Document généré le 26 déc. 2024 16:38

First Peoples Child & Family Review
An Interdisciplinary Journal Honouring the Voices, Perspectives, and Knowledges of First Peoples

Reclaiming Indigenous Sign Languages and Supporting Accessibility and Inclusion for Indigenous Deaf Children and their Families

Kristin Snoddon, Dominique Ireland, Joel Abram, Marsha Ireland, Max Ireland, Elizabeth Osawamick, Shelly Tanner, Miigwaans Osawamick-Sagessige et Shayla-Rae Tanner

Volume 19, numéro 1, 2024

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1114908ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1114908ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada

ISSN

1708-489X (imprimé)
2293-6610 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Snoddon, K., Ireland, D., Abram, J., Ireland, M., Ireland, M., Osawamick, E., Tanner, S., Osawamick-Sagessige, M. & Tanner, S.-R. (2024). Reclaiming Indigenous Sign Languages and Supporting Accessibility and Inclusion for Indigenous Deaf Children and their Families. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, *19*(1), 10–27. https://doi.org/10.7202/1114908ar

Résumé de l'article

This paper reports data from a research study and workshop about reclaiming Indigenous sign languages and cultures, and strengthening services for Indigenous deaf children and their families and communities. The purpose of this workshop was for presenters to share their lived experiences and knowledge as deaf and hearing Elders, parents, and youth, including what resources were and were not available to them. Findings revealed themes including the importance of support for accessibility and inclusion from First Nations political and community leadership; the importance of supporting children’s intersectional identities; the need for greater resources for First Nations communities to access services and supports for deaf children; and youth experiences of learning about deaf culture and sign language, and attending deaf schools. These findings also suggested innovative models for including deaf children and their families.

All Rights Reserved © Kristin Snoddon, Dominique Ireland, Joel Abram, Marsha Ireland, Max Ireland, Elizabeth Osawamick, Shelly Tanner, Miigwaans Osawamick-Sagessige et Shayla-Rae Tanner, 2024

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d’auteur. L’utilisation des services d’Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d’utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l’Université de Montréal, l’Université Laval et l’Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

First Peoples
Child & Family Review
An Interdisciplinary Journal Honouring the Voices, Perspectives, and Knowledges of First Peoples

Reclaiming Indigenous Sign Languages and Supporting Accessibility and Inclusion for Indigenous Deaf Children and their Families

Kristin Snoddon,[a] Dominique Ireland, Joel Abram,[b] Marsha Ireland, Max Ireland, Elizabeth Osawamick,[c] Shelly Tanner, Miigwaans Osawamick-Sagessige, and Shayla-Rae Tanner

a Toronto Metropolitan University
b Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians
c Anishinaabemowin-Teg

Corresponding author: Kristin Snoddon, ksnoddon@torontomu.ca

Abstract

This paper reports data from a research study and workshop about reclaiming Indigenous sign languages and cultures, and strengthening services for Indigenous deaf children and their families and communities. The purpose of this workshop was for presenters to share their lived experiences and knowledge as deaf and hearing Elders, parents, and youth, including what resources were and were not available to them. Findings revealed themes including the importance of support for accessibility and inclