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StatCan report finds more people are learning Indigenous languages

By **HAMDI ISSAWI** StarMetro Edmonton
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EDMONTON—As a child, Carolyn Kiskotagan was afraid to speak her native tongue.

It started in Grade 3, while she was attending a public school near the Red Pheasant reserve in Saskatchewan, one with Plains Cree children like herself. She was exhilarated, finding children other than her sister to speak Cree with between classes — at least until the school found out.



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“I got a strap when I came in from recess,” she recalled. “I had no idea that we were not allowed to speak Cree.”

The punishment struck a frightful cord that had forced her to hold her tongue, unless she was alone with her sister, when nobody else could hear her.

It wasn't until adulthood, while trying to communicate with an elder on the reserve who was straining and struggling with English, that the words just poured out of her.

“He was having such a horrible time and I felt so bad for him so I told him, ‘Nehiyowah.’ That means, ‘Speak Cree,’” she said. “The look on his face — he was so shocked. He had known me for years and years and he had no idea that I could speak or understand Cree.”

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According to a Statistics Canada study released Thursday, native speakers of Indigenous languages are in decline, and Kiskotagan has a strong sense of why.

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“Our spirit is made up of everything our ancestors did,” Kiskotagan said. “The language is a part of the spirit, so when all those things were torn away, the spirit is not whole.”

Using 2016 census data, the agency reported that between 1996 and 2016, Indigenous first-language speakers dropped by one per cent.

But over the same period, there was an eight per cent climb in fluent, second-language speakers. As of 2016, there were almost 264,000 of them.

Today, Kiskotagan, 58, is a culture support worker with downtown Edmonton’s Boyle Street Community Services, an inner-city social service, where she helps some members of the city’s Indigenous community connect with their history, teachings and language.

But before that, between about 2014 and 2017, she worked as a Cree language teacher for young children in North Battleford, Sask. There she saw first-hand the benefits the lessons had on her community. When her students went home and spoke Cree to their parents and grandparents, the old words would spark new life and interest in a language that some had nearly forgotten, or buried deep inside as she once had done.

“The elders and the parents, they would come to me and shake my hand and thank me for teaching their children and their grandchildren because their grandchildren were going home and talking Cree to their grandparents,” Kiskotagan said. “That makes it worthwhile, and I love teaching especially the little ones, because they teach their grandparents and their parents.”

According to the StatCan report, 66 per cent of homes that had at least one parent with an Indigenous language as their mother tongue were also homes to a child who could speak fluently. That number jumped to 78 per cent when both parents had an Indigenous language as their first.

The analysis also found that the average age of native speakers was about 37, while those who learned it later were about 31, suggesting that children were learning from parents, grandparents in the home, or at school or early childhood programs in the community.

From a teacher’s perspective, Kiskotagan agrees that speaking a second language at home is invaluable to fostering fluency. But she understands why some parents, and even students, may be hesitant.

“Some people will say they don’t want to try to speak Cree because they think they sound funny, because people laugh at them,” she said. “I would say, ‘Continue trying, continue speaking — it doesn’t matter if they think you sound funny. The only way you’re going to learn

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And while the decline in native speakers sounds an alarm, Kiskotagan said she's hopeful that more people are picking up on these languages, because it's never too late to learn.

"The way we speak our language, the way we practise respecting the land, and all those teachings that we have, the more that we learn about those things, the more whole our spirit becomes," she said. "Even though it is a second language, better late than never."

Hamdi Issawi is an Edmonton-based reporter covering the environment and energy. Follow him on Twitter: [@hamdiissawi](#)

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