The Cree Way Project: an experiment in grass-roots curriculum development

Richard J. Preston
McMaster University

Background of the Project

Native education in the late 1960s and early 70s

This decade has seen widespread efforts to 'Indianize' Native people's educational curriculum, across Canada and in the U.S. as well. While this is not the first time such attention and effort has been directed to this problem, the events of the past decade coalesced the efforts of Native organizations, government, educators, and others, funded from both private and public sources.

In 1971, the National Indian Brotherhood's statement "Indian Control of Indian Education" was accepted as a policy guideline by the House Standing Committee on Indian Affairs, and in 1973 DINA gave similar approval. The purpose was to develop the recognition of Native Cultures in the various provincial and federal schools, through the inclusion of cultural content in curriculum materials, and to develop the use of native language and native teachers in the schools where native students were educated. Secondary goals related to providing facilities that would support "Amerindianization" in a variety of ways.

In Quebec, Amerindianization proceeded with 1) the establishment of native teacher training facilities at (now defunct) Manitou College, 2) with linguistic research which developed a model for languages of instruction (the "inverted triangles") that begins in the native language and shifts gradually to the second (French or English) language, and 3) in the Cree Way project.

The development of the Cree Way project

This project was, from its beginnings in 1970, an intentionally and pointedly intra-cultural experiment, to the extent that such an ideal was possible to realize. Literally, intra-cultural refers to an educational process that was traditionally a matter of growing up within the family context, learning social and bush-living skills, as well as the oral traditions, world view, and moral precepts. The Cree Way project could not realistically expect to duplicate this setting, but within the need for schoolrooms, teachers, curriculum standards and the rest of our basic elements of education, there is sufficient flexibility to permit more than simply the use of Cree as the first language of instruction, and for "cultural inclusion" of content in the curriculum. Beyond these two preliminary steps, Cree Way sought to incorporate a structure of knowledge, and a context of learning that is more distinctively Cree than other curricula.
Structure of knowledge: Just as the Cree (or any other) language is more than a lexicon of words, having instead a complex structure that builds and combines units of meaning into a medium for self-expression and interpersonal communication embodying a distinctive style and content; so Cree knowledge is more than an inventory of facts taken on by each individual over the course of his life. It is the way that each person makes coherent sense out of the diverse persons and events that constitute the intuitively real and correct way of life that the Cree rely on for their sense of identity as a person and as a member of their particular cultural group. To incorporate this into education has, in the past, been mostly a result of long term, often non-deliberate accumulation of materials from within the cultural tradition of the school personnel. Provincial curricula today are examples of this process.

Context of learning: The context of learning is easier to perceive, at least in the first analysis, than the structure of knowledge. In Canadian culture, the context is family-centred for the first years of childhood, and then is very markedly changed to a mixture of family and school. Traditional Cree learning took place in a familial context throughout the life-cycle. Learning characteristically took place on an individual to individual basis, within the group of persons that was at the same time, family and community. For the Cree Way project, the crucial step was to make the school, with its classrooms, teachers, and curriculum, a part of the developing northern settlement community. This was done with marked success, particularly in curriculum development, and it is this aspect that will be detailed in the remainder of this report. Because of the importance of specific individuals to the project, the report is in part a chronology of the efforts of particular individuals.

This report, then, presents the history of the project. The key individual, and others, comprised a "grass roots" institution from the modest, part-time beginnings in 1970 to a Cree Way Centre, funded by the Donner Canadian Foundation and other secondary grants from February 1974 through June 1976. The Centre became essentially inoperative by June 1977, and was converted into a classroom. The Cree Way project then spent a year or so in limbo, but with substantial effects outside of the Centre. Many Cree people of Rupert House and other communities are interested in what Cree Way was doing.

The key individual was John Murdoch, a young teacher of extraordinary intensity and determined demeanour, who began his teaching career in 1968 at Moose Factory Island Indian School. The next year, he had the very good fortune to marry Gertie Diamond, a young Cree woman who was the first secondary school graduate from her community, and who had lived from 1967-69 as a member of my family. In 1970, John and Gertie moved to Paint Hills, on the Quebec side of James Bay, where John was principal of the day school, and where he found in his new responsibility an opportunity to develop goals he had begun to formulate at Moose Factory.

From their arrival, the Murdochs sought with appropriate actions to integrate themselves with the other families of
the community, based on the conviction that both their joint role as family and John's role as school administrator should be responsive to, and integrated with, the community. Since teachers and, more notably, school principals have traditionally associated with (and been responsive to) the white enclave in these communities, the innovation of this family was quite significant. The new principal's behaviour was also more nearly appropriate in Cree terms since he made a consistent and deliberate effort to avoid authoritarian attitudes and actions, explicitly preferring to make the school's program responsible to the local band council. He urged teachers to visit the children's families socially and advised on how teachers might make their classroom roles more suitable for acceptance and respect by the children. The community response was positive and supportive. Absenteeism dropped markedly and remained low. Adult classes were filled and stayed filled.

