax teachers from Prince Rupert were interviewed to provide their views on the following important questions:

- How did the introduction of this language program affect Aboriginal students in the district?
- Can the Sm’algyax initiative enhance the educational experience of Aboriginal students - their school culture - and start to remedy the devastating impacts of decades of colonization?

The teachers were also asked to share their views on ways of improving the Sm’algyax program and to talk about their dreams and aspirations for the program.
CHAPTER THREE

Research Method

This research examined educators’ perspectives and general views of the Sm’algyax language program and the way it is influencing and impacting students. Five Sm’algyax teachers were interviewed and were asked to provide general comments in response to the questions as explained in the procedure and data analysis section of this chapter. In the next chapter, the findings extracted from these responses will be placed in the context of the available literature on the topic, including previous works relevant to the district in question.

Rationale

Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik (1999) reviewed how case study research focuses on individuals in the field in order to understand their perspectives. It is an inquiry that “enables you [the researcher] to clarify and make explicit your own connections between teaching and learning” (p. 398). Hence, this method was chosen in order to better understand the Sm’algyax educators’ perspective and their general view of the program and the way it is affecting their students’ learning environment.

Educators involved in the Sm’algyax program were chosen to be interviewed because of their unique background and expertise. They truly have the professional responsibility for “the intellectual, physical, social and emotional development of the students entrusted in their care.” (British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, 2002; p. 119)

Stipek (1998) demonstrated that when educators understand their students’ cultural background and manage to enhance their students’ sense of pride and belonging, they succeed in strengthening the students’ intrinsic motivation and encourage learning and mastery as goals.
The Subjects, the Setting and the Material

Five teachers, four females and one male, including a resource teacher from district staff involved in the coordination of the Sm'ālgyəx language program, were interviewed in Prince Rupert during the week of December 2-6, 2002.

With teaching experience that ranged between five and over fifteen years, these educators possess a rich expertise that combines elementary, secondary as well as alternate schools teaching assignments. Between the five of them, they have taught and interacted with Sm'ālgyəx students in every school in the Prince Rupert area. Two of the classroom teachers are among the fewer than estimated five hundred remaining fluent speakers of the language, and were certified through the Language Authority process. The other two are among a younger generation of qualified Tsimshian teachers. Unfortunately, due to historical reasons outlined in the literature review of this project, they happen to be less fluent in Sm'ālgyəx.

Another reason that was taken into consideration when choosing the participants, was the fact that the four teachers taught through team-teaching situations that paired the two fluent speakers of the language with the two qualified teachers. Such teams provide a mixture of freshness and experience with several types of expertise, and transform the classroom into a community of learners where students as well as their teachers are constantly learning with and from each other.

Procedure and Data Analysis

Smith and Glass (1987) described how successful interviews manage to elicit data when the “researcher prompts the subject with a series of questions... to obtain the subjects’ perspectives on what events mean to them.” (p. 266). The teachers were asked to provide general observations and comments about their students and their work. Appendix C outlines the series of questions that the subjects were asked.
Four interviews were conducted. The shortest lasted about 40 minutes and the longest took about 75 minutes as it involved two of the educators who teach together as a team. Schools and other educational institutions were chosen to host the meetings in order to provide familiarity and overcome any discomfort. A tape recorder was used during the meetings and the full conversations were transcribed shortly thereafter; the subjects were given access to these transcripts.

On later examination of the interviews, major themes and topics were identified. Each topic was given a colour code to facilitate the grouping and streaming of the different themes. Green highlighted comments on different elements of school culture, orange outlined the impact of colonialism and assimilation policies, red identified teachers' efforts and energy, pink represented the program's expectations, blue identified the positive effects on the students, and brown portrayed the teachers' goals and aspirations for the future. Needless to say, many colours overlapped during numerous parts of the conversations proving the difficulty of coding the data and the necessity to closely examine the transcripts in order to tease the meaning out of the conversations. After coding the major themes, they were linked to the literature review in order to tie the emerging themes to the different sections of the theoretical framework outlined in chapter two.

Ethical Considerations

This inquiry closely followed the University of Northern British Columbia research project ethical guidelines. For example: to ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used to refer to the interviewed subjects. After the completion of the work, the subjects will also have full access to the project findings.
The project was approved by the Prince Rupert School District (see appendix A) and the University of Northern British Columbia (see appendix D). All participants were given the information sheet and were asked to sign the consent form attached in appendix B.

Limitations of the Study

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that this research did not examine any data on the impact of the Sm'algayx language program on Aboriginal students’ academic success or graduation rates. Future analysis of students’ achievements in other subject areas, and detailed comparisons of graduation rates before and after the introduction of Sm’algayx would be useful quantitative indicators that would examine the impact of the program on overall academic success.

A second limiting factor is the fact that this study focussed only on some of the teachers directly involved in the program. The fact that this study was limited to five interviews necessitates further discussions with other teachers in the program before any attempt to generalize the findings. Research did not extend to the students or their parents. Neither did the study elicit feedback from other teachers who work with these Tsimshian students and who may have indirect perceptions of the program’s impacts. And finally, the study did not seek feedback from the Tsimshian community at large.
CHAPTER FOUR

Discussion of the Findings

Qualitative data analysis requires the categorization of information into a smaller set of themes or propositions but “the trick is... to reduce the volume of data without losing its essential characteristics and meaning” (Smith & Glass, 1987; p. 271). The researcher seeks to confirm (or refute) the working hypotheses as well as the categories defined, by consistently reviewing the evidence in the data collected. In addition, a clear link must be established between the theoretical framework – the literature review in the case of this study – and the findings.

This chapter will integrate the foundations detailed in the literature review into the colour-coded themes, from the data, using quotes to illustrate the findings. The introductory note (the red theme) will focus on the educators’ efforts and energy. The legacy of colonialism (orange) will represent a concrete demonstration of the sad history mentioned in the literature review. The school culture section, highlighted in green in my data, will provide evidence that the reality lived by First Nations students in Prince Rupert exemplifies what students from certain socio-cultural backgrounds face at school. The pink theme on the program’s expectations and the blue theme identifying its positive impact on the students will be combined to confirm that this initiative is a practical solution that manages to increase First Nations students’ sense of pride and belonging, as suggested in the working hypothesis.

Researchers often face new themes that they did not anticipate in their theoretical framework or in their hypotheses. This was the case with the brown coded theme that will be explored towards the end of this chapter to follow the teachers’ dreams and aspirations.
Introductory Note: Efforts and Energy

I must begin by saying that I was very impressed with the participating teachers' efforts, dedication, and high level of energy. I noticed their strong and deep sense of mission. Al told me: "I am supposed to be a retired person but I refuse to go on retirement till I get my job done." Noreen felt strongly about her responsibility as a Tsimshian teacher: "I have to pass on everything that I was taught to the future generations...I want to keep our culture alive." Toni talked about the importance of the culture "I don't want to lose it...I think it is important for our kids to understand their culture." Vera agreed: "I want to pass it on to my students." Dee summed it up by stressing that no effort should be spared to "bring the language alive".

Sm' algyax teachers regularly attend workshops and in-service sessions to share new ideas and upgrade their skills. They are also actively involved in the district's literacy initiatives. In addition to their teaching assignments, they are regularly busy with other tasks. For example, Noreen observed that in her classes: "we spend a lot of time counseling... a lot of time we are the mother, the grandmother". It also became clear during the interviews that the teachers' enthusiasm and extensive work to revive the language is in no way limited to their classrooms. Several fluent speakers offer Sm' algyax classes to the community, others are actively involved in the development and delivery of a variety of workshops to encourage First Nations families to get more involved in the education of their children. Dee captured the spirit behind all these efforts: "We just have to continue to persist, continue to advocate for our First Nations students... and continue to be strong."

