

Cree immersion classes begin at Alexander First Nation ^[1]

Author: Jones, Susan

Source: St. Albert Gazette

Format: Article

Publication Date: 12 Oct 2011

EXCERPTS:

Students at Kipohtakow Education Centre start their day by singing Ka Kanata.

As they stand on guard for their home and native land, these young people are also doing something quite radical at Alexander First Nation. They are learning to speak Cree.

"We want to teach our culture, and language is so important to that. We need to carry on as Cree people and as a Cree community and we can't wait any longer," said Jody Kootenay, director of education at Kipohtakow school. "In our entire community, only one person under the age of 50 understands Cree."

This fall Cree immersion classes are being held for the first time for the four- and five-year-old children registered in kindergarten classes. One word at a time

It's a continuation and enhancement of a program that began three years ago when teachers started using the public address system to introduce a Cree word of the day to all classrooms in the kindergarten to Grade 12 school. About the same time, they also asked small numbers of students to stand before the office microphone each morning to sing the national anthem in Cree.

...

Teacher Sandra Auigbelle, who teaches the immersion program to the five-year-olds, follows a curriculum that mirrors that of any other provincial kindergarten classroom, but as they learn to count or to recite the months of the year, they do it in Cree.

Auigbelle was raised at Alexander, but only spoke Cree until she was nine years old. She remembers a great deal of the language, but over the years she lost some of its subtle undertones and meaning.

...

For many generations, First Nation people were only allowed to speak English, especially in school, and as a result the language almost died at Alexander.

"They were forced to learn English. At one time they were not allowed to speak Cree," said Kootenay. "I learned some Cree from my uncle, but only simple commands or ceremonial words."

Soetaert related the story about one of his teachers, who upon hearing the new Cree word of the day, which happened to be "father" went home and addressed her own parent using the word.

"He looked at her in a perplexed way and then asked what she meant," said Soetaert.

Onion Lake teachers

Because so few people spoke Cree at Alexander, the community brought in teachers from Saskatchewan.

"Of the 21 teachers and teaching assistants on staff, only nine are fluent in Cree. Most of them came from Onion Lake, Sask.," Kootenay said, adding that in many ways, the kindergarten immersion program was modelled on one at the Onion Lake school.

The children are also learning to read English, so eventually it is hoped they will be completely bilingual. In addition, the kindergarten classes are learning about their Cree heritage.

Auigbelle teaches the children a Cree prayer that blesses their home, their family and their community but also pays respect to nature. The children have a smudge ceremony each morning.

Auigbelle is proud of how quickly her students are picking up the language.

...

-reprinted from the St. Albert Gazette

Region: Alberta ^[2]

Tags: aboriginal ^[3]

immersion ^[4]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/11/10/cree-immersion-classes-begin-alexander-first-nation>
Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/11/10/cree-immersion-classes-begin-alexander-first-nation> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7859> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/aboriginal> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/immersion>