

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ZHAHTI KOE SLAVEY LANGUAGE PROGRAM

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It is a basic right to encourage use of our language in a place of learning -- to preserve our traditions and identity as a people. Our struggle for political recognition depends on the existence of our language. Chief Joachim Bonnetrouge, Zhahti Koe, NWT (Selleck, 1981:10)

The growth of Dene language and culture in the Northwest Territories stemmed from the perception that the education system was not effectively meeting the needs of the Dene people, one area of concern being native languages. This report examines one response to that concern, the program developed by the Zhahti Koe community. The program drew extensively on the Elders, a traditional Dene source of knowledge and wisdom. Other factors identified as contributors included the support and commitment of the community, the practice of traditional approaches to decision-making, commitment of staff and school, the development of many different kinds of learning materials and effective use of political support at community and Territorial levels. The Zhahti Koe program serves as a model and an inspiration for community-based language renewal.

The Setting

Zhahti Koe is the Slavey name for the community called in English Fort Providence. Zhahti Koe literally means the home of the priest; a reference to the establishment of the Roman Catholic Mission there in the mid-1800's. The historical impact and influence of contact with the traders and missionaries is still evidenced in such things as the name Fort Providence, the incorporation of French words into Slavey, religious practices and the fact that some older Dene speak French.

Zhahti Koe is 72 km downstream from Tuaro (Great Slave Lake), where the lake joins Deh Cho (Mackenzie River). On the north side of the river, the

community spreads roughly a mile overlooking the banks of the river. The population of Zhahti Koe is 602 (June 1981 census) of which 76% are Dene, 11% Metis and 14% other. (Outcrop, 1984:140).

Shortly after Alexander Mackenzie visited the area in 1789, the Hudson's Bay Company established a post on the North side of Tuaro. In 1823, that post was closed. (Cooke, 1986:109). In 1858, the Roman Catholic missionaries established themselves on Nduro (Big Island) at the head of Deh Cho, moving in 1861 to the present location. The mission was called, "Notre Dame de la Providence". (Outcrop, 1984:140). The move was followed by the Hudson's Bay Company's establishment of a post in relocated Zhahti Koe, a post which operates today. (Cooke, 1986:214).

The Dene of Zhahti Koe are called Deh Gah Got'ine (Appendix J). Traditionally, this group has lived south and west of Tuaro, Deh Cho and along the Nae chag'ah (Liard River). The different dialects spoken throughout these different regions are understood by most of the Dene, known in English as the South Slavey. (Dene Nations, 1984:9). Communities in this region are Hay River, Fort Providence, Kakisa, Jean Marie River, Trout Lake, Fort Simpson, Liard, Nahanni Butte and Wrigley. This region is known as the Deh Cho Region.

South Slavey, French and English are spoken in Zhahti Koe. Many older people speak Slavey and French, reflecting the educational influences of the Roman Catholic missionaries. Some of the Dene elders were present at the signing of Treaty 11 in 1921 in Zhahti Koe and were valuable witnesses in supporting the caveat that reached the Supreme Court in 1973.

The diverse language base creates unique language needs. To establish this more clearly, the Department of Information surveyed eleven communities, including Zhahti Koe, in 1983. The survey found that: respondents had retained their language to a very high degree. (Devine, 1983:34) Zhahti Koe native language literacy was also found to be high compared to other communities, likely reflecting the work done by the Zhahti Koe Language Research Centre established two years earlier.

Other community level organizations with an interest in language at the community level include the Chief and Band Council, representing the Dene in the community, and the Settlement Council, representing Local Government. The LEA is an elected body with influence centering around the school (Appendix K). Non-governmental organizations include the Hunters and Trappers Association, the Friendship Centre and the Metis Local. Not unlike other native communities, the people who are active in many of these organizations wear more than one hat and are generally involved in more than one organization.

The Events and Two Personal Perspectives

The Zhahti Koe Language Project started out as a research project, then grew into a Research Centre and then became a program. Three stages are described: initiation, development, and implementation. In reality, these stages overlap, but they are presented separately for analysis.

