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**Language Connects Us:**  
*Maintaining the Mohawk language  
on the St. Regis Reservation*



*By Paul Boyer*

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### About Voices of Language

Voices of Language is a series of reports examining how Native communities in North America are working to sustain and revitalize their threatened indigenous languages. Funded by a generous grant from the National Science Foundation, Voices of Language focuses on the work of individual educators and activists. By telling their stories, we hope to provide inspiration and insight for others taking part in this young movement.

### About Native Science Report

*Native Science Report* is an online journal of education and policy, exploring the role of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics within tribal and Native-serving colleges, as well as the communities they serve. Additional articles and reports related to language revitalization can be found at:  
[nativesciencereport.org](http://nativesciencereport.org)

## Preface

Native language revitalization is often thought to be a young movement. Many tribes in the United States, for example, are only now beginning the work of documentation and instruction. But for Mohawk communities in northern New York State and eastern Canada, language survival has been a priority for decades—even centuries. With more than 350 years of sustained contact with European society, Mohawks have had to work longer and, arguably, harder than most to sustain their land, their identities, their traditions—and their language.

This determination has served them well. Members of the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation, which straddles the border separating New York State and Canada, have been part of the American and Canadian economic systems since the nineteenth century; for much of the twentieth century they were widely known as skilled ironworkers, helping to build some of the tallest skyscrapers in New York City. But most tribal members also remained fluent in their own language. Well into the mid-twentieth century, Mohawk was still the language of the home and community life. As a teenager in the 1950s, Carole Ross, a fluent speaker who spent much of her career teaching Mohawk, recalled her father saying, “When you come in this house, you speak Mohawk.” He was an ironworker and fluent in English. But he believed his own language had value and should be used.

For a variety of reasons—ranging from the imposition of residential schooling to the arrival of television—this strategy of learning English while guarding the Mohawk language began to erode in the postwar years, as it did in many other Native communities. But more than most tribes, Mohawk communities acknowledged the warning signs and acted. By the early 1980s they were starting schools, training teachers, and working to create a standardized orthography, among other efforts.

Today, these efforts have grown into a remarkably diverse variety of language programs. They include two immersion schools, several adult immersion programs (including a language and culture apprenticeship program), as well as several options for part-time language study. One tribal agency has even developed a complete online language curriculum available to anyone with access to the internet. All this is taking place in a community of only fourteen thousand members. For good reason, the tribe is an inspiration and a role model for many Native nations.

These efforts are yielding results. Immersion schools and adult immersion programs, for example, are successfully producing a new generation of speakers. The administrators and teachers we talked with, however, also caution that their work has not yet reversed language loss. Most fluent speakers are elders, they told us, while most children and young adults speak (or prefer to speak) English. This report focuses on why revitalization is so difficult, even in a community that makes language a priority, and how these experienced and committed educators are working to overcome the challenges.

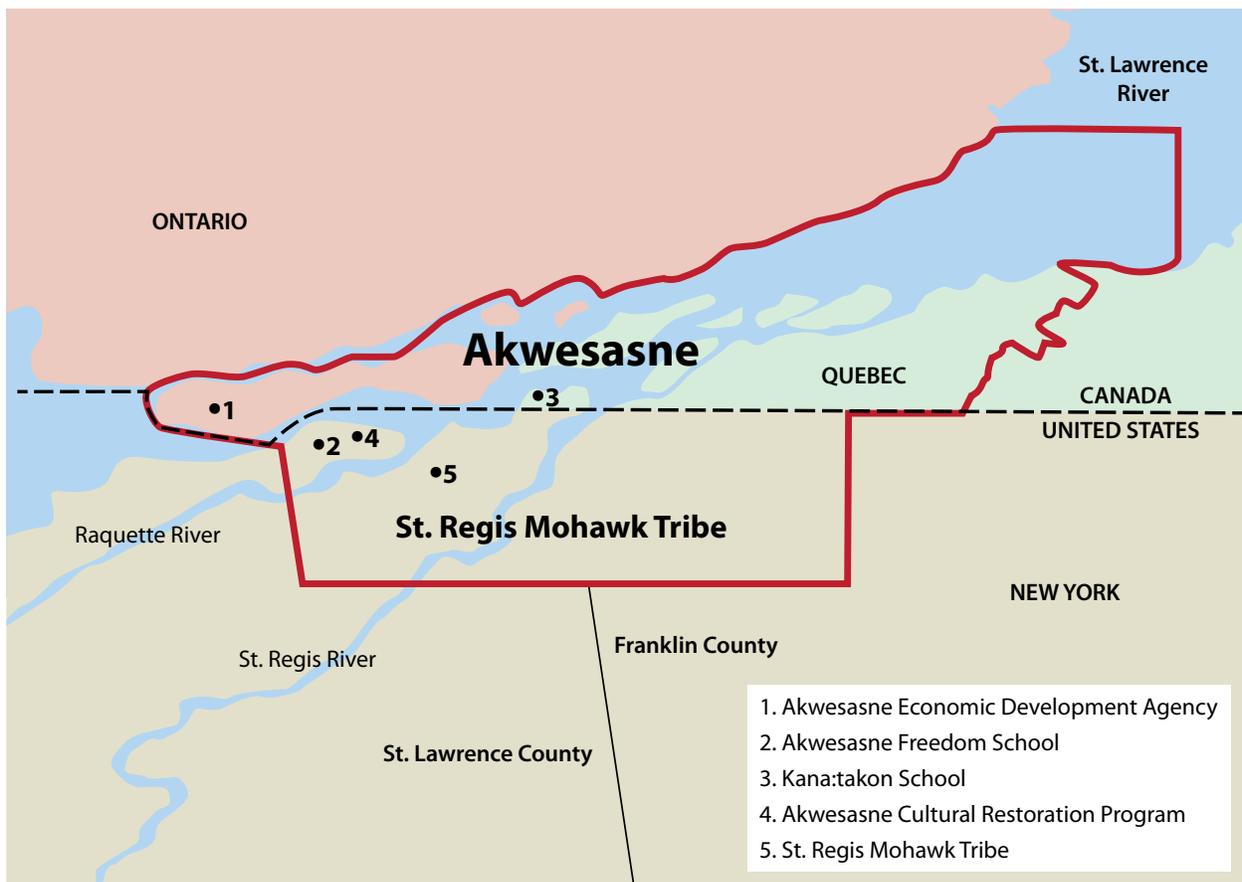
*Language Connects Us* is part of the Voices of Language project, an ongoing effort by the online journal *Native Science Report* to document the rapidly growing movement for indigenous language revitalization in North America. This report does not argue for one particular approach to language revitalization. Rather, its purpose is to better understand the motivations, goals, and day-to-day challenges faced by community members who are working to save their own languages. Focusing on their experiences and insights, we hope this series will offer both inspiration and practical ideas for others participating in this movement. For non-Indians, we hope the reports will help explain why languages matter and why revitalization is viewed by many as an urgent and necessary undertaking.