The Legacy of Colonialism

The research data provide evidence that the sad legacy of colonialism still haunts our schools and constitutes a major obstacle to the educational success of First Nations children.
The participants attributed a wide range of social problems affecting Aboriginal children and their families to the long decades of colonialism.

Dee talked about her own schooling to illustrate her negative experience: “I remember learning next to nothing about who I was as a Tsimshian person.” She also emphasized that a generation later, her own son-who graduated few years ago from the public school system in Prince Rupert—was constantly asking her: “Why can’t I learn my own language at school?”

Al elaborated on the cultural disruption that characterized the historical experience of the Tsimshian with missionaries: “they took away our songs, they took away our drums, they took away our regalia, they took away our identity.”

The push to give up what the missionaries considered a “heathen life” coupled with the assertion that there was no use for the native tongue, were effective tools in perpetuating the myth about the cultural superiority of the colonizers. The old tactics managed to instill a sense of inferiority in the colonized by trivializing the ancestors’ language, religion and culture and ridiculing their validity and importance. As Dee put it: “our people were made to feel less.” As she looked back at her own childhood, Toni recalled that “it wasn’t important for me to learn and speak the language.” Noreen explained the reason “you would never need the language, so why learn it?” This commonly held rationale, which contributed to the loss of language, was repeatedly drilled over the years in many Aboriginal communities as a way of trivializing their native tongue. Howatt (1997) argued that the colonialists’ language often creates the illusions of truth and reality. Thus, it plays an important role in assimilating the indigenous population by distancing the people from their ancestors’ language and culture.

The participants also linked many of today’s problems to yesterday’s residential schools. The abuse and neglect that characterized this sad educational experience have also
led to a deep sense of distrust and negative attitudes towards schooling among many of today's parents.

The subjects spoke bitterly about the racist comments and incidents that their students continue to face in the schools. "Racism is alive and well, I hear it sometimes on daily basis" said Dee. Noreen talked about teachers' attempt to remedy the devastating impacts of racism: "The hardest thing is to try to get First Nations' students away from the hate of being hated."

**School Culture, Classroom Discourse and Aboriginal Students**

Many of the students in the Sm'algyax classes – especially in the secondary schools - come from Lax Kw'alaams, Kitkatla, Metlakatla and Hartley Bay. These four First Nations reserve communities in the vicinity of Prince Rupert are often referred to as the villages and are only accessible by boat or float plane.

I found evidence of a major differences between the culture in Prince Rupert schools and the students’ home culture on the reserve. According to Toni, it is a move from a community where “everybody knows everybody” to a much larger city with big schools. Noreen also confirmed that most of the students face “a culture shock going from the village to town”

The Sm'algyax program in the villages started about twenty years earlier than the program in town. Feasts and other cultural activities are more common there. As a result village residents have a stronger sense of belonging and consider themselves one family. Dee contrasted that to the situation in town: “students feel that they don’t have a place in schools”

Iglesias (1985) explained how students whose home cultural backgrounds do not share the same values and norms of the dominant group in society often face failure at school. Ballenger (1997) talked about the difficulties that these children face in a school environment characterized by foreign ways of acting. Vera confirmed these findings by stating that “living
in Rupert is very different from our own way of living at home”. As a result of these constant efforts to adapt to the new city environment, many of the students who come from the villages feel stressed because of their inability to cope with a rigid, well established school culture. It is obvious that students’ learning may be minimized under such circumstances because their level of comfort and their ability to participate are quickly diminished. Toni gave a recent example about one of her students who came from one of the villages and stayed for a week before going back home because “she just couldn’t deal with the whole new surroundings.”

The schools’ catering to pre-set, standard socio-cultural norms is also a problem for many First Nations students who were born and raised in the city. Dee observed that “many students come to school behind in terms of literacy because they are not getting as much exposure to book reading at home.” There is no doubt that developmental stimulating activities such as reading play an important role in preparing children for schools. However, schools run the risk of alienating a large population of their students when they set an expectation that all kids should meet a certain middle-class standard of reading or other educational readiness before they begin school.