Two persons involved in the project from the beginning provided the data. Margaret Thom has been involved in education since 1974 as an appointed member. In 1980, she became the chairperson of the LEA. During the summer of 1981, she joined the Zhahti Koe Research Team. In September 1982, she continued to stay on as a researcher after the Slavey Language program was implemented in the school. In May 1983, Margaret began her training to replace Ethel Blondin-Townsend as Project Coordinator, a position she still holds today as well as the chairpersonship of the LEA. Margaret was born and makes her home in Zhahti Koe, Denendeh.

Ethel Blondin-Townsend went to teach in Zhahti Koe in 1979 and assumed the Vice Principalship in 1980. She was the first Coordinator of the Slavey Research Centre that grew out of the 1981 summer research project, a position she maintained till July 1983. At the time of the interview, she was the Assistant Deputy Minister of Culture and Communications for the GNWT. She was born in Fort Norman. She has her Bachelor of Education from the University of Alberta where she specialized in English reading and linguistics. She taught and worked in Education for ten years and applied her experience in aboriginal language program development in Zhahti Koe.

Initiation

The enthusiasm and commitment that has characterized the Zhahti Koe Slavey Language Program was evident early in the initiation phase. The initiation period was roughly one year, 1980-1981. In July 1980, an LEA community survey determined the people's desire to have more culture and language taught in the school program. Meetings held throughout the year in Zhahti Koe, consultation with other communities involved in indigenous language programs, and a growing number of Dene teachers in training were evidence of strong and continuing interest on the part of the LEA, the Band and the School Administration in developing a Slavey language program.

That interest culminated in a meeting in 1981 when the Dene Band, the LEA, the Department of Education Area Superintendent for Education from the Katt'o Dehe (Hay River) Area Office, and the Principal and Vice-Principal met to discuss a Slavey school program and development of materials by the Dene Band Council. Blondin-Townsend credits the initial development to all of the above groups and to the interest and support of parents in the community and native teachers on staff, in particular to the part played by the Principal.

Blondin-Townsend states, "I don't really think that it would have gone anywhere without his support and his leadership". (Interview Notes, 1987:1).

The eight members of the research team hired in July 1981 were local, of Dene descent and bilingual in Slavey and English. Most of the members were involved in the education system as teachers, tutorial assistants, LEA members, students or parents. The selection was based on experience, expertise, dependability, and interest.

Blondin-Townsend also feels all "the right factors were there - community spirit, experienced and knowledgeable people at the program level, people who could read, write and speak Slavey, monies from ILDF, support from the politicians and senior bureaucrats, LEA support." (1987:5). Most of all "there was vision of what could happen", (1987:6) and based on the sense that "this group of people could undertake any project they wanted to and complete it because they had the expertise, resources, native leaders in the community...and a living wealth of resources available to us". (1987:50. The time was right.

"How the language was dying", was a great concern in the community, said Thom, then LEA Chairperson. She saw the lack of communication between the old and the young contributing to the disappearance of a "distinct and unique Dene way of life" that was connected to culture, a traditional way of life in the bush, and important Dene values. (1987:1). These were some of the reasons she felt it was important to document on paper essential knowledge collected from the traditional Elders and leaders to draw on as a basis for curriculum and materials development.

The need for such materials was evidenced by other issues leading to other concerns as well. The overall academic achievement of students was low. Blondin-Townsend, the Vice-Principal of Elizabeth Ward School at the time, states "children were not functioning adequately in either language (Slavey and English)." (1987:2). Based on their knowledge of the community, the people involved in the initial meeting felt the chance of academic success was far greater for students learning in Slavey than it was for those learning in English. Blondin-Townsend states that "the cultural base is all tied into the Elders", and "certain ties and strengths could be identified that would assist in the enhancement and development of the aboriginal language". (1987:2). These include connections between the spoken language and the transmission of culture and individual sense of Dene identity, and between the Elders and passing on of traditional Dene ways of life and values.

At the territorial level, the Department of Education "was re-examining overall the problem that was mainly pervasive throughout the north on why a lot of aboriginal children were having difficulties", said Blondin-Townsend. (1987:2). There was a growing awareness of the "wealth of material" and the

need for a new direction "to develop a strong language base and also to develop the self-image and reinstate the importance of aboriginal language rights. (1987:2). Of an education system operating in English, she says "getting people to assimilate and give up their language was an outdated and colonized approach that had to be dealt with." (1987:2).