Most of all, we hope this report captures the sense of determination, hope, and energy we felt during our visit to the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne. We know that the community hosts many visitors hoping to learn from their work. Yet we were welcomed with grace and kindness by all. It is to them this report is dedicated.

## Introduction

Straddling the St. Lawrence River along New York's northern border, the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation is the only federally recognized tribe with contiguous territory in both the United States and Canada. It's a distinction that creates an international frontier like no other. I arrived with my passport, and used it twice, but several roads within the reservation cross the border unimpeded, without even a sign to mark the boundary.

My host was Carole Ross, director of language programs for the St. Regis Tribe, a woman in her 70s with boundless energy. Eager to show all of the tribe's language programs, we spent a great deal of time in her car. Driving down a reservation road she would casually announce that we had crossed into Canada or, a few minutes later, that we were now in the United States. I frequently lost track of our location and, more than once, began an interview with a teacher or school administrator not entirely sure which country I was in. I grew alert to clues, like speed limit signs in kilometers or stop signs in French.



Free movement between nations felt liberating at a time when American politicians were promising to build more and higher walls along the nation's perimeter, but it was also misleading. Even where physical barriers don't exist, a bewildering array of political, legal, and even cultural boundaries carve the small reservation into a jigsaw puzzle of overlapping jurisdictions. The southern half of the Mohawk Nation falls within the United States; the northern half is in Canada. Meanwhile, the American side is also within New York State, which often exerts its authority, while the Canadian side is divided between two provinces, one English speaking (Ontario), one French (Quebec).

Additionally, the reservation maintains three distinct governing bodies. On the American side, New York State and the federal government deal exclusively with the St. Regis Mohawk Tribal Council, which is governed by six elected tribal council chiefs.<sup>1</sup> Across the border, twelve district chiefs and one grand chief comprise the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, which represents the Canadian portion of Akwesasne (which is the tribe's traditional name, and the name used when referring to both Canadian and American territory).<sup>2</sup> There is also a traditional council of elders, ostensibly representing the tribe as a whole on matters of internal policy.

Not surprisingly, different philosophies and policy priorities are reflected in each group. Several times in recent history these differences led to vocal and even violent protests within the community. These disputes are often triggered by relatively small events—the imposition of import duties at a border crossing, opposition to a federal employment program, disagreement over the legality of a bingo parlor—but all reflect a deeper debate over the tribe's governance and identity. Who speaks for the people as a whole? What defines Mohawk identity in the modern era? What does it mean to be a sovereign nation? These questions are important in all societies, but they sit especially close to the surface of daily life in Akwesasne, where geographic and political divisions are so tangibly experienced.

While the reservation's bi-national location creates complications and uncertainties, it also puts the tribe at a dynamic crossroads, where ideas and expertise of several nations (both European and Native) meet and mix in energetic ways. The very forces that lead to protests and international conflicts also inspire innovative programs and nurture inspiring leaders. It is not surprising, then, that it is here—along a contentious international border—that some of North America's first and most ambitious efforts to sustain a Native language took root.



I was eager to visit the Mohawk community precisely because it is widely viewed as a language revitalization success story, a place where immersion schools and adult programs thrive, supported by a cadre of trained teachers who pioneered instructional practices now widely used in other Native communities. While the Maoris of New Zealand and Native Hawaiians have more comprehensive language programs (reflecting their larger populations and greater political leverage), the Mohawks sometimes attract more attention because theirs is a relatively small reservation, with a small population and limited resources. If they can do it, it is argued, there is hope for hundreds of small tribal and Native communities across North America. For this reason, many of its leaders and the

institutions they helped establish are used to hosting visitors: writers such as myself, well-intentioned volunteers who (I was told) sometimes show up unannounced, and—most importantly—members of other tribal communities eager to glean insights from the Mohawk model.

And what they have to show is, indeed, impressive; my tightly packed agenda, facilitated by Carole Ross's tireless driving, touched only a few highlights: We visited The Akwesasne Freedom School, a Mohawk-language immersion school; we toured the tribal headquarters, where Ross taught adult language classes; and we talked with administrators and teachers at a language and culture apprenticeship program, funded by a legal settlement with the Alcoa Corporation. All that is on the American side. On the Canadian side, there is another immersion school and a second adult program.

Added together, the result is a rich array of programs that are the envy of most other Native nations. But it was clear that this diversity also reflects, to some extent, the geographic and ideological divisions within the community. How these different groups, across the various borders, are working to build a common vision and a coherent approach to language revitalization became the central focus of my visit.

## Colonization, conflict, and renewal

// Well, this is my birth story," Carole Ross began.

As usual, we were in her car, somewhere just above or below the border. "My name is Katsi'tsienha:wi, and it means 'she is carrying flowers.'

"When I was born, I wasn't breathing. I was all blue. So my grandmother"—who was a midwife—"worked on me and as my grandmother worked on me, her neighbor, who didn't know my mom was in labor, came over carrying flowers." Also attending the birth was an old woman, a friend of the family, who sat in a chair in the corner "just smoking a pipe," Ross said. ("Actually, that's where she lived," Ross interjected, as we drove down a rural road lined with a procession of small frame houses.) "Anyway, my grandmother got me to breathe, but the old lady who was there said, 'Baptize her right away and call her Onwá:ri (Mary/Marie) Katsi'tsienha:wi.'

"So that's how I got my name: Carole Marie Katsi'tsienha:wi." Surrounded by family, neighbors, flowers, and the Mohawk language, Carole Ross came into the world.

Mohawk was the language of home. Precocious, she formed her first words at six months; by the age of two she was a chatterbox. Her father, an ironworker in New York City, lived much of the time away from home. When he returned one snowy January evening, her mother, who had just given birth to Ross's brother, said—hoping for a surprise—"Don't tell your dad that we had another baby." But when her father walked in the door, Ross ran up and blurted out, in Mohawk, "Dad, we have another baby!"

"You mean I said all that in Mohawk?" Ross asked her mother when the story was told years later. Yes, her mother assured her. All that, and more.

Mohawk was the dominant language of the community, as well, spoken by most tribal members and even some non-Indian residents, including the redheaded postmaster. Only when Ross entered kindergarten at the small brick elementary school in Hogsburg, New York did she encounter a world where English came first, though she did not recall feeling traumatized by the unfamiliar language or shame for her lack of understanding. "Nobody ever said, 'Don't speak the language.' Nobody ever put pepper on my tongue," Ross said. It probably helped that her teacher was a tribal member, though she didn't speak Mohawk.



Carole Ross.

Photo: Paul Boyer

Ross recalls mostly staying silent. “I didn’t speak when I didn’t have to,” she said. Instead, she focused on listening and, like most of her classmates, behaving well. “We sat when we were supposed to and got in line when we were supposed to.” In this way, she stayed out of trouble and eventually mastered English.

Did she ever sense that she was forgetting her ancestral language? I asked. “Never,” she said. “Never, because I would get home from school and my dad and mom would talk Mohawk.” And while her parents understood English, they expected the children to speak Mohawk at home. She remembered her younger sister getting off the school bus and coming in the front door still speaking English. Her father told her, “When you come in this house, you speak Mohawk.” This was not criticism of English; her parents saw its value and accepted its use. There was room for both—but each in its proper place.

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*Her father told her,  
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Mohawk.”*

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This approach to culture and language—learning one, while guarding the other—sustained the Mohawk people for over two hundred years.

The Mohawk Tribe is historically part of the five-nation Iroquois Confederacy. Traditionally, they called themselves the Haudenosaunee—an Onondaga word meaning People of the Longhouse—and just as a single longhouse sheltered several families, each performing a distinct role, so each tribe traditionally occupied a particular territory and served a particular function within the confederacy. The Seneca claimed the western-most territories and were expected to guard the “western door,” while the Onondaga, in the middle, were said to tend the longhouse fire. The Mohawks, originally located in what is now eastern New York State and Vermont, guarded the “eastern door.”<sup>3</sup>

Europeans began arriving along the seaboard of Canada and New England by the first half of the sixteenth century, when Basque-speaking fishermen made seasonal camps near the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. By 1534, French expeditions led by Jacques Cartier reached present-day Montreal, bringing settlers and Jesuit missionaries to the territory just north of the five nations. By the early 1600s British settlements were appearing along the New England coast and, eventually, inland. Around the same time, the Dutch



*The St. Lawrence River, viewed from the south shore, in the reservation town of Akwesasne.*

*Photo: Paul Boyer*

settled the mouth of the Hudson. In 1609, Henry Hudson, looking for a passage to the Orient, reached the very edge of the Mohawk's "eastern door," leading to establishment of a Dutch trading post that later became the city of Albany.<sup>4</sup>

By the first decades of the seventeenth century, the Iroquois were surrounded by a growing assortment of European villages, forts, trading posts, and missions, each occupied by querulous foreigners competing for land, souls, and access to trade routes and trade goods. Living in the middle of contested terrain, neutrality was rarely an option. Pursuing their own interests, they traded with the Dutch, sided with the British against the French (or, sometimes, the other way around), and, eventually, fought alongside the British against the American colonists.

The American victory left most Iroquois without political leverage to protect their remaining land base. As old agreements with the British were rendered null, new, less favorable treaties were signed with the Americans. Land was frequently purchased or appropriated under legally dubious circumstances, often in bits and pieces. The Cayugas, who once claimed a broad swath of scenic land around the lake that still bears their name in central New York, first saw their territory shrink to one hundred square miles, then shrink again in 1795 when they were left with two tiny tracts totaling three square miles at the lake's northern tip.<sup>5</sup> Even these smaller parcels were later sold to non-Indians. As ancestral homelands evaporated, many Mohawks moved north. The St. Regis Reservation sits on traditional Mohawk hunting land, but the reservation began as a Jesuit mission established in the 1750s on a site first populated by Mohawks displaced from their homeland near present-day Albany.<sup>6</sup> Because the St. Regis Mohawks fortuitously sided with the Americans in 1775 and signed treaties with New York, they enjoyed a measure of security after the war, attracting homeless and disaffected members of other tribes in the region.<sup>7</sup>

By the start of the nineteenth century, the Iroquois had nearly two hundred years of exposure to European society. They were not the better for it. Longhouses, the foundation of the Iroquois' communal life, were abandoned; nearly all tribal members now lived in individual cabins. And with the loss of territory needed for hunting, families eked out livings as best they could—foraging for ginseng when demand for the medicinal plant briefly spiked, or selling baskets crafted from split ash. Poverty and the loss of autonomy were keenly felt as communities became what historian Dean Snow characterized as “deplorable wilderness slums.”<sup>8</sup> The centuries-old confederacy had ceased to function, alcoholism was endemic, faith in traditional ceremonies was eroding. While some families were adapting, it was a low point for the community as a whole.

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However, the next two centuries did not bring annihilation, as some predicted, but the reverse: a slow, uneven, but ultimately determined effort to survive as a people. By the early 1800s the charismatic Seneca leader Kaniatario (also known as Handsome Lake) began speaking out for restoration of traditional ceremonies and argued for greater cultural and political separation from American society. At the same time, he advocated for pragmatic accommodation to their new social and economic reality: Farming, he said, should be embraced as a respectable profession; corrosive in-fighting should be avoided. He had his critics, but Kaniatario's efforts to devise a way for Iroquois to be Iroquois in the world as it was helped begin a journey toward renewal.

Other steps followed. By the early twentieth century, both the United States and Canada were pressuring and, when possible, compelling Iroquois communities to assimilate into the mainstream of American society through compulsory enrollment in residential schools, allotment of tribal lands, abandonment of traditional government, and other means. Yet, noted Dean Snow, “Despite (or perhaps because of) the political currents running against the Iroquois in both New York and Canada, traditional practices revived and spread.” An updated league of tribes was introduced, hereditary chiefs reinstated, and the Longhouse Religion continued to spread, reaching the St. Regis community by the 1930s.<sup>9</sup>

On their own terms, the St. Regis Tribe found ways to participate in the American economy. When the Canadian Bridge Company hired

tribal members to work on a new steel span to Cornwall Island in 1888, many Mohawks found their path to a new career. Their reputation as skilled and fearless ironworkers eventually led them to New York City, where they helped build many of Manhattan's tallest skyscrapers. Welding girders hundreds of feet above the ground was, in its own way, another part of the tribe's cultural renewal. Just as ancestors left villages to hunt, returning home with food and stories of danger and bravery, so the twentieth century ironworkers journeyed from home, engaging in work that required tremendous skill and nerve in order to support families back home. "For the first time in a century," according to Snow, Mohawk men "had access to the kind of prestige and wealth that the ancient chiefs could have understood."<sup>10</sup>

Photos of the period, showing tribal men in construction overalls and hard hats, superficially present an image of assimilation, the only visible evidence of their heritage being (it was often said) an unusually keen sense of balance. But when these men returned to their homes along the St. Lawrence, many still spoke Mohawk and, like Ross's father, expected their children to do the same. It is this climate of pride and cultural self-awareness that Ross invoked when she shared childhood memories of her family and her community.



What's so remarkable in Carole Ross's accounts of reservation life in the mid twentieth century is that Mohawk was still widely spoken, despite 350 years of contact and social change. But there were, in hindsight, signs of distress. Even as a child, she knew that not all tribal members spoke their ancestral language. Within her kindergarten class, some children did and some did not. As the years passed and the children grew, so did the use of English, which slowly displaced Mohawk as the community's lingua franca. Ross recalled her mother switching to English when non-Mohawk-speaking visitors arrived. She said it was the polite thing to do.

"So that's why we lost our language," Ross said, not completely in jest. "We were too polite."

From here the pattern of language erosion progressed in the usual way: As fewer and fewer children were taught the language, fluency receded generationally. For a while, it was still strong among young adults. As late as the early 1990s, tribal linguists reported that fluency was common among those over thirty.<sup>11</sup> But once the natural process of language transmission from parent to child ended, it inevitably became the language of elders. Today, Carole Ross said fluency is strongest among those over fifty, especially those over sixty or seventy. Her generation is the last to reliably speak Mohawk as their first language.

