

Books for preschoolers latest tool against language loss in northern Quebec ^[1]

Cree Child and Family Services set to release seven culturally-based picture books

Author: Longchap, Betsy

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EXCERPTS

In the hopes of reversing a worrisome trend of language loss, Quebec Cree are expanding their library of Cree-language books that are culturally-based and aimed at preschool aged children.

After launching a call for stories in 2020, the Cree Nation Government's Child and Family Services department is set to release seven picture books in Cree syllabics for preschoolers in June.

Kelly-Lee Pepabano is the director of the Cree Nation Government's Child and Family Services department.

"We know that the Cree language is lost with our children because of technology, we see them watching television and using iPads in English mostly," Pepabano said in Cree.

It is very alarming for our children to lose their Cree language.

- Kelly-Lee Pepabano, Child and Family Services

Childcare centres in the Cree communities follow the provincial ministry of education program, but can develop their own resources to teach the children based on Cree culture and language.

With titles like Gookum's (Grandmother's) Gift, Mila's New Snowshoes and My Cousin's Walking Out Ceremony, the stories are culturally relevant and give educators and parents more tools, said Pepabano.

"There was not enough Cree materials for the educators to use to really promote the Cree language," she said.

The books are written in Cree syllabics in both northern and southern East Cree dialects.

On the back pages, the stories are also told in Cree roman orthography and in English.

Cree literacy

This will help early Cree literacy a lot, according to Melissa Rodgers, a pedagogical advisor with the Cree Nation Government, who led the project.

"For our children to learn their language, we can't go to the store and buy educational material," said Rodgers. "[We wanted] to highlight Cree culture and the language, because it's so rich."

Funding for these latest books is coming from the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework, a federal program.

The books will be added to a growing list of other resources, include flashcards, songs and other picture books based on Cree stories and in the Cree language.

All of the resources were created through consultation with elders, educators, chiefs and councillors from all over the Cree territory, said Pepabano.

Among the seven picture books, two are for infants, two are for toddlers and three are for preschoolers.

The illustrations are done by Natasia Mukash and Nalakwsis Mukash from Whapmagoostui and Kim Delormier, a Mohawk illustrator from Kahnawake.

The books create an opportunity for parents and educators to play an important role in language preservation, said Pepabano.

I think it's a wake up call.

- Kelly-Lee Pepabano, director Child and Family Services

"I think a lot of parents know that their children are using a lot of English to communicate most of the time," she said, adding there's so much more English today than when she was a young girl growing up on Fort George Island, near present day Chisasibi.

"We need to take action now before the Cree language is lost."

The department is also working on other teaching materials such as a snakes and ladders board game with a Cree-inspired design.

Child and Family Services have printed 17,500 copies of the books.

They will be made available to the Cree daycare centres and to families with children in the daycare system.

Some copies will also be made available through the Cree health board's *Â Mashkûpimâtsît* Awash program, which is focused on pregnancy, infant and early childhood care.

Region: Quebec ^[3]

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