The people and agencies concerned about the language knew that obtaining funding was part of any comprehensive strategy. The cooperation that characterizes the program was also evident here. A first funding proposal for initiation and funding of the proposal was signed by the Chief of the Zhahtl Koe Band, all of the members of the research team and the two informants to this study. The significance of both the process and the signatures is that they show that from the beginning, the Slavey Language Project had broad support within the community and strong commitment from the research team.

Development

Development occurred over an eight-week period in the summer of 1981. Main activities during this intensive period were training, research and development of curriculum and material. The goal was to prepare and produce enough material to support a full oral program of immersion at the Kindergarten level and a half hour each day of oral Slavey instruction in Grades one to nine in September 1981.

Thom felt terminology and pronunciation were important because interviews with elders revealed "that our generation tends to speak slang. We took short cuts. We dropped prefixes or suffixes. When you speak with an Elder, you really upgrade your language." (1987:2). The research team members wanted to ensure that they had the right information and pronunciation "before it got to a point where it was impossible" to do anything about it. (1987:3). As the 1983 Community Languages Survey showed, that point had already been reached in some Dene communities. This recognition created an even stronger imperative to make the most of the opportunities to work with Elders to strengthen the language.

At a more general level, Blondin-Townsend speaks to the importance of Slavey as a language:

...language is important, and it's part of culture, part of history, and just as important, if not more important than English. It is different - the grammar is different and also the feeling, the psychology of the language. You could portray the language academically. It is complicated, sophisticated, with different levels of sophistication. We wanted the students to learn about the history of the language, how words are derived, how your language reflects how you think as a

native person. (1987:6).

It was with this in mind that the research staff prepared material for implementation of oral Slavey for the coming school year.

Twenty-one research projects were completed following interviews with Elders and parents. A proposal to the GNWT, Department of Education dated January 4 1982 listed subjects covered extensively. These included:

Traditional Life Styles and Roles
 Traditional Dyes
 Traditional Leadership
 Traditional Hide Tanning
 Modern Adoption
 Remedies and Cures

Other topics covered were shelter, transportation, food harvesting, birth rites, place names and animals. Workbooks, flash cards and posters were prepared during the development phase with a goal of making learning fun and interesting for the students.

On a broader level, the research team's work constituted a foundation for a Native Language Institute. Attempts to establish such an Institute began in the development stage, but the Institute was not realized.

Implementation

On September 8, 1981, an oral Slavey language program was implemented in the Elizabeth Ward School in Zhahti Koe. The first step of implementation was visits to the homes of all kindergarten children by the Principal and the LEA Chairperson to inform parents of the program. Kindergarten was taught in Slavey, and grades one through nine participated in one-half hour of oral Slavey each day.

The Slavey language was also introduced as an evening course to the adult population of Zhahti Koe. Blondin-Townsend recalls, "I think we had a very large amount of the community that can read and write Slavey as a result of these evening workshops." (1987:7). These courses were called marathons "because we could teach seven days a week ...on Saturday and Sunday afternoon and every evening from 7 to 10 p.m. ... for 2-3 weeks at a time." (1987:7). These immersion courses addressed the cultural and linguistic aspects of the language - spelling, reading, writing, idiosyncrasies of the language, different dialects, map work.

The Zhahti Koe Slavey Language program created and maintained an awareness of the program by its continuing involvement of the larger community through these evening courses. The decision to have a written Slavey language component was made, and emphasis then moved on to developing a basic competency. The students were expected "to learn how to read and write the language because we realized the importance of going from an oral tradition to putting a lot of this wealth of information on paper for future purposes." (1987:6).

To handle ongoing implementation and coordination of the program in the school, a Slavey Program Development Committee was established in January 1982 by the School. The LEA provided direction to the program.

Throughout the first year of implementation, a smaller research team continued to prepare materials. "around the life of the people and the environment", says Thom. (1987:6) The children especially enjoyed the music and Thom feels "they picked up the language faster through music. ...the fact that the record was produced by a local artist" was positive and made learning Slavey unique and interesting. (1987:5) That record, *We Are Standing* (Appendix L), and the Slavey tapes are known by heart by many students.

The interaction with staff, parents and students created "a tremendous amount of awareness", says Blondin-Townsend, "throughout the community by students using what they knew and by participating in the teaching of the aboriginal language". (1987:6) The effects of this kind of interaction on people in transition from a traditional to some future blended culture were significant and positive because they strengthened the traditional language and identity.