Today, there are an estimated thirty-five hundred Mohawk speakers spread across North America, with the greatest number in Canada, where there are several Mohawk reserves.<sup>12</sup> On Akwesasne, the number of speakers is estimated around four hundred. As always, numbers are estimates, and vary widely. Yet, in the dismal world of indigenous language statistics, the Mohawks fare better than most Native communities. Unlike many tribes that have only a handful of fluent speakers or, worse, no

longer have any living speakers, there is still a base of fluency within and beyond the community, even if it represents a minority of the tribe's total membership.

Also unlike other indigenous communities, the Mohawks of Akwesasne (and several Canadian reserves), acknowledged the warning signs of language loss even when the language was relatively strong, and began building the schools and formulating the language policies that made them role models for other indigenous communities. With decades of experience, the Mohawks developed some of the programs that are now viewed as best practices in language revitalization, and their work continues to inspire Native peoples around the nations and the world.

However, language revitalization can be a controversial and even divisive topic. This is true in many Native communities; there are different attitudes regarding the value of language and not all tribal members believe revitalization should be a priority. But this tension is especially pronounced in the politically factionalized Mohawk community. Here, language has been drawn into larger debates over governance and definitions of sovereignty: issues that have, in the past, sparked protest and even moments of violence.

## 2

## Connecting language and culture

The modern language revitalization movement grew out of one such conflict. In 1979, simmering tension between the elected tribal council in New York and self-identified traditionalists erupted when a federally funded employment program for tribal youth began building a fence along part of the reservation's boundary. Loran Thompson, a tribal chief and staunch traditionalist, opposed the construction project, which ran through his property, on two grounds. First, he believed involvement of the federal government, even indirectly, violated tribal sovereignty. Secondly, a border fence implied acceptance of the Mohawk nation's greatly diminished land base—it followed a boundary that Thompson and other traditionalists did not accept as the legal limit of their ancestral territory. In protest, he “confiscated” some chainsaws owned by the employment program. In response, tribal police arrested Thompson. As the conflict escalated, traditionalists established a protest encampment on Thompson's property, located on a point of land at the convergence of the St. Lawrence and Raquette Rivers. Roads leading to the small peninsula were then blockaded by state police. The resulting standoff lasted two full years.

Residents of the encampment created their own community within the reservation, practicing forms of self-governance that they felt were more in keeping with traditional Akwesasne values. But life was not idyllic; with roads closed, access to the rest of the reservation (and the world beyond) required a river crossing. Every trip—for food, for a visit to relatives—became a complicated logistical endeavor. For parents, the problem was especially fraught. Was it safe to send their children to the reservation's schools, which were all outside the blockade? More fundamentally, should children go to schools that reflected a system the traditionalists opposed?

Beverly Cook, a resident of the encampment, felt that “in the atmosphere of political upheaval,” the answer to each question was “no.” Speaking to a North Country Public Radio reporter thirty years later, she said, “I couldn't imagine sending my daughter to public school. It just didn't work for me, and the other parents were like-minded; it was really important for us to know our kids were going to know who they were...and why their parents were behind a barricade.”<sup>13</sup>

She and other parents began educating children within the encampment, establishing what they called the Akwesasne Freedom School. Relying on volunteers, including some non-Indians from as far away as France and Germany, the school was an informal enterprise “united by a determination to keep Mohawk culture alive,” according to Louellyn White, a tribal member with a doctorate in American Indian studies from the University of Arizona who wrote a history of the school. “While state police sharpshooters stood nearby and gunfire was occasionally exchanged between opposing groups, young Mohawk children were learning to speak their people's language,” she wrote. “They

walked in the woods looking for medicine and learned the Haudenosaunee creation story and Haudenosaunee history.”<sup>14</sup> Carole Ross noted that her sister, Theresa LaFrance, a certified teacher, also worked and taught at the encampment.

Eventually the blockade ended, the encampment was abandoned, and a slow healing process began.<sup>15</sup> However, the school remained. Today, it is located in a wooded grove near the original protest site, with an enrollment of about sixty students. The schoolhouse is a simple frame building that, like a traditional longhouse, is oriented east to west with doors on either end. Operating without federal or state funding, and reluctant to impose burdensome tuition on parents, it remains a modest institution that still relies on support from outsiders; Quakers, in particular, have adopted the school as a project. Several foundations have, at various times, also provided funding.



*Akwesasne Freedom School.*

*Photo: Paul Boyer*

Over the years, the Freedom School’s educational philosophy continued to mature. Rejecting the conventional division of academic subjects, the school’s curriculum emphasizes experiential learning by following the cycle of seasons and traditional Haudenosaunee ceremonies. This holistic approach integrates reading, writing, science, art, and other western disciplines into the thematic study of the natural world and the surrounding community. “They study people, science, animals, birds, everything,” explained Kanerahtens Tara Skidders, the school’s manager. “But they study it as it’s happening around them.”

Our visit coincided with the maple season, Skidders noted, so some students were, at that moment, outside. The immediate task was collecting and boiling sap from sugar maples. “But they’re also learning the words that go with it [and] the tools involved.” Smaller children might draw pictures documenting the process. Older children might be asked to write a story. “So, they’re reading, they’re

writing, they're drawing," she said. Meanwhile, learning how and why the sap flows through trees brings science into the activity.

While the Akwesasne Freedom School is perhaps best known as a language immersion school, this thematic curriculum, I gathered, most fully captures the essence of the institution's mission. Language is an important part of this mission, but it sits inside a larger culturally grounded curriculum. Language immersion was, in fact, not part of its original program. It was added later, and grew incrementally—first introduced into the k-4 program in 1985, extended to the sixth grade in 1998, and incorporated into the eighth grade in 2011. English instruction was not removed from the ninth grade program until 2014.<sup>16</sup> Today, the Freedom School is fully Mohawk in its instruction. "We don't use any English," said Elvera Sargent, who is part of the school's administrative staff.



Becoming a fully Mohawk immersion school, however, means more than simply eliminating English. More deeply, the Mohawk language also determines what is taught, and how it is taught. Carole Ross, who joined the conversation, wondered how the school managed to teach subjects that depend on technical and specialized vocabulary, such as the sciences. Did the students have the language skills needed to discuss how sap rises in maple trees, or how blood flows through arteries? It's challenging, acknowledged Skidders. Words need to be translated, although some words—like "organelles," a specialized part of a cell's structure—"don't translate because they don't translate." But what teachers can do, she said, is describe a *process*. Sap rising in a tree, for example, is like "blood running through your body," she said. "It's like a story."

That approach—science as storytelling—works best in the lower grades. It's more challenging in the upper grades and some subjects, like chemistry, are simply not taught. This is not a weakness, Skidders argued, but a reflection of the school's mission. Parents are reminded that children are here to learn in a "Mohawk immersion environment." If parents want their child to learn chemistry or take trigonometry, well, "that's on their own time." In other words, it's not the school's mission to follow the Western curriculum or justify their work against current school reform mandates, whatever they might be. True, they don't teach advanced math; but, then, the public high school doesn't teach the Mohawk worldview.