These initiatives were supplemented by mimeographed readers and workbooks based on remembered history, belief, and technical knowledge of hunting and trapping, and gradually this cultural content was put more into terms of Cree semantic and behavioural structures. At the end of the second school year, in 1972, the Band Council at Rupert House (another Cree settlement about 100 air miles south of Paint Hills) asked for and obtained the transfer of Mr. Murdoch to their school with the purpose of achieving similar integration of school and community.

During the two years at Paint Hills, John had created the first stage of what later was called Cree Way. The use of readers and workbooks in Cree syllabics and in English, and recruiting the daily teaching work of a community adult as syllabics instructor, convinced John that the syllabic alphabet, applied to the student's language, provided a tangible, understandable way to experience and learn reading and writing as personal skills. Even more, the grasp of these basic skills made the learning of English less difficult, and raised the children's interest in learning to a noticeably higher level. Parental support was surely a contributing factor to the raised level of interest in learning, but no less important was the ability of the children to see, in their own actions, the significance of literacy. It was no longer a strange skill to be used to record an equally strange (English) language, but a way to give tangibility and permanence to their own familiar words and thoughts. In this intracultural context, literacy makes sense and is both interesting and rewarding.

In brief, John had made a significant change in the way education proceeded, from the usual "top-down" orientation to a grass roots "community-up" perspective, in which the school met the incoming children on their own terms, and built upon what the children already knew (Murdoch 1972, 1974; Preston 1972, 1974; Denny 1974; Gagné 1974).

The Cree Way Project: 1974-76

Cree Way as an institution, as a project with a staff, a budget, and a Centre, was conceived by John Murdoch and worked out with the suggestions and assistance of others,
and finally jointly written up as a proposal by John and myself in 1973. The proposal's success was the shock of Murdoch's career. He was accustomed to disagreement and resistance from DINA and the world-at-large (as he saw it) but quite unaccustomed to a strong and tangible commitment of support. He quickly took a responsible and cautious stance towards allocation of the Donner Foundation funding. The first step of collection of materials was already familiar and easily increased in scale, managed by Gertie's contact with the people who were interested in accepting task-specific work orders, and administered by her. Only funding was needed to increase the work, and that was now available. People taking on the work were conscientious in the quality of materials collected, and in accepting wages for work done.

Many people of Rupert House contributed extensively to the collection and working up of cultural materials. I mention only Willie Jacob, Annie Whiskeychan, Kenneth Weistchee, Hugo Blackned, Margaret Wesley, Mary Diamond and Hugo Hester, but there were many more.

The first significant problem to cope with was in converting the collected materials into curriculum booklets that were ready for classroom use. The skills were partly developed by John in the previous few years, but the volume of work that now presented itself was formidable for one person who was also teacher and principal of the school. John's solution was to try to recruit and train someone as a lay-up specialist in lettering, cutting and pasting drawings, and writing the syllabic script. But this was not managed and John worked extra hours to keep the materials flowing. By April of 1974, twenty items were produced amounting to about 300 pages. They were tried in the classrooms and formats were modified whenever pupil difficulty indicated such a need. This almost instant feedback between classroom and curriculum development work was very useful, and an almost unique situation.

School closed for the spring goose hunt, which allowed the children a period of truly intra-cultural education in the family context, while John spent more time preparing materials. In May, several persons who had received a packet of Cree Way materials wrote evaluative letters to Cree Way and to the DINA regional office. One assessor who also visited the Centre found the project "...carefully supervised and...rigourously planned, with due regard to the flexibility necessary to encourage local initiative... The material have been as carefully integrated as can be expected at this time. In fact, I was deeply impressed with the organization and cooperative effort of everyone involved" (Ellis 1974).

Letters from DINA regional office and district office officials were also appreciative (Lemay 1974; Aimé 1974), as was the educational official of the Indians of Quebec Association, and the director of the Alaska Native language Center. John attended a series of meetings with DINA educational personnel, demonstrating the project's potential for cooperation with DINA. The Cree Way Course Outline K-7 was evaluated by the DINA curriculum coordinator against the
provincial curriculum and was found to include all the content of the latter, as well as Cree content. Criteria for more detailed evaluation have not yet been worked out, but it is important to keep in mind that the only way to discover whether a school program is successful is to know what it sought to do, and to know how to recognize the signs of reaching the goals sought for.