Children live and learn the cultural norms of their parents, guided by the values, traditions and expectations of their families. The vast majority of their interactions with adults are part of a larger social context that reflects their traditional cultural background. Their development occurs in a ZPD characterized by a particular set of problems solved through the guidance of well-known faces using familiar discourse. Instead of providing a supportive environment that validates these students’ previous experiences, the schools in town seem to be limiting their adult-child interactions to a pre-set, standard ZPD that is often very foreign to many of their students, especially those who come from different socio-cultural
background. This inability to relate to Aboriginal students' formative experience is a source of constant pressure that eventually results in students dropping out of schools.

Noreen put it in slightly different terms: "students aren't interested in learning offered when it has very little to do with their culture, very little to do with being part of a community, or being part of a society where you are accepted."

Sm'algyax: A Practical Initiative and a Possible Solution

In spite of the sad picture painted by some of the findings above, I was able to detect evidence of the strength and potential of the Sm'algyax language program. In this section, I will try to outline some areas of success. I will specifically focus on how the program is meeting its major goals as outlined in the Sm'algyax Integrated Resource Package (see Chapter 2).

In terms of fostering the appreciation of Ts'msyen culture and language, I found that the program succeeded in providing a sense of identity and a sense of belonging to its students. Noreen stressed that the first class activity is getting to know the students' parents because "in Native societies, the most important thing is family, who you are and where do you come from". Vera confirmed that talking "about our background, our culture and our tradition...helps the students to know who they are." Al described it as "piecing together where they belong and what their identities are... [because] this is what was taught to me by my grandparents". In the process, the students look forward to and are eager to participate in their Sm'algyax classes. This is an important step towards the creation of a more inclusive and friendlier school environment. Brendtro, Brokenleg & Bockern (1990) described how Aboriginal communities viewed the spirit of belonging, "children were nurtured within a larger circle of significant others." (p.37). Because everyone felt included and a part of the
larger community, young children accepted guidance from the adults who had a duty to serve as their teachers.

I also recognized the teachers' success in establishing a welcoming and safe environment, due in part to their work to build strong personal relationships with their students. Dee informed me about the results of a survey conducted among Sm'algyax students, their “written comments have clearly indicated that they feel safe and welcome in their language classes.” Noreen spoke proudly about the “friendships that we developed in our classes.” If this warm, welcoming class atmosphere could be gradually extended to all other classes in the school then it might ease the students’ sense of pressure. At the same time, such atmosphere has the potential of bridging the gap that exists between two drastically different cultures and succeeds in connecting the two separate Zones of Proximal Development.

The subjects were also able to demonstrate how they are meeting other program goals such as encouraging and initiating the revival of Sm'algyax among children and contributing to the revitalization of the language by the younger generation. Al was excited about “bringing back our songs, bringing back our dance [and ultimately] bringing back our own way of life” through a unit on feasts that he has been working on with his classes. Toni elaborated on the same unit by detailing the process and especially “the roles that people play, and the responsibilities that they have during the actual feast.” Dee gave another example when she described the sense of pride that Tsimshian students and parents felt when the leading class – the first who started learning Sm'algyax in grade 8 few years ago - prepared and delivered a “little speech in Sm'algyax” during their graduation ceremonies.

The above findings reveal an important aspect of the potential of the Sm'algyax program: its ability to help Aboriginal students and parents in overcoming some of the harmful effects of colonialism. As discussed earlier, the erosion of language and culture has
led to a sense of inferiority. In contrast, today’s language revival is not only creating a sense of identity but also a sense of excitement and pride. The subjects’ presence in the classrooms and around the schools gives these students hope because they represent successful role models who have persisted and overcome many difficulties throughout their years of schooling, while managing to maintain their Tsimshian identity. Thus, they send these students a strong message on the validity of their Aboriginal culture as well as the richness and traditional wisdom carried in Sm’algyax.