A commitment to "all Mohawk all the time" also places tremendous responsibility on teachers to not only teach the Mohawk language, but to also have the skills needed to teach in Mohawk and maintain a Mohawk-only environment during the school day. Finding teachers with this facility is hard, and getting harder. Few incoming teachers grew up speaking Mohawk and those who learned the language in school or as adults find that teaching pushes their language skills to the limit.

That's true even for Skidders, who first learned Mohawk when she was a student at the Freedom School. "But then we moved away and I grew up. I didn't hear a lot, so I forgot a lot." To rebuild her language skills, she participated in a three-year immersion language program started by the school specifically to train a cohort of teachers. She discovered an aptitude for language learning. "For whatever reason, I just picked it up really, really well." Even before the program ended, she was hired,

first as a substitute, then as a full-time teacher. But she quickly learned that even with a background in Mohawk and two years of intensive language study, she still had a great deal to learn.

As a student teacher, she was taught to maintain a Mohawk language environment by immediately translating whatever a student said in English into Mohawk. “Always turn their words,” she was told by her mentor. “Every time a kid says something in English, tell them how to say it in Mohawk, and make them repeat it. You don’t answer their question if they ask something in English, or even partially [in English], or if it’s incorrect.” It sounded like a good approach.

But children are unpredictable. “They’ll say anything,” Skidders discovered. Time and again, she caught her students saying things in English that she didn’t know how to “turn” into Mohawk. Suddenly, she didn’t feel quite so fluent. “Oh, my god,” she said to herself, “you don’t know a lot.” After the school day ended, she sought out her father or other older relatives, and asked them, “How do you say this? How do you say that? It was like another vocabulary you got in school.” Experienced teachers helped her, too, but the first year of teaching was “rough.”

Her skills grew, but retaining fluency requires constant practice. Now an administrator, she worries that she is losing it again. Even though she works all day in the school, the front office is a de facto “English zone.” She spends much of her day talking to parents who do not speak Mohawk, making phone calls, and hosting visitors (such as myself). Meanwhile, she berates herself for not knowing vocabulary for “office-y things.” Each setting, it seems, has its own vocabulary and a new set of challenges.



Tara Skidders’s own efforts to learn—and maintain—her language skills introduced a particular concern of Carole Ross’s, which is the challenge of sustaining fluency after graduating from an immersion school or after completing an adult language course. Lack of coordination and continuity was, in her view, an unsolved problem. It was an issue she returned to throughout my visit as we traveled from one appointment to another. Whenever I mentioned the number and variety of language programs, Ross noted that each operated in isolation. Without a larger, organizing structure, the language programs were not effectively rebuilding fluency within Akwesasne.

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*“Every time a kid says something in English, tell them how to say it in Mohawk, and make them repeat it.”*

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Skidders agreed that students have few opportunities to maintain fluency after leaving the Freedom School. Most graduates continue their education in the region's public high schools, she said, and in preparation, the Freedom School begins to teach English reading and writing in the later grades to help ease the transition. But once out of the school, she knows that most students no longer study the Mohawk language or have many opportunities to use what they learned. She was surprisingly philosophical about this. "I don't know if we worry about it," Skidders said. "If they've been here ten, twelve years, what more can we do?"

Yes, she agreed, language skills will erode. She used her own daughter as an example, who left the Freedom School after eighth grade to enroll in the public high school. "She hasn't maintained a lot [of the language] because she's into books and she's got to get her science, and all this stuff. But," Skidders continued, "she's done really well. She's gotten into college. She's graduating this year from high school, and she's only had four years of public school education." If students want to maintain their fluency, she said, it is something they have to do "on their own time."

What then is the value of a language immersion school if language skills will not be used outside of the school and will, with time, fade? I didn't ask this question directly, but as Skidders continued to talk about her daughter and other graduates, it was clear that she did not view language simply as a practical skill, but as a way to build a sense of identity and pride as a Mohawk. Vocabulary and grammar may be forgotten, but the deeper lessons learned by students—that they are Mohawk, that they have a history, a culture, and a distinct status as a sovereign nation—will not be disappear.

For evidence of the school's enduring influence, Skidders pointed to students who become active in the public school's Mohawk club or return to the Freedom School to volunteer, substitute, or even teach. And this commitment is often passed to the next generation. Some students are the children of graduates. "There's a real continuity," she said, and these children arrive primed to learn. "I think they get it because they've been here." She meant not only physically, I gather, but also emotionally and spiritually. "They've been here. They are ready to wake up.

"It's there," she said—in the heart.



Still, everyone at the school would *like* to see full revitalization of the Mohawk language. If the school's leaders could make one wish come true, it would be "to bring the language back," said Elvera Sargent. "That we wouldn't need this school," added Skidders. "And that there's nobody telling me, 'I don't understand you,' telling me, 'You can't talk that language.'"

In this world, the school would become more like a college, teaching multiple languages and a wide array of advanced subjects, building on a foundation of resurrected fluency and cultural awareness. "Those are my big, big dreams," Skidders said. But could this happen? "I don't think so," she said, ticking off a litany of barriers, including what she believed was an increasingly hostile political climate in the nation toward Indians and the concept of Indian sovereignty. She also focused on internal debates over identity that splinter the community, weakening the tribe's ability to identify goals and move forward. To achieve the dream of language revitalization, she argued, the Mohawk nation needs to overcome internalized shame, reject dependence on the federal government, and rebuild the tribe's historic self-sufficiency.

“To me, it could come back, but we have to get back to those values of being a Haudenosaunee person, and being respectful of the earth,” she said. “We don’t need the government to sustain us if we know how to grow our own food, raise our own animals, pick our own medicines, speak our own language, birth our own babies, bury our own people.” She continued:

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*“We don’t need the government to sustain us if we know how to grow our own food, raise our own animals, pick our own medicines, speak our own language, birth our own babies, bury our own people.”*

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We can do it ourselves. Yeah, we need programs at this time because we’re dependent on the government because we’ve been taught to be dependent on the government. We’ve been taught to [believe], ‘You don’t know anything, you need us.’ But we need to look at how to create that independence for all the people. What’s in those medicines? What’s in those pills? What’s that doctor giving you? What’s in that food? [We need to] look at how we eat, how we live. Everybody’s addicted to a computer. Nobody knows what kind of tree that is because they don’t go outside.

In this way, the Freedom School’s leaders are not arguing for greater political “self-determination” as this term is understood by the federal government or many elected tribal leaders around the United States. They aren’t asking for more federal money or slightly more political autonomy. Instead, the school’s leaders want to *separate* themselves from the mainstream of American society. They want not only to be free from government support (and oversight), but also free from the capitalist economy and the entangling webs of consumerism and technology. As described by Tara Skidders, the school is pursuing restoration of a self-sufficient, largely agrarian society sustained by traditional knowledge, traditional ceremonies, and traditional forms of leadership.