In September 1982, a full Slavey language program consisting of oral and written lessons was implemented at the school. Some opposition to language instruction being compulsory led to the LEA unanimously establishing the following policy:

Slavey language is a recognized subject in the school program. For this reason, any child who has at least one part of Slavey descendant, it is compulsory for that child to participate in the Slavey language program. Furthermore, all parents not of Slavey origin are encouraged to allow their children to participate in this excellent program as our school is working towards bilingual education. (sic) (Minutes, 1982)

The policy was communicated to parents by the principal in his 1982-83 school year message.

Thom talks of the opposition present in the community from people who don't see the potential of the program "because for the longest time through their experience with non-native people in residential schools ... they have developed negative feelings towards their own language." (1987:4) She feels the "process of unbrainwashing on the part of these people who went through that system" has to take its course in order to bring them to the realization "that its OK to speak your language and to express yourself in your language. Until then it will be a constant problem." (1984:4) For the LEA and for Thom, this experience of resolving conflict, particularly with one non-native parent and some Dene parents, demanded growth and learning. The LEA has managed this and other potentially explosive issues partly through maintaining an open process and partly through the resulting support of a majority of community members.

In the July 1985 issue of Focus, a Department of Education publication, Thom was described as speaking "with great feeling about the importance of communities getting local control over their schools. Especially important to her is introducing the Dene culture into school curriculum." (GNWT Education, 1985:3) The article quoted Thom as saying, "Our LEA has come to the point where the department has to react to what we have to say. Community people know their needs and wants better than people in Yellowknife." (GNWT Education, 1985:3) Thom feels the biggest change has been in attitudes. Community people who want to be instrumental in changing things are becoming LEA members, and more LEA members are becoming active in meetings and in the community.

This change in attitude is also visible among the students. When the program first started, there were three categories of speakers: non-fluent, passive bilingual and some fluent speakers. As a result of the program, Thom says, the non-fluent category has been eliminated. This is paralleled by an increasingly positive self-concept among Dene students.

The growth and development of the LEA is reflected in its actions, culminating in a January 1983 motion to accept Slavey as a required program. This passed unanimously after the LEA completed its annual review of school policy and needs. Slavey as a required program was described as a second language, native language program, one component of a bilingual education approach. The Slavey Language Program had become part of the routine of Elizabeth Ward School.

Analysis of the Slavey Language Program

Beware of how the elders act, watch, ask questions. Once we are dead, you will be alone without us forever. Marie T. Gargan, Zhahti Koe; NWT (Thom/Blondin-Townsend).

1987:91)

The Slavey Language Program was successful for a number of reasons, an important one being expressed in the above quote. An active interaction with Elders was one important contributor to success. The recognition that the Elders today are a last generation bridging traditional Dene life on the land and emerging futures of combined cultures and languages gave the project a particular urgency and uniqueness.

The steps in the analysis of the Zhahti Koe Language Program were as follows:

1. to examine data for LEA-related factors identified by the informants as affecting success;
2. to observe and extrapolate other factors affecting success;
3. to consider the impact of these factors and attempt to rank them. This was not possible because all were essential factors;
4. to identify potential barriers to success and to consider how success factors overcame these barriers;
5. to assess each success factor in terms of transferability to situations where similar barriers exist;
6. to draw conclusions.

The factors affecting success and the conclusions are developed below.

Factors Affecting Success

The factors affecting the success of the Zhahti Koe Program were as follows:

1. that it built on traditional Dene values and ways;
2. that the people and community were committed;
3. that the program began at the right time and the right place;
4. that institutions and organizational policy facilitated the programs developed;
5. that it met community needs;
6. that a range of resources were developed to meet program needs.

Analysis of how these factors positively affected success of the language program is given below, drawing on information given by the informants and extrapolated from the data gathered.

Traditional Dene Values and Ways

The project captured the spirit and uniqueness of opportunity encapsulated in the description of the role of elders in one of the publications put out by the Zhahti Koe Slavey Research Centre:

It is truly a sign of hope for them to assume their proper role within the community structure as the Leaders, Mentors and the Wise. It is not enough to speak of our respect for the knowledge of our elders, we must also take a definite step to preserve in some way the very essence of this valuable gift. It is our privilege for us to share their words, thoughts and lives. We give them our thanks... (Thom/Blondin-Townsend, 1987:5)

The Slavey Language Research Centre staff went beyond simply consulting with the Elders. The involvement of Elders throughout the process constituted a real contribution to bilingual education, not simply consultation with resource people. Their influence continues to be significant.