Cree Way was re-introduced in its developed form to the community of Paint Hills in the early summer, when John and I took copies of materials for examination and presented these and an explanation at a town meeting. By this time, sequential materials in two subjects had been developed, and this inventory of materials and skills was taken to Manitou College during the summer, where people from eight other native communities participated in varying degrees. Since these people were in training as Native Language instructors, their work on materials ensured the subsequent classroom use of Cree Way materials in the following academic year. Peter Denny's skill in the analysis of semantic structures was combined with that of interested Native instructors, and the math curriculum developed accordingly.

Later in 1974, some of these instructors came to the Cree Way Centre for a week of on-the-job training, and produced an additional 35 curriculum items. The centre activities, by this time, included shipping sets of the materials to many other Native education projects in Canada and in the United States. Late in the year, John wrote a proposal for expanding the scope of Cree Way to include the other seven James Bay Cree communities. His prior success made this ambition seem appropriate, and he took the lead in writing the proposal, with little aid from me. The Grant Council endorsed the proposal in January 1975, but the funding has not yet been secured by Cree Way, or by the Grand Council.

Also, during early 1975, I twice visited the centre as part of field trips to research and report on school problems in another Cree community. In April, John made a presentation at the Native American Bilingual Education Conference in Calgary. Marguerite MacKenzie and I, at the request of the Grand Council, made a comprehensive study of the educational needs of the eight communities (Preston and MacKenzie 1976). Both the Calgary conference and the study of the other Cree communities showed the unique degree of effective cooperation between community, curriculum developers, and the school. Most other projects, even when physical proximity between these three essential elements is close, fail to cooperate sufficiently.

In retrospect, John's dual role of school principal and Cree Way supervisor, combined with Gertie's work and congenial relations with the Cree people, was a rare and superb network of essential relationships. My 'phantom' role as director was one of distant advice and logistical support when either were sought by John, and the DINA district office was only sporadically a source of difficulty. When district office told John that he would have to resign either the principalship or the role with Cree Way, he was politically adept enough to (nominally) resign from Cree Way. But DINA educational administrators were not satisfied
with their lack of input and administrative control, which they might have obtained by accepting John's application for the position of Curriculum Coordinator for the Cree area. For this job, his academic qualifications were insufficient.

Put simply, John needed a B.A. in order to qualify for the work that he was already performing, on his own. His future with DINA was blocked. I supervised correspondence courses, and he spent a summer (1976) at McMaster University which took him through the Year II university level, but that was not the solution. Although Cree Way was working well, larger ambitions to expand the scope were frustrated.

During the 1975-76 school year, a critical situation was developing, only partly visible to any of the persons concerned. The Grand Council did not fund John's expanded proposal, DINA was not prepared to advance John in their system, and his many submissions to potential funding sources brought no results. John's determination to make headway was done with an independence of attitude that asked little of me (unless I would get another grant) or of the Grand Council, or of DINA, as participants in Cree Way. His independence and zealot's energy had developed Cree Way to an impressively productive project, probably unique in the history of northern 'projects' that so chronically fail to even get well under way, much less succeed. But while John was failing to find support for the institution, he was also faltering in developing the primary purpose of the project. The personal independence that sustained his efforts did not serve the goal of his efforts.

The development of curriculum materials, which was the purpose, had reached a plateau. Hundreds of items, totalling thousands of pages, had been produced and used with success, and the progress was tangible and effective, as far as it went. Development beyond this stage, into higher grades and a blend of Cree and English, required the research of expert persons into the semantic structure of Cree. As I indicated at the beginning of this paper, Cree Way was able to go beyond the goals of using the Native language in the classroom and the use of cultural inclusions in curriculum materials for Native students. The significant contribution of Cree Way was to use language and culture with much greater sophistication of method, to provide curriculum materials that present the Native structure of knowledge (via semantic structure) in a context where the classroom maintains a Native learning style. The development of these materials requires the cooperation of Cree persons, curriculum skills (as John provided) and the work of psycholinguists. Peter Denny, Marguerite MacKenzie, and José Mailhot have all provided the latter skills, but the cooperative relationship between Cree Way and the non-Cree advisors was not maintained sufficiently during the 1975-76 period.

I believe that the plateau in the development of curriculum materials was a result of the diminished attention to developing more sophisticated curriculum materials, requiring cooperative work of persons expert in Cree and English semantic structures, at a time when increased input was needed. The early stages of development were managed well on a grasp of the Cree structure of knowledge that was more
intuitive than analytical, but the analytical aspect becomes an increasingly necessary complement to the Cree's conscious sense of their knowledge, as the curriculum becomes more integrated with Western civilization's knowledge. Still, I believe that no other project in native education has gone as far as Cree Way in this direction, so that the promise of such intercultural development in curriculum materials is still unrealized.