This agenda gives language revitalization a clear and emotionally compelling purpose, though success often feels like a distant goal. “I don’t know if it’ll be in my lifetime, maybe in my kids,” Skidders said. “But I think it’s possible.”



The Freedom School is certainly the best known of the tribe’s various language initiatives, but it is not the only one. The following day, Carole Ross and I drive across the invisible border and arrive at the Kana:takon School, located in the village of St. Regis (also known as Kana:takon). Contrasted with the Freedom School, it looks very much like a small public elementary school: a paved parking lot surrounds a modern one-story schoolhouse with the expected floor plan of

carpeted hallways, offices, classrooms, and gymnasium. Built just four years before our visit, the facilities are modern and in good repair.

The school also fits more conventionally into the tribe's educational system. While the Freedom School flaunts its outsider status—Tara Skidders told me, when I asked, that she “didn't care” what its legal status was—Alice King, the principal, explained that Kana:takon is under the authority of the Ahkwesāhsne Mohawk Board of Education, which has jurisdiction over schools in the tribe's Canadian territory. Until forty years ago, tribal schools were managed by the Canadian government. “When I was a kid, and even when my daughter was little, we were still federally run, [we were] controlled by the government,” King said. Today, schools are tribally controlled. Funding comes from the Canadian government through Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, though—mirroring complaints heard in the United States—she noted that tribal schools receive disproportionately less funding than non-Native schools.



*Kana:takon School.*

*Photo: Paul Boyer*

In other ways, Kana:takon's mission and educational practices are similar to what we saw at the Freedom School. It, too, focuses on both language and culture, as its mission statement makes clear: “In partnership with parents, families and our community, we provide a culturally enriched education in Kanienkeha, our Mohawk language...We are committed to instilling in each student a respect for our language and traditions which is the foundation for lifelong learning.”<sup>17</sup> This is pursued through a language immersion curriculum that runs from kindergarten through grade 4. (Grades 5 and 6 are part of a “transition program” that prepares students for an English-only middle and high school.) Similar to the Freedom School, Kana:takon even organizes its curriculum around thematic studies.

But King, more than Skidders, stressed the difficulty of maintaining a Mohawk-only learning environment. Mohawk is the language of instruction, she said, but added: “As soon as [students] come out of the classroom, it's English.” In the playground, in the lunchroom, in the hallway: children won't speak the language. In the past, school staff tried to promote use of Mohawk by rewarding positive

behavior. For example, students would “get a trinket if they were caught [speaking Mohawk] without being told, or if they reminded [other students] to speak Mohawk,” she explained. But these simple incentives didn’t change behavior.

The problem, King said, is that children don’t hear the language in daily life, and not all homes put a high value on learning the language. Some do, of course, and choose Kana:takon for that reason, but other children are enrolled because it happens to be the closest public school. Located in the center of St. Regis, a small but densely populated reservation town, many children live nearby and can walk to school. But the school’s educational mission is not always understood or actively reinforced by the students’ families, which means, King suggested, that language—like math, history, or science—is something that only happens in a classroom. This is one of the major impediments the school faces, she said. Students have “got to be here for the right reason, not because of convenience.”

Student motivation was not the only reason students were not using the language. King also believed the school was not doing enough to build fluency. Students were only being taught to speak what King called “ceremonial language”—a formal and somewhat formulaic dialogue, the kind used in ceremonies.

“It’s rote,” Ross interjected.

“Yes, and it’s memorized,” King said. “So [the students] are not being immersed in everyday language, such as greetings, or anything to do with the home, the school, or playground.”

In response, the school was in the middle of a fundamental overhaul of the language program. Building on recommendations of a bilingual education consultant, teachers were learning to elicit more spontaneous conversation in the classroom—encouraging students to use complete sentences, not read from a text or rely on “pat” phrases. Out of this, the school was also developing wordless picture books with images of animals, people, and everyday scenes meant to generate questions and conversation in the classroom. “So the teacher says, [in Mohawk] ‘This is a robin,’ and then asks questions about the picture,” King explained. “He or she has to be creative in getting them to respond.”

By now, it’s early afternoon and King was needed in the auditorium for an all-school gathering. Carole Ross and I followed, where we found the children already arrayed in a large circle of chairs. There was a happy buzz of conversation—all in English. But when a teacher stood with a microphone and talked at length in Mohawk, the children listened, and when questions were asked, they responded confidently. A drum group performed, and their singing echoed through the room. The language—the mood—was unmistakably Mohawk, and as Ross and I watched from the sidelines I wondered if Principal King was selling herself short. Good teachers are often their own harshest critics, quick to see their own faults, always lamenting the gap between their hopes and the hard realities of education. Yet, in this room, the climate was hopeful and happy, the evidence of the school’s good work on full display.

## 3

## The challenge of teaching adults

Immersion schools are often viewed as the best and, perhaps, only realistic hope for the revitalization of Native languages. Even if educators struggle to motivate students who would rather speak English, they have the luxury of time. Starting in kindergarten (or even earlier), the language is studied, heard, and spoken every school day for years on end. Early exposure and constant use are the keys to fluency, research suggests.

Language programs for adults face a different set of challenges. Unlike small children, adult learners are self-motivated; they are choosing to study their language and can explain why it matters to them. But even enthusiastic adult learners often struggle to master a second language. Part of the reason is that language learning is simply harder for grownups; a body of research suggests that there is a developmental window that closes sometime in adolescence. According to linguist John McWhorter, “Even with good instruction, it is fiendishly difficult to learn any new language well, at least after about the age of fifteen.”<sup>18</sup> Even the most successful adult learners will not match the fluency and facility of a native speaker; they will, at the very least, always speak with an accent.

Another and—some argue—more important barrier is that adults simply lack the time needed to truly master a second language. For most adults, language study is a part-time activity—something pursued after work, on weekends, often for a few minutes a day or a few hours a week. This often produces a mismatch between effort and expectations. While language mastery requires sustained work over a long period of time, many adults grow discouraged if they don’t see rapid progress, especially when initial enthusiasm fades and lessons become harder and more complex. Since second language learning is an option, not a necessity, it’s easy to quit when the work gets hard or other responsibilities take precedence. And many do.

Of course, strong desire can overcome these barriers. Ross reminded me of the adage, “If you want something bad enough, you will work until you think you are good enough.” Still, adult language classes must, in one way or another, confront the hurdles of time and motivation. Programs on Akwesasne pursue at least three different strategies. The first, one my host Carole Ross directed, targeted the particular needs of tribal employees. Classes take place in the tribal headquarters—a small classroom right off the main lobby—and are held during the workday. The tribe considers language learning an approved part of an employee’s work day and the hour spent in the classroom is compensated. In practice, Ross said, students often have a hard time interrupting their work and, from her perspective, the policy was closer to “You can attend class as long as nothing else is scheduled.” Still, by making both space and time for Ross’s class, the tribe was acknowledging that even adults who care about their language need support and encouragement.<sup>19</sup>

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*She showed us word lists, recorded dialogue, grammar lessons, and pointed out that students can practice pronunciation by recording and listening to their spoken responses.*

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A second adult language initiative is found on the Canadian side, on the island of Cornwall. Run by the Akwesasne Economic Development Agency, the program provides daily classroom-based instruction for tribal members living on both sides of the border. However, our visit focused on the agency's development of a computer-based Mohawk language curriculum, which, for a nominal month subscription, students can access from home computers. According to Joanna McDonald, who works as the program's executive assistant and curriculum developer, some students live as far away as California and Mexico. One tribal member, serving in the military, was logging in from Iraq.