Continuous emphasis was placed on team development which parallels traditional Dene emphasis on the group. Decisions were made by consensus. Everyone's contribution was valued equally as Blondin-Townsend says, "everybody played a role because everybody had ideas, and it's amazing how the wealth of ideas just came out as soon as you became involved." (1987:12) Research team members were from the community and enjoyed unusual access and confidence. Community residents responded to the competence, vision and skills of staff on the project through their cooperation and support.

People working together cooperatively created a circumstance in which the community as a whole addressed difficult decisions about moving to a written language and alphabet form and standardization. The following quotation illustrates general reservations held about this move to a written language:

The customary vision of language in some cultures with oral traditions perceives language as a spiritual medium of life creating both visions and reality. It is from this perception of language that some cultures believe: "If you write our words, you will kill their spirit." And other people have said, "You can't learn our language in a school. You have to learn it by using it while living on

the land." (Lamothe, 1984:17)

These reservations notwithstanding, the project and the LEA decided to introduce written Slavey into the Language Program. A consensus approach to decision-making was instrumental in managing language issues like these about which people feel strongly and which affect people at personal as well as community levels. The Zhahti Koe experience demonstrates how essential is the involvement of communities in decision-making about issues of literacy. It also demonstrates how important it is for the Dene to follow traditional Dene methods of decision-making, based on consensus, in making such decisions.

Elders showed a tremendous amount of respect to the researchers and the Zhahti Koe Slavey Centre staff by spending their time and passing on their knowledge. It was this time spent with the staff that enabled the Slavey speakers to upgrade their Slavey in the process of consulting. This builds on a fundamental, traditional Dene principle outlined in *Dene Government Past and Future*:

We respect and care for each other. In particular, we honour and provide for our elders who cared for us and passed on the gifts of generations past. We also honour and provide for our children who will pass on the ways of the Dene to generations yet to come. (Malloch, 1987:17)

The process is not unlike what is happening with other indigenous groups where the elders have the knowledge, the younger and more formally educated do the "translation" work, and the young are the recipients of this knowledge and the process. It is the young, after all, who are the future leaders and who will ensure Dene languages and culture in the future.

People in the Project

The success of the program was in "the people we picked to work on the project" says Blondin-Townsend, the first Coordinator. (1987:7) She says "the human resources element is so important. If you don't have the right people, you can have all of the proper materials and all of the funding and everything, but it simply won't work. We were fortunate...that we had all the people we needed." (1987:7) In her view "what worked was, basically, the number of hours we invested, the kind of interest we created, the essentially modernized approaches" that involved "many people and made them feel a part of what we were doing." (1987:8)

The 1981 summer research staff played central roles. Blondin-Townsend addresses essential qualities of staff that contributed to the success of this project. The people chosen for the project were hand picked but "...most of all

you need people who are multi-faceted in their talents so that they will be able to do more than just one function." (Interview Notes, 1987:10) She says, "we wanted people who were consistent, who were diligent, who wouldn't balk at working overtime, and who were dedicated." They were lucky to find such people. (1987:12) Blondin-Townsend questions specializations in terms of the need for a balance of many skills and qualities on this kind of initiative. The approach taken allowed for the melding of skills and built on the talents of the individuals so that collectively they were able to produce the varied and vast amount of materials required for the Slavey Language Program.

The research team interviewed Elders, transferring a wealth of oral tradition onto paper. Thom felt this progression was essential to preserve the knowledge of Elders. It was the instructors, some of whom were members of the 1981 summer research team, who worked with the Elders. Thus the knowledge of the Elders was brought into the classrooms although Elders were not physically present.