However, in the year I have been considering, there was a great deal happening in the centre. If a core of permanent staff did not materialize, the work went on and the number of items designed and produced rose, and by the end of the 1976-77 year the list passed the 300 mark. Donner Foundation funding was completely expended by the end of June, 1976, and smaller grants from Affaires Culturelles and DINA lasted through April 1977. A documentary film on Cree Way was also made (NFB 1978).

In early 1977, the same Cree instructors who spent a week's on-the-job training in 1974 returned, and their results were 79 new curriculum items, twice the number done in 1974. This consistency of personnel and increase in work completed shows the Cree Way potential, where the informal basis for participation continues to work well. But at the end of the 1976-77 school year, John and Gertie left for Saskatoon, where John completed his B.A. in Indian and Northern education, and spent spare days and weekends driving to Indian towns to help them in starting the kind of project that Cree Way has demonstrated.

When John left the centre, there was no one who was able to step in and keep it going, although there are several people who are still very interested in what they were doing. The centre is now a classroom, but the materials are currently being used in several James Bay schools, and in a letter from the Grand Council, written after John's departure, the possibility of funding in late 1978 is mentioned. More important, the materials that Cree Way produced are praised

"...the Cree School Board has decided to incorporate the Project into our own curriculum development department and to arrange for regularized funding (Saunders 1977)."

Since the Cree School Board is only recently established, it is reasonable that funding has not come through yet. As an interim arrangement, they have hired Annie Whiskeychan to continue work on curriculum development. Their very positive stance, the continuing use of the curriculum materials produced during John's tenure, and John's return to a different job with the Cree School Board is the state of the project at the end of 1978. Much was done; much of it was done very well. Much remains to be done. If Cree Way was truly a grass roots project, it will survive John's departure. Perhaps it is proper that Cree Way should undergo this test, at this time.

The research into the Cree structure of knowledge still goes on, although it lacks a cooperative setting to coordinate the results for the development of curriculum
materials. If the Cree School Board can be interested in this part of the promise of Cree Way, more will be done. Without doubt, the materials produced already have a continuing importance in the work of the School Board, and in the classrooms of the schools in that area. But the great potential for Cree Way to contribute to the effective continuation of Cree language and culture lies in the development of curriculum materials that are based upon the Cree structure of knowledge, before people in the schools and the School Board unwittingly abandon this goal for the more available compromise of English texts in Cree words.

This is, in my opinion, the crucial issue. Because the Cree structure of knowledge is known by Cree individuals at a mostly intuitive level of awareness, and not known at all by non-Crees working with the School Board and in the schools, it will seem a natural and reasonable thing to be satisfied with the appropriate Cree words in curriculum. Some Cree will be aware that correct speaking in Cree is a subtle and complicated thing, learned over one's entire life and done with true excellence by only some persons. This is an indication of the nature of Cree knowledge, and the standard for education should reflect the subtlety and complexity of both language and culture (knowledge). This will require expert assistance of the sort that Peter Denny and others began to contribute, and are willing to work further on. It requires a bridge of coordinated efforts between scholarly knowledge and applied techniques, which was the great achievement of Cree Way, its point of stalemate, and hopefully its new start.

NOTES

1 Cultural inclusion is the label given to an early stage of efforts to make curriculum materials more appropriate to the experience of children raised in remote Indian settlements, and refers to replacing unfamiliar persons or events in the reading materials, with familiar persons or events. For example, a story about a bus driver might be replaced with a story about a moose hunter (Murdoch 1974).

2 Adequate criteria for such a project will have to be sensitive to the location, to the Cree cultural goals as well as to provincial schooling goals, to the continuing performance of the children both in the Cree schools and in provincial schools (secondary and post-secondary) and to the balance desired between schooling for self-development as a Cree person, and schooling for being able to get a living economically.
REFERENCES

AIME, Albert E.
1974 Letter to J. Murdoch, February 6, 1974, from Mr. Aimé, Education Supervisor, DINA Abitibi District.

DENNY, J. Peter

ELLIS, C. Douglas
1974 Letter to G. Lemay, May 3, 1974, from Dr. Ellis, Chairman, Department of Linguistics, McGill University.

GAGNÉ, Raymond

LEMAY, Ghislain

MURDOCH, John S.

NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA
1978 Cree Way. 26 minutes, colour.

PRESTON, Richard J.
1974 The Means to Academic Success for Eastern Cree Students. Symposium on Anthropology and Education:
