

# “Program Evaluation and Quality Control” in Native Language Education

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Responding to Ronald Mackay’s paper “Program Evaluation and Quality Control”, has been an interesting process. Evaluation for my organization (the Saskatchewan Indian Languages Institute) has been mainly aimed at project evaluation and, necessarily, aimed at assessing whether we meet the various funding agencies’ criteria. Mackay’s paper raises the topic of evaluation of programs more broadly — using evaluation as a management tool to improve the quality of a program.

Many of us realize the value of teaching our children their Indian languages. The author of *Indian Control of Indian Education* puts it well:

Language is the outward expression of an accumulation of learning and experience shared by a group of people over centuries of development. It is not simply a vocal symbol; it is a dynamic force which shapes the way a man looks at the world, his thinking about the world and his philosophy of life. Knowing his maternal language helps a man to know himself; being proud of his language helps a man to be proud of himself (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, pp. 14-15).

And Esther Wesley:

It is said by the elders that our language is our culture: the way we think about life, the way we respond to people, the way we interpret other actions. We are expressed through our language. If we lose our language, we lose our culture, we lose our uniqueness as aboriginal people (Canada, House of Commons, 1987, p. 6).

We agree on the value of languages, but are we successful in our attempts to retain and revitalize our languages? Apparently not, because a 1985 Secretary of State-initiated study of indigenous languages in Canada reflected the state of these languages in the areas of linguistic survival and aboriginal constitutional rights; they made very dreary predictions. Esther Wesley summarizes the findings:

Linguistic survival: Out of 53 languages indigenous to Canada, only 3 languages have strong chances of survival past the end of the decade; 8 are facing extinction; 29 are deteriorating rapidly; and 13 are moderately endangered. If any of these languages disappear from Canada, they will disappear from the face of the earth.

Aboriginal constitutional rights: Language is the essence of a people's cultural identity. If aboriginal rights include the right to cultural survival, then the preservation or revitalization of aboriginal languages is not an option or privilege, but a fundamental and inalienable right that ought to be granted protection by Canada's Constitution (Canada, House of Commons, 1987, p. 6).

Institutions such as the Saskatchewan Indian Languages Institute have been set up to accomplish a variety of goals with regard to Indian languages. With evaluation in mind, a colleague and I were working on a five-year action plan for the Institute. We looked at the functions of the Institute in relation to our mission statement and our objectives:

### **Mission Statement**

The Saskatchewan Indian Languages Institute is an Indian-controlled institution which serves the Indian peoples of Saskatchewan in our common goal — the preservation of Indian languages and cultures. Guided by our Indian values in the organization and operation of the Institute, linked by our elders to the past and the circle of nature, driven by the belief that our Indian past describes who we are, where we come from, what we believe in and how we should respond to the world, the Institute is dedicated to a future in which all our descendants will speak our Indian languages and rejoice in our Indian cultures.

### **Objectives**

- to promote the retention and revitalization of Indian languages in Saskatchewan, and thereby aid in the preservation of Indian culture
- to promote pride in Indian languages among the Indian community, and respect for these languages among the general population
- to record, transcribe and thereby preserve the wisdom of the Elders as expressed in the oral history of Saskatchewan Indian people
- to collect and share information and resources related to the Indian languages.

### **Functions**

- Curriculum Development: The Institute develops, publishes and distributes high quality language teaching materials for Kindergarten through Grade 12, as well as for post-secondary education.
- Implementation of Indian Language Programs: The Institute assists communities to set up Indian programs in their schools, conducts workshops and inservice training for teachers and program developers, and informs Indian language teachers of education and professional development

- opportunities.
- Interpretation and translation services.
- Clearinghouse: a directory of Indian language resources is maintained.
- Language Classes: Conversational classes are offered.
- Research ongoing in these fields: linguistics, language teaching, needs assessment, and Indian culture and history.

Our mission statement is quite general, and our first two objectives, promoting retention and revitalization, and pride and respect for the Indian languages in Saskatchewan, are not particularly specific. They could be part of the mission statement. The third and fourth objectives dealing with recording and transcribing oral history, and collecting and sharing information and resources, are more specific and we can see that we are fulfilling them.

Looking further at our functions, we realize, although all the functions are directly relevant to the preservation and revitalization of our languages and cultures, they themselves all merely lay the groundwork for language programs. We realize that we have been more research-oriented, at least this past year, and curriculum development has been a secondary function. Originally, curriculum development, along with Indian language instructor training, was a primary function.

Does an organization rewrite its objectives to fit its changing functions, or change its functions to fit its objectives? Does a time come when a program changes so much that one must stop and take a good hard look at it? Is the Institute now a research center? Yes, it is definitely time for us to commission an evaluation of our Saskatchewan Indian Languages Institute.

Although this evaluation would be initiated by management in this case, I would not consider management as the principal stakeholder. The principal stakeholder would be the Indian people we serve. In fact, students are the reasons we have language programs, and as such, they are the principal stakeholders. Some of the questions to be answered would be: Is the Institute helping to retain and revitalize the Indian languages of Saskatchewan, and thereby aiding in the preservation of Indian culture? Are we promoting pride in Indian languages among the Indian community and respect for these languages among the general population? How can we best accomplish these goals for our principal stakeholders? These are some of the questions we would want answered.

Further, any study of a language program should consider whether the program is on track in relation to its goals and objectives. Moreover, Indian language programs should provide for an Indian viewpoint in program design, and implementation and evaluation. An evaluator should keep this in mind and operate from that Indian perspective.

In addition, one of the vital and essential aspects of a successful program is community support and it should be evaluated. Support not only for the in-class program, but for implementing community language policies and individual home language policies, should be assessed.

## CONCLUSION

If we are to retain and revitalize our languages, then it is up to us to do everything in our power to reverse the trend toward loss of Indian languages. One way would be to evaluate all facets of our programs starting from the early stages, keeping in mind the principal stakeholders: the students, and basing the evaluation on our goals and objectives.

Many Indian language programs have ceased to function without written evaluations having been done. Therefore, we never know if they failed or if they ceased due to financial cutbacks. It seems Indian language programs focus all their energies on survival. It is a shame that languages such as English and French get such generous funding and the limited funding for Indian language programs restricts the activities of programs. We all know if we had adequate monetary support, we could begin achieving some of our goals. And yet, we should all embrace program evaluation as a tool for improving our language programs and for helping us make use of our own resources.

Alex Spence sums up the situation very well:

For instance, if you are an Italian, if you are French, if you are English — whatever ethnic background you are from — if you do not retain your language, you will be able to find it by searching for your roots. But the aboriginal people of Canada are not that privileged to be able to retain their language once it is lost. We might as well say that we are an endangered species. That is why we come to you. We want you to help us in terms of continuing some of the dreams that we have. We want you to help us be able to be part of the continuing education that we hope to do in terms of languages. (Canada, House of Commons, 1987, p. 9).

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## REFERENCES

- Canada, House of Commons. (1987). *Minutes of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development*. Tuesday, March 24. No. 24. Ottawa
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## THE AUTHOR

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