

History of the Kanien'kéha Language in Kahnawà:ke, by Davis Rice Summer 2019

Though written in a first person perspective from writer/researcher Davis Rice, the following is based on research (including the work of Kaia'titahkhe Annette Jacobs) and discussion with Kahnawa'kehró:non who have knowledge on the history of the Kanienehaka Language. The final paper was sent to the Kahnawà:ke Culture & Language Network for review and endorsed by the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke.

This paper is about the history of the Mohawk (Kanien'kéha) language as told by the people living today and their experiences. Various individuals lived through troubling times when understanding the language importance and how valuable it is in our lives. The language was alive and flourishing prior to the implementation of formal Indian day schools in Kahnawà:ke. It goes without saying the demise of the language began during the early years of these schools.

We examine when the language was spoken in the homes and try to identify why a generation of fluent speakers refused to carry on with this tradition. We will concentrate on the portion from 1970, which was referred to as the stepping-stone for the revitalization of Kanien'kéha. Several individuals spoke about their history and experience about the language and what it means to them. We also look at what are some of the projects that have taken place and what exists today; remarkably the community has to be proud of the accomplishments made to help revitalize the language.

Background

When I was a boy back in the 60's the only language we spoke was Mohawk and some English. My Ista (grandmother) only spoke and understood Mohawk so we had to converse with her as such. As far as my parents were concerned, speaking Mohawk wasn't necessary for the future as English was the language of the day.

Schools in Kahnawà:ke were run by the church. When we went to elementary school, we couldn't speak Mohawk and would receive a stern glance or even the strap (form of punishment usually handed down by the Sister superior)

Back in the homes, the parents who spoke refused to teach their kids and used the language when they did not want the children to understand. The church run schools heavily influenced the community and felt speaking our language wasn't necessary. Back then, people rarely used or even knew their Kanien'kéha (Mohawk) names. However, when people were baptized, the priests registered the Kanien'kéha (Mohawk aka "Indian names") and used this as an identity to reflect that you were a born an Indian (many of the youth didn't know their Kanien'kéha names.

The language was widely used by the community up until the latter part of the sixties when our elders began to pass. It's like the language went with them.

There was an assumption by outsiders that the language was alive and flourishing but in reality, it was deteriorating. Most children of the 60's and 70's did not speak or understood their language and very few parents taught at home. They unwittingly enshrined that English was good and Mohawk was bad!

A Kahnawà:ke bilingual grandmother (English /Kanienkaha) explained that the pressure was tremendous and heavily influenced whether you should speak to the children in the language. The feeling at the time was that Kanienkáha was not going to get the children anywhere in life. When she was in public, she refused to speak Mohawk out of embarrassment. Whether this has to do with multigenerational trauma from her time at Indian Day/Residential school is something scholars will argue. Regardless, the language was in turmoil.

As a young council chief in 1986, I recall eight of the twelve council members spoke fluent Mohawk and I remember the feeling listening to them converse and laughing when the time allowed. I will concede that when the non-speakers entered the room, it quickly turned back to English. I never found an explanation why this happened?

The revival of the Language

What was needed was to look at the language in depth. A survey done by the National Museum of Man in 1976 concluded that the Mohawk language was endangered. Only a very small percentage of our people were completely fluent. This caused a major concern and began the uphill challenge of maintaining what we had left and how to enhance the language.

This was no easy feat. Trying to argue the necessity of keeping the language took a lot of strength and tenacity by individuals who would not give up their battle in preserving the language, ensuring the people would never forget where they came from. People like Annette Jacobs, sister Dorothy Lazore, Nora Deering, Frank Jacobs, Frank Natawe are but some of the names that continually come up as crediting those responsible for educating the community about the importance of keeping our language alive. Realizing our language was endangered was the first time people began to understand the necessity to keep it alive.

Prior to 1970, the only thing native (language, culture, etc...) in our schools were the children! No native teachers (all non-native), no native content, no native history, no stories, songs or pictures and certainly no language! Needless to say this had a negative impact on our collective identity and self-image.

I can share an example of this when in grade four (1969) we had a Mohawk substitute by the name of Mrs. Diabo. She was a mother and elder with no teaching experience, who filled in as a substitute when necessary. Although the full time teacher left her with instructions for the day, she would detour from this

on occasion and tell us stories from our past. This was the best part of our day and we insisted for her to continue telling stories and forget math, etc. I can remember this like it was yesterday and doing this research and writing project only enhances my feeling that we need to continue our struggle. We must remember that learning our language (and culture) was not allowed. Why did all my class remember this one woman telling stories more than anything else? Understanding who we are is more important than anything else. It was the first time we began to understand who we were!