A growing number of Native communities are uploading word lists to the internet, or developing apps with vocabulary and phrases. Other communities are collaborating with companies like Rosetta Stone to develop complete language courses. Taking a more do-it-yourself approach, the Mohawk initiative is using a Canadian software platform, called CAN-8, to develop its own custom-made language curriculum. McDonald described CAN-8 as a "blank database" that grows and changes over time. "So what we did, and I believe it's been going on for ten years now, is every day we add a little bit more, a little bit more." The tribe has full control over content, she emphasized. "We decide how we want to organize it—what levels we want, what sublevel we want."

McDonald clicked through the program. There are audio clips of stories and songs; one featured a "bouncing ball" encouraging students to sing along. She showed us word lists, recorded dialogue, grammar lessons, and pointed out that students can practice pronunciation by recording and listening to their spoken responses. This and other content is created and recorded by Karen Mitchell, the program's director, and two fluent speakers, including Mary McDonald and Dorothy Lazore, a noted expert in the Mohawk language and Native language revitalization.

For all the content provided—and the creative lessons it features—motivation still remains a barrier. Asked if anyone had used the online program to gain fluency, McDonald said, "Well, we never had anybody do it alone. We've had people who...get the basic vocabulary—they get Level One done. But then they get bored and they don't want to be here anymore." Looking for more support, many of these students start attending the daily hour-long classes, McDonald said, "so they can speak to other people."

During our visit, the center was also wrapping up a two-year immersion program, supported by a grant from the Canadian government. With six hours of instruction a day (“five if you don’t include lunch,” McDonald said), the program began with eighteen students, ranging in age from twenty-two to seventy, most of whom started out with only limited facility with the language. At the program’s end, the eleven who finished “were maybe not what you would call fluent, but they would be able to hold a conversation with no English whatsoever [and] understand what they were hearing.” The hope was that these graduates would in turn become teachers, “but funding for that is a little hard to come by.” Since the program had just wrapped up, it was not yet clear how the students would use their new skills.



Back across the American border, we made our final visit to Akwesasne’s newest adult language initiatives, developed by the Akwesasne Cultural Restoration (ACR) Program. The program emerged out of a legal settlement with Alcoa, which maintained a factory on the St. Lawrence, immediately upstream from the reservation. Over the years, the factory released high levels of contaminants into the water—including PCBs, aluminum, and cyanide—which found their way into fish, wildlife, and soil. The tribe took Alcoa to court, arguing that the chemicals harmed the health of tribal members and threatened cultural practices and its traditional subsistence economy. A 2013 settlement awarded \$19.4 million to the tribe, of which \$8.4 million was set aside for support of traditional cultural programs that were put in jeopardy by the contamination.<sup>20</sup>

Language was also a casualty of the environmental damage because it is inseparably linked to culture, said ACR Program Manager Barbara Tarbell. When hunting, fishing, trapping, gardening, and other traditional practices die, the words that are part of those traditions also disappear—along with the larger worldview that the language sustains. To revitalize these cultural practices, it is also necessary to rebuild the language because “you can’t do any of those things without language,” Tarbell said.

At first, Alcoa rejected this argument. “The company said, ‘We’re not responsible for learning the language,’” Tarbell recalled. “We said, ‘Oh, yes, you are.’” What finally emerged was an ambitious four-year adult apprenticeship program that teaches both traditional skills and language. Ten students—the youngest is nineteen, the oldest are grandmothers—are paired with mentors willing to share their knowledge. Each student chooses an area of special interest—such as gardening or trapping—although some skills, such as basket-making, are taught to all. Apprentices spend their mornings working with their teachers, doing whatever is considered appropriate for the season, and building language skills. In the afternoons, students head to a classroom for more focused study of the language with two trained instructors.

This schedule—time in the field, followed by formal classroom instruction—acknowledges that it’s difficult to study the complexities of Mohawk grammar while also engaged in, say, planting a garden or catching fish. Also, Tarbell noted, mentors are not necessarily fluent speakers and none is a trained language teacher. While mentors can introduce students to unique vocabulary, classroom instruction is needed to develop higher level speaking and writing skills. “Students probably learn language better/faster through both [informal and formal instruction],” she argued.

It's an intensive, full-time program and, aside from one month-long break in December (not provided to trappers), it continues year-round. The primary criteria for admission into the program was a potential student's commitment. Applicants needed to show that they would stay in the program and also, added Tarbell, that they were willing to share what they learned with others. To make full-time study feasible, students are provided stipends to cover living expenses.

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*...three years into their studies, the most advanced students were already reading and capable of writing stories.*

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The apprenticeship model asks a great deal of adults. With a stipend, students can view their studies as a "job," but it still required a lateral step out of whatever they were doing before and, in a sense, asks them to live different lives after they finish. This limits the number of students who can take part in this kind of learning and it's tempting to wonder if apprenticeship programs, which expend a great deal of time and expense on a small number of students, are a viable strategy for language revitalization.

Advocates argue, however, that it's one of the few reliable ways for adults to gain fluency. Dorothy Lazore, one of two language teachers in the program, noted that three years into their studies, the most advanced students were already reading and capable of writing stories. (She added that four of the ten were struggling: "We might need to get after them.") In addition, Tarbell emphasized that graduates can extend the program's impact by becoming teachers.

But much like the Freedom School, the Akwesasne Cultural Restoration Program has a larger purpose. It, too, wants to rebuild a society grounded in the values and knowledge of the Haudenosaunee people. In conversation with Tarbell, it was clear that the apprenticeship was about more than gaining fluency and learning traditional skills; the goal was tribal nation-building, which, administrators argue, requires tribal members to maintain their distinct social and cultural identity. To do this, Tarbell argued, it was necessary to "live the experience."

## 4

## Taking Mohawk from classrooms to the community

I began my visit aware that St. Regis supported several language initiatives, though most of what I knew was based on what I had heard about the Freedom School, which is almost certainly the best-known language program, at least within the United States. What surprised me, however, was not only the variety of language projects, but the maturity and sophistication of each: The Kana:takon School with its k-4 immersion program, the decade-old adult education program run by the Akwesasne Economic Development Agency, Carole Ross's courses held at the St. Regis tribal headquarters, and the ambitious language/culture apprenticeship program.

These and other programs are allowing hundreds of children and adults to study their language and some of these learners are achieving some degree of fluency. Yet when directly asked to evaluate their success, most of the people interviewed said the tribe was not yet reversing language loss. The near-universal fluency remembered from the 1950s is not being recovered, they concur, despite the schools and programs in place.