In their practice, the teachers have set clear and realistic learning objectives. Dee was very frank: “We don’t kid ourselves. We know we are not going to produce students who are fully fluent…our expectation of the program is to expose the children to the language and to the culture.” Sm’algyax as a second language might not lead to fluency, but it will certainly enhance and motivate and lead to what Mitchel & Brumfit (1994) defined as “social and cultural empowerment” (p.36).

Concerns and Aspirations

Teachers repeatedly expressed concerns about inadequate funding for the program, larger class sizes, decreased support for students with special needs, lack of time, small rooms and crowded classes. Some teachers felt that more signs in Sm’algyax around the school coupled with exclusively assigned language labs would be effective tools for increasing the profile of the Sm’algyax program in the schools. Others stressed the need for more Sm’algyax learning resources such as videos, cassettes and multi-media CD-ROM’s.

It is beyond the scope of this project to provide recommendations to the School District or to the Sm’algyax Language Authority. However, given the teachers’ passion about their dreams and the consensus that they shared when asked about their aspirations for the program, I feel compelled to add the following section outlining their ideas:
- Start the Sm'algyax program from kindergarten.
- Establish a summer language immersion program for the students.
- Hire more Aboriginal teachers to increase the number of First Nations role models.

It is my hope that once these findings are shared with the School District, the Language Authority and the participants, a thorough discussion about the merits of the above mentioned points will take place among all stakeholders.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

As demonstrated there are many differences between First Nations students' background culture and a school culture that fits Delpit's description of "attempting to force all differences into standardized boxes." (p. 264). Many Aboriginal students feel that school's culture is foreign to them, they feel stressed because of what they perceive as a constant pressure placed on them. The Sm'algyax program in Prince Rupert is one place that provides a warm, welcoming familiar environment to Aboriginal students and as such gives them a sense of belonging.

Through the power of personal relationships and classroom use of historical narratives, the program's ultimate goal is what Ward (1996) referred to as cultural rapprochement that validates Aboriginal students' experiences, gives them a sense of pride and enhances their success at school. This revitalization of language and culture helps the fight against the devastating impacts of decades of colonialism and cultural disruption.

Recommendations for future research include a closer focus on the students' views about their schooling experience through case studies, or general surveys. Interviews with other teachers and school personnel and analysis of school success indicators for registrants in the Sm'algyax program would be appropriate venues for future research. Given the fact that Sm'algyax is offered as a second language, it would also be interesting to conduct some
comparative analysis of the differences between first, bilingual, and second Aboriginal language programs in order to determine the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.
References


Appendix A

Letter of Consent from the Superintendent of the Prince Rupert School District
November 14, 2002

Fax: 250-356-2316

Mr. Wael Afifi,
Co-ordinator,
Content Standards,
Ministry of Education,
Parliament Buildings,
Victoria, B.C.

Dear Wael:

This is to confirm that I have given permission to you, as a UNBC graduate student, to conduct research in our District with regard to your Sm'ałgyax Language Program project. It is understood that you will be contacting teachers and administrators who are closely linked to this program in our district and that you will follow UNBC ethical guidelines and in particular the requirements of sharing all the findings with the participants.

Yours sincerely,

Peter M. Porte,
Superintendent of Schools.

/cd
Appendix B

Participants' Information Sheet and Consent Form
1) What is the purpose of this research?
   - To analyse different aspects of the Sm’algyax language program in Prince Rupert.

2) What are the potential benefits of this project?
   - To highlight how this language program is enhancing the students’ learning environment.

3) What are the potential risks?
   - There are no foreseen negative consequences for this research. For example: there are no invasive procedures or potentially harmful experiments.

4) How are the participants chosen?
   - They are educators involved in the Sm’algyax language program in Prince Rupert.

5) What will the participating educators be asked to do?
   - To agree to be interviewed by the researcher to provide general comments about the Sm’algyax language program and to respond to the questions outlined in the Project Proposal.