People on the project not only had to have a range of skills and commitment, they had to know how to pursue, gain and use political support. That political astuteness had to be on two levels, working within the formal political machinery, and mobilizing interest and support in the community. Creating an awareness and maintaining support of people in a community is hard work. The people on the language program achieved that in part through establishing many opportunities for community involvement. The language program was not restricted to day school or to students at the school. The marathon evening classes and training sessions held seven days a week, were open to community people and created public awareness. They also helped parents learn about the sophistication and complexities of Slavey while they became literate in their native language at the same time as their children. For such a program to be successful, all levels of the community, but most importantly the people who are on staff, must be prepared to put in long hours and work hard.

The credit for this hard work on the parts of all project staff goes in large part to the two informants whose leadership and vision continue to enhance northern indigenous languages at community and territorial levels. Their commitment to Dene language and culture is affirmed by their continuing involvement. Thom, at the community level, has provided consistency and stability to the LEA, qualities critical to positive school-community relations. Blondin-Townsend's experience at a community level is now applied at a territorial level in her position as Assistant Deputy Minister of Culture and Communications, including the Language Bureau.

The Right Time and the Right Place

The Slavey Language Program was timely in bringing together different perspectives on language needs. This is the only period in history, brief as it is, when a generation of Dene Elders live and can speak about another way of life in the aboriginal language. When this valuable human resource, lifeblood of an oral history, is gone, this type of language program will not be possible. The passing of that generation will mark the beginning of another phase of Dene education and educational opportunity.

In the future, after this point in history, language programs may reconstruct the language, in the process working with poor pronunciation, slang, and sloppy usage described by Thom as characterizing the language of the existing generation. Had this research team not had the opportunity to work with the Elders, they would not have distinguished between their contemporary use of the language and the old world language of the land.

The importance of timing must be noted at another level, that of acknowledging historical appropriateness of developments. Colonial attitudes towards assimilation are generally recognized as unsuccessful and unacceptable. Blondin-Townsend says, "it takes the spirit of the people, the support of the people, the wealth and resources of the government and the political will" to achieve a successful program. (1987:15) She believes people in the north are just beginning to realize their power and the potential for communities to exercise their rights and their authority.

Institutional and Organizational/Policy Factors

The language project matched the concerns and mandates of participating agencies. These agencies included the Band Council, the LEA, the school, the department of education, Arctic College and the Territorial Government. This project was able to work with key organizations at the community level, in particular the Band Council whose infrastructure and mandate at the community level made the project possible.

At the school, some classes were rescheduled and others were cut to make way for the pilot. The school staff had to be flexible about required content for the Language Program to become part of the school curriculum. The willingness of the principal to support this flexibility was essential.

Initiatives at the Territorial level created an opportunity for this language program to develop at a community level. At a community level, policies were also required when the Slavey language program experienced the opposition of one non-native family who did not believe Slavey language should be compulsory.

Community Needs

The concern over the lack of communication between the generations and the steadily declining number of speakers among the younger generation motivated the political will of the community - the Dene Band, the LEA, the school, the Research Team and parents. These concerns were also the focus of cooperation among the Elders, parents and native staff at the school.

Through the July 1980 survey, the LEA was able to determine the need for more cultural and language programs in the school. Reasons for a Slavey language program were established. Children were not functioning well in either language resulting in a loss of self-esteem and identity. Equally important was the lack of communication between elders and children and between generations. Concern about these translated into a recognition of the need to preserve the language as an aspect of culture, a Dene traditional way of life and values. The LEA was able to translate these concerns into a program, and in doing so validated the community's point of view that the Dene language and culture ought to be valued in institutions of learning and teaching.

Seeing one's own language taught as an academic subject within a formal education structure is significant for people. The program generated a spirit of respect. Children were not embarrassed to be heard speaking their own language. As noted previously, children's language skills improved to the point where all were passively bilingual or fluent.

From the beginning, people working on the program recognized how important it was to find out what people in the community wanted their children to learn. Fluency and language use levels increased, testimony to the heightened self-esteem and positive self-image of community members. The Slavey Language Program continues to serve as a model and example for other communities and people concerned about losing their language. While the impact on the Zhahti Koe community has been substantial, work continues towards achievement of the Slavey Language Program's overall goal of bilingual education.

