

## THE VALUE OF MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

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## THE VALUE OF MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

*By Sister Dorothy Moore\**

It is an honor for me and for my people, the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia to be invited to speak to you at this Seminar. (Spoken in Mi'kmaq first)

I would like to begin by reciting a poem written from the heart by a well known Mi'kmaq poet, Rita Joe.

*I Lost My Talk  
I lost my talk  
The talk you took away.  
When I was a little girl  
At Shubenacadie School  
  
You snatched it away:  
I speak like you  
I think like you  
I create like you  
The scrambled ballad, about my word.  
  
Two ways I talk  
Both ways I say,  
Your way is more powerful.  
  
So gently I offer my hand and ask,  
Let me find my talk  
So I can teach you about me.*

Aboriginal people or First Nations people have a linguistic history that is more tragic than could ever be described in words. If in truth:

*Language is the soul of the people;  
Language is the mind of the people  
Language is the spirit of the people*

then truly, Aboriginal people who have lost the use of their mother tongue have been culturally stripped in soul, mind and spirit. What can be more tragic than that?

From a very young age, I learned that the language I used to communicate was not acceptable. First of all, it was forbidden in our Indian day schools. As well, we were ridiculed and mocked whenever we left the security of the reserve community. It was with vengeance that the residential schools took on the task to rid the Mi'kmaq language

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as directed by the federal authorities. The outcome of speaking one's own mother tongue was punishment and children often times experienced such a horrendous fear of this punishment that they had no choice, but to leave their language by the wayside, sometimes forever. Consequently and tragically hundreds of children lost the use of their beautiful and sacred language.

The census statistics provided by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples indicate that in 1991 50% of those identified as Aboriginal did not understand any Aboriginal language, 17.5% understood one but could not speak it and only 32.7% could speak an Aboriginal language. These statistics are depressing and undoubtedly, with the passage of time since 1991, the Aboriginal languages have continued their downward trend of deterioration. Verna Kirkness states that, "the loss of our language threatens our very existence as a people."

Recently, in Nova Scotia, a survey was conducted to determine the state of Mi'kmaq language usage in the province. Not surprisingly the results showed that the mother tongue of the Mi'kmaq nation was used to varying degrees among the thirteen bands surveyed.

These are four examples: At Acadia Reserve Community with a population of 865, the language has become extinct. In Shubenacadie (Indian Brook) the population is 1960 and only 2.29% are fluent Mi'kmaq speakers. Mi'kmaq language usage at Membertou Reserve is 12.43% with a community population of 679.

The largest Mi'kmaq community in Nova Scotia is Eskasoni with a population of over 3000. It has the largest number of fluent Mi'kmaq speakers (42.86%). The combined results tell us that a greater number of people in Eskasoni prefer to use both English and Mi'kmaq inter-changeably.

This survey has confirmed the sad truth that currently the Mi'kmaq language in Canada is heading towards extinction at a tremendous speed. The loss of Aboriginal languages is attributed partly to federal government initiatives to prevent their use in the education system. In 1897, a Commissioner of Indian Affairs expressed the following sentiment which became a policy for many years:

Instruction of Indians in the vernacular is not only of no use to them but detrimental to the cause of education and civilization and will not be permitted in any Indian school. It is believed that if any Indian vernacular is allowed it will prejudice the pupil as well as his parents against the English language. This language which is good enough for a white man or a black man ought to be good enough for the red man.

The *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (1988) includes a policy statement which declares that the Government of Canada is "to preserve and enhance the use of language other than English and French." This gives us encouragement to move forward, when added to the recommendation by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples that: "Federal, Provincial and Territorial governments support Aboriginal nations and their communities in using and promoting languages within their nations, territories and communities where they choose to do so."

So where do we begin? Is this question overwhelming when we know that out of more than a million people who claimed Aboriginal ancestry in the 1991 census only 190,165 declared that an Aboriginal language was their mother tongue.

Research articles that I have reviewed on language of instruction, bilingual education, language aptitude and the role of first language development in second language acquisition can be summed up with the following statement:

in order to experience success in academic, social and personal life, the young child needs to be instructed in his/her native language. Furthermore, the acceptance of the language which is part of the culture is of utmost significance to the development of self-esteem and consequently success in school.

We not only must be convinced of the truth of these statements, we must also be committed to do everything in our power as educators and parents to bring them to reality. The challenge is enormous and it may take several generations before we see the situation reversed. However, we are faced with a dichotomy. On the one hand, concern for the loss of language is being voiced by Aboriginal elders and, on the other hand, many parents continue to possess the belief that their mother tongue is a hindrance and a deterrent to academic success in school. Not so, according to recent research which has shown, "that continuing to develop skills in the first language accelerates the acquisition of the second language." Parents need to be convinced that, "a strong early childhood experience in the first language will prepare the child for a more rapid transition into English." Other studies show that young people are quite capable of developing two languages. The majority of Mi'kmaq children entering school lack proficiency in the English language, yet do not speak their mother tongue. We often classify the language spoken by them as Mi'klish.

In Nova Scotia, steps are being taken to stop the continued erosion of the Mi'kmaq language:

1. In 1972, a new orthography was developed by Doug Smith and Bernie Francis known as Smith-Francis orthography, to facilitate the reading and writing of the Mi'kmaq language.
2. Seven Band controlled schools have developed a Mi'kmaq language curriculum to serve the linguistic needs of their students. We borrowed from Kahnawake methods on how to move towards immersion programs in the classroom.
3. Two universities in the province provide credit courses in the Mi'kmaq language. Some students have become so proficient that they are able to write their graduate theses in the Mi'kmaq language. Other graduates are now teaching the language in the classrooms.
4. The Center of Excellence for Mi'kmaq Language has been established in Eskasoni and serves the language resource needs of many schools in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland.

5. The Department of Education of Nova Scotia has developed Mi'kmaq Language 7 for non-Mi'kmaq speakers. This is now being piloted in the provincial schools. Students may take this course as an alternative to French, which is a compulsory requirement in the junior high grades.

6. An annual conference called *L'nuisultinej*, "Let us Speak our Language" is held at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, bringing together educators and many other interested people to discuss Mi'kmaq language issues.

7. Bill C-30, "Jurisdiction of Education", gives control of Education to the Mi'kmaq people in Nova Scotia.

It is also gratifying to see more and more adult learners taking advantage of courses which teach them to be readers and writers in the Mi'kmaq language.

We live in an English dominant society but that must not deter us from exercising our right to learn and to speak our mother tongue at home, in our community and in the classrooms. Our language is God's gift to us. It is distinct, it is beautiful and it is sacred.

*Language is the soul of the people.*

Wsitunn na wjijaqamijual wskwijinu'k.

*Language is the mind of the people.*

Wsitunn na ta'n telte'tmi'tij wskwijinu'k.

*Language is the spirit of the people.*

Wsitunn na mlki - ktlamsutasutimuow wskwijinu'k.

APPENDIX