6) Who will have access to the subjects’ responses? How will confidentiality be addressed?
   - In addition to the researcher and the immediate supervisor, each participant will have access to her or his own response before it gets incorporated into the findings. After the completion of the work, the participants will have full access to the findings.
7) How will the data be stored, and for how long? How will it destroyed and when?

- Voice recorded cassettes from individual interviews will be kept with the researcher all the time. As soon as the researcher prepares the transcripts of the interviews, these cassettes will be completely erased. Participants may request to review the transcript of their own interview, but only the researcher and his immediate supervisor will have access to all the data from these transcripts. All the data collected will be shredded at the end of this project.

8) How is anonymity addressed?

- Pseudonyms will be used to refer to the interviewed subjects.

9) How to get a copy of the research results?

- By contacting the researcher.

In case of any complaints about this project, please contact Max Blouw, UNBC Vice President Research at (250) 960-5820.
Part 2 (Informed Consent Form to be signed by the participating educators)

University of Northern British Columbia
Education Program
Education 798-3
M Ed Project

Consent Form for Participating Educators

Before indicating your consent for participation in this research project, it is required that you read the attached information sheet that addresses some of the questions that you might have. Should you have any other questions/ concerns about the information sheet or about this consent form please don't hesitate to ask me or contact my supervisor.

It is required that you read and note your agreement to the following terms:

I understand that all information will be treated in an anonymous fashion. Only the instructor will see this signed consent form with your name. Any other identifying information will not be used in the written project.

I understand that I may request an individual meeting with the M.Ed Project student to receive a report of the findings.

I understand that all participants are free to terminate participation at any time.

I understand that if I require more information regarding this project, I may contact the supervisor, Margaret Anderson, at the University of Northern British Columbia, telephone (250) 624- 2862 and in case I have any complaints about this project, I may contact Max Blouw, UNBC Vice President Research at (250) 960-5820.

I understand that I may request a copy of this signed consent form.

By signing this form, I am providing written consent for participation in this Project research study for EDUC 798 and consent to the terms listed above.

_________________ signed on __________________
Participant

This study was explained by me by Wael Afifi, the project researcher.

_________________ __________________
Signature of Research Participant Date Printed Name

I believe that the person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

_________________ __________________
Signature of Investigator Date
Appendix C

Interview Protocol
The following questions were asked during the interviews:

- Where do you teach? What grades? How many students and classes do you have?

- Let’s start with some historical context: What do you think about the effects of colonialism’s harmful attacks on the Tsimshian culture?

- When and why did you decide to teach Sm’algyax? What steps have you taken to prepare yourself for this task?

- How was your own school experience? Was it different from your home experience?

- What are the similarities between your own school and home experience and today’s Tsimshian students’ experience?

- What are the obstacles that your students are facing? What could be done to improve their graduation rates?

- How are you helping your students in developing a sense of belonging and a cultural identity? Please give specific examples.

- Why are you putting all this effort in the program?

- What are your frustrations? How could they be addressed?

- What do you need to work better and more effectively?

- What are your goals and aspirations for the Sm’algyax program?
Appendix D

Letter of Permission from UNBC
MEMORANDUM

To: Wael Affifi
412 - 1419 Stradacona Ave., Victoria B6S 5J3

Margaret Anderson

From: Alex Michalos, Chair
Research Ethics Board

Date: November 22, 2002

Re: Ethics Review EP2002.1114.120
Cultural Empowerment: An analysis of the Sm'algyax Language Program in Prince Rupert School District

Thank you for submitting the above noted research proposal to the UNBC Research Ethics Board for review. Your proposal has been reviewed by two independent reviewers. Please make the following changes to your participant information sheet:

- In the event of complaints regarding the research participants should contact Max Blouw, Vice President Research at 250-860-6620
- How will the data be stored, and for how long and how will it be destroyed and when
- Identify the potential risks and benefits of the study

Once you have incorporated the above noted recommendations you may begin your research. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Dr. Alex Michalos
Chair, Research Ethics Board