Thom feels two things are needed for the success of any language program - commitment of people on staff and support of the community. Parents need to encourage their children by "talking to them. The school alone cannot be expected to make a child fluent because of the time frame that the child is in school. Kids are in school five hours a day and the rest of the time is the responsibility of the parents to do that." (1987:11) She says,

...we know we have the support by talking to people, especially the middle-aged and elders. Sometimes you'll meet them on the street and they'll stop and talk to you. They'll tell you how much they appreciate what the school

is doing by teaching the native language and the cultural way of life. This makes you feel good that it's appreciated, what you're doing. That's the kind of support we need in order for us to go on. ...the increase in the number of people coming to the school shows it is working and that they are interested in what goes on. (Thom/Blondin-Townsend, 1987:11)

Part of the language program's success is the extent to which it addressed needs identified by the community itself. This factor contributed to community participation and support and provided a useful measure of program success.

Range of Approaches/Resources

Curriculum materials were developed in many media - class charts, printed lesson materials, music and records, and a bilingual history book called Nahecho Keh, Our Elders. Thom says this book will "encourage the kids to speak Slavey and make them aware of the history of the Dene, how they live and what they had to do to survive." (1984:5) Writings enjoyed support for a number of reasons.

It is so right that this book should be written. Not only white man's stories should be in print. Otherwise we as Dene will not know the history of our own people. We must keep our own identity. Harry Minoza, Zhahti Koe, NWT (Thom/Blondin-Townsend, 1987:90)

Putting Elders' knowledge in writing is obviously one way of passing it on. At the same time, it acknowledges that in changing times the Dene must continue to recognize certain knowledge as essential to Dene identity.

Production of curriculum materials substantially increased the classroom support available to teach Slavey. The range of media -- records, videos, tapes and a variety of printed matter -- reflects the innovative approach of the research team.

Essential Ingredients for Similar Language Programs

Dene Language programs in the NWT are still in a pioneering stage. New school-based programs are difficult to introduce in the best of circumstances. Programs being developed for the first time face even greater difficulties. Adequate (i.e., substantial) time, resources and planning must be the basis for bringing aboriginal languages into formal school programs.

Equally essential are the vision and spirit that must underlie such programs. That vision and spirit must be articulated, communicated and

incorporated into planning. All of these require skills. Development of such skills requires training. Neither the skills nor the training are generally available at a community level in the NWT except when imported.

Historically, people with these needed skills have not remained in the communities. People who leave for education stay out. Those in the community who run for public office may not have these skills at the time of election. Elected leaders at a community level are generally in office for a term of one or two years. During the first term, they must learn about the responsibilities of office without time to devote to gaining communication and planning skills. This is as true for band councillors as it is for local government representatives and LEA members.

As well as the need for skill development, LEA development needs to be more focussed. Responsibilities must be clarified -- responsibilities of parents, schools, other community agencies and the LEA. This is particularly important if major organizational changes, like Divisional Boards, are being considered. Once responsibilities have been established, channels of accountability must also be clarified.

In considering any aboriginal language program, a dialogue on responsibility and process should occur early to delineate the different roles of elected government, government agencies and the community, particularly parents, and to ensure that these roles are seen in the same way by different players.

Elected officials must develop policies that support aboriginal language programs. Government agencies in all sectors must be flexible enough to translate policies into programs. The community must participate both as source and resource. Parents and families must accept the responsibility for keeping a language alive by using it. In the NWT, the LEA has a unique opportunity to play both a leadership role and a catalyst role.

The emphasis on collective process in the Zhahti Koe Language Project contrasts sharply with the decision-making process practiced in hierarchical organizations including government bureaucracies. This is not an incidental or irrelevant observation. Language is only one aspect of culture. Dene culture is characterized by cooperation, consensus and respect for each person's contribution. For language programs to fully and accurately reflect the cultural values, the process through which they are developed must, as in the Zhahti Koe Language Program, practice them.

In a hierarchy, power and influence is top down with prestige and status attached to the top layers. The lower you are in the chain of command, the less power you have. Flatter, more collective structures and consensus patterns of decision-making recognize that everyone has equal power and

influence. The question raised by this aspect of the case study is: "What balance between these two approaches will contribute the most to community development in language and other areas, at the same time providing acceptable levels of accountability?"

The greatest measure of success for the Slavey Research Project is the strengthened and affirmed use of Slavey today. The project established an important precedent; left documented knowledge; strengthened the community; and pioneered an approach to community language development. It ensured that a comprehensive record of traditional knowledge is available for future use. It serves as a model for other indigenous groups concerned about their language and culture.

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