Language in schools 1970's

In 1970, thanks to an understanding principal, Mohawk instruction for 15 minutes per day per class **was allowed** as an introduction to our language. Three elders were hired to come up with a system to converse with the children. There was no curriculum at all and it was experimental. These new teachers did not have any training and began planting the seed that led to 30 minutes of instruction for the next two years. In 1972, the University of Quebec offered a training certificate program initiated by the Combined Schools Committee that was funded by Indian Affairs. 5 people enrolled for the specialized teaching certificate. The teachers themselves developed the pedagogical material.

A local survey from 1976 made language a priority and decided to explore what was needed to preserve the language. It's my opinion that the people of the community had taken the language for granted. The perception was that the language was widely used. We did not understand how critical of a state it was in. Dorothy Lazore led a group of university students to develop Mohawk material such as charts, games legends and a calendars for the first time in Mohawk.

In 1979 a pilot project took place using total immersion in nursery for one half day and 30 students applied. The following year, students who fulfilled the year went on to kindergarten for an additional half day. The following year, 15 of the 30 went on to grade 1 where they stayed until grade 4.

Also in 1979, the formation of the Kahnawà:ke Survival School allowed for the continued learning of language and culture in elementary to carry on to high-school.

In 1983, a permanent Kanien'kéha language curriculum was created as part of the Kahnawà:ke Education Center. By 1984, total immersion began in 3 levels and was extended through grade 3 and partially through 4-5-6.

In 1986, 2 teachers were released from teaching to concentrate on the development of social studies, science and language arts. The biggest challenge was the lack of pedagogical materials for future teachers to follow.

June 1989 saw the first graduates of immersion from grade 6. Another initiative created by the Cultural Center was the first language immersion summer camp.

In 1994 a movement was made to extensively reorganize the schools. As a result, kindergarten to grade 4 at Karihwahronon increased to full immersion.

Previous to 1994, all Kahnawà:ke students went to Kateri School from Grades 1-3 and to Karonhianonha School for Grades 4-6. After 1994, Karonhianonha became a Mohawk Immersion school for grades 1-6 while Kateri remained English, with Mohawk language classes offered, also from Grades 1-6, giving parents a choice. Both programs still exist today.

In 2006, the Kanien'kéhaka Onkwawenna Raotitiohkwa Cultural Center began a one year full Mohawk immersion program for adults 18+ which was

The success of the program depended greatly on support and participation by the parents, grandparents, extended family, community leaders and community as a whole.

In 2007, the MCK Language and Culture Training Program was established to offer their employees language and cultural learning opportunities. The program has since extended seats to the EDC organizations (2011) and community members through a working relationship with KORLCC (2014).

Key Milestones

Some important milestones to remember:

- September 1970- 15 minutes per day for Mohawk language instruction in the schools
- 1979 pilot project total immersion for nursery ½ day
- 1984 total immersion nursery, kindergarten and grade one 1988 creation of Karihwahronon, language instruction begins at age 2 in a home like surroundings, operated and maintained by parents and entity. Today it provides necessary academics needed to go on to high school at each child's individual pace.
- 1997 the Onkwawenna Language Center created to promote the language throughout the community. The language and culture training center" committed to the enrichment of the social fabric of Kahnawà:ke by making the strongest and most determined effort to learn, revive, use, perpetuate and live the beautiful Kanien'kéha language within the community.
- 2000 the MCK enacts Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Language Law
- Kanien'kéha Ratiwennahni:rats (Kanien'kéhaka Onkwawenna Raotitiohkwa)
 - Adult immersion reconnecting to their language and culture .
 - 2008 becomes 2 year program
 - Over 120 students successfully graduate since beginning.

- June 2014- 15 successful graduates becoming full adult speakers!
- 2007 the MCK develops its own Culture & Language Training program for employees
 - 2011 The program extended seats to other Kahnawà:ke Organizations
 - 2014 The program extended to Community for those who could not attend Ratiwennahni:rats through a relationship with KOR
- 2014, the Language Nest, Iakwahwatsiratatie was established as a natural environment for children to learn Mohawk as their first language. Parents are encouraged to learn the language while sitting along side their children.
- 2018 the establishment of the Kahnawà:ke Language & Culture Network
 - KOR
 - MCK Language & Culture
 - Karihwanoron
 - Language Nest
- 2019 The Year of the Indigenous Language (United Nations Declarations)
 - Key events by the Kahnawà:ke Language & Culture Network, culminated in December with an honor luncheon to elders who preserved the language

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- Kaia'titahkhe Annette Jacobs had been mentioned numerous times as perhaps the most influential in the revitalization of the Kanien'kéha language in the Community and her written works were used as references throughout the above document.
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