Why? One problem, Carole Ross emphasized, was the lack of coordination among programs. Numerous organizations and institutions are taking part in the language revitalization effort, but each operates independently. This produces a wide array of programs, instructional methods, and goals—which can be an advantage in a diverse community. But it also produces obvious gaps. While two immersion schools are teaching children up to middle school, for example, nothing was available for students wishing to continue their studies in high school. For Ross, this lack of organization and continuity is one of the strongest barriers to the development of fluency.<sup>21</sup>

We also talked about barriers to revitalization with Dorothy Lazore, who has spent much of her life studying and teaching Mohawk—and several other Native languages. Her name even came up during our visit to Hawaii, where she played a role in creating some of the first Hawaiian language immersion classes in the 1980s. She arrived not speaking Hawaiian, but she knew how to build effective language programs and, with her help, a small group of educators now affiliated with the University of Hawaii-Hilo created what is often hailed as North America's most comprehensive Native language revitalization program. Along the way, she taught herself Hawaiian by memorizing one hundred new words every day. Any adult who has attempted to study a second language will know what a remarkable feat this is, but Lazore waved my amazement away. "It's a simple language," she demurred.

In other interviews, language teachers and school administrators often focused on the limitations of their own programs: They worried about their own fluency, they debated the weaknesses of their program's curriculum. But Lazore focused more on the larger social context. She noted, for example, that language revitalization efforts often struggle precisely because the language is no longer used

in daily life. Like Ross, Lazore remembers when Mohawk was the lingua franca of the community and everyone, it seemed, recalled with pleasure how even the town's postmaster (a non-Indian) spoke Mohawk to his customers. In that era, just about everyone spoke Mohawk; it was the language of daily life.

That has been lost. No longer passed from parent to child, Mohawk is taught like a foreign language and is only rarely heard outside of classroom settings. Simply put, it has become "a school language," Lazore said, which helps explain why children in the Kana:takon school can't even be bribed into speaking the language outside of the classroom. "Okay," they say, "school's over, so now I'm going back to English." Even at home, they'll say, "I don't have to talk Mohawk here because I'm not in school." The revitalization project stalls because the language never gets outside the classroom door.

For this reason, revitalization requires more than classes or even immersion schools. Language must not only be taught, it must be valued, and it must be used in different settings. Lazore talked about a niece who told her that she didn't need to speak Mohawk because she wasn't in class. "So what happened?" Lazore asked her. "You don't know your language anymore? You just throw it away?" I go, "You still understand the language; you can still talk it." Language can be used in all settings and at all times because "you're a 24-hour Mohawk."

To promote language use, Lazore said, it's important to encourage parents to learn Mohawk so that it can be reintroduced into the home. It also needs to be part of community life. And this, in many ways, is the larger goal of language advocates within the tribe. More than being proponents of Mohawk language instruction, the teachers and administrators we met were advocates for a strong and self-aware Haudenosaunee identity. Some were focused on a muscular idea of nationhood, arguing for greater political and economic self-sufficiency. Others seemed to focus more on nurturing the spiritual and cultural values of their heritage. But all shared a belief that the Mohawk language was an essential part of this vision.

"With all of these imposed borders and jurisdictions, the one thing that always connected us here in Akwesasne was our language," Carole Ross said. She, and others, feel strongly that it must survive—and that it will survive.

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*Revitalization requires more than classes or even immersion schools. Language must not only be taught, it must be valued, and it must be used in different settings.*

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>“Government,” St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, accessed May 19, 2018, <https://www.srmt-nsn.gov/government>.

<sup>2</sup>“Meet the Chiefs,” Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, accessed August 10, 2018, <http://www.akwesasne.ca/mohawk-council/meet-the-chiefs/>.

<sup>3</sup> Dean Snow, *The Iroquois* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 60-61.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>6</sup>“Culture and History,” St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, accessed March 3, 2018 [https://www.srmt-nsn.gov/culture\\_and\\_history](https://www.srmt-nsn.gov/culture_and_history).

<sup>7</sup> Snow, 156.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>11</sup> Kate Freeman et al, *Ojibwe, Mohawk, and Inuktitut Alive and Well? Issues of Identity, Ownership, and Change*, (New Orleans, LA: American Anthropological Association, 1994), 5.

<sup>12</sup>“Mohawk: A Language of Canada,” SIL International, accessed December 4, 2017, <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/moh>).

<sup>13</sup> Nora Flaherty, “Akwesasne Freedom School’s Mission: Cultural Survival,” North Country Public Radio, accessed June 17, 2017, <https://www.northcountrypublicradio.org/news/story/18193/20110812/akwesasne-freedom-school-s-mission-cultural-survival>.

<sup>14</sup> Louellyn White, *Free to be Mohawk: Indigenous Education at the Akwesasne Freedom School* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>17</sup> "Kana:takon School," Ahkwesāhsne Mohawk Board of Education, accessed May 20, 2017, [http://www.ambe.ca/?page\\_id=10](http://www.ambe.ca/?page_id=10).

<sup>18</sup> John McWhorter, "The Cosmopolitan Tongue: The Universality of English," *World Affairs Journal*, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/cosmopolitan-tongue-universality-english>.

<sup>19</sup> Since our visit, Carole Ross left this teaching position and the tribe's language program has been restructured. Ross told us that "five or six people were hired to provide instruction at different locations and at more convenient times other than work hours." Additionally, the tribe has also developed its own language certification program. Led by Dorothy Lazore, it is currently working to train ten fluent speakers. "My guess," Ross said, "is that the tribe has finally listened to what I've been saying for years to anyone who'd listen, [which is that] if the tribe professes 'sovereignty' why can't we certify our own teachers?"

<sup>20</sup> "Natural Resource Damage Assessment," St Regis Mohawk Tribe Environment Division, accessed August 16, 2018, [http://www.srmtenv.org/index.php?spec=nrda\\_main](http://www.srmtenv.org/index.php?spec=nrda_main)).

<sup>21</sup> In the year since our visit, there are signs that this lack of coordination is being addressed. Carole Ross reports, for example, that the St. Regis Tribe's certification program and a Canadian-funded higher education program (not discussed in this report) are now using materials developed by the Akwesasne Economic Development Agency's CAN-8 initiative.

## About the Author

Paul Boyer is editor of *Native Science Report*. He is author of two reports on the tribal college movement for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and founding editor of *Tribal College: Journal of American Indian Higher Education*. Recent books and policy reports include *Capturing Education: Envisioning and Building the First Tribal Colleges* (Salish Kootenai College Press and University of Nebraska Press, 2015) and *Ancient Wisdom, Modern Science: The Integration of Native Knowledge in Math and Science at Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities* (Salish Kootenai College Press, 2010). He holds a doctorate in educational theory and policy from The Pennsylvania State University.

## On the Cover:

The report's title, *Language Connects Us*, was translated into Mohawk by Carole Ross, language coordinator for the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, who is pictured with her daughter, Jamie Ross.

*Photo by Paul Boyer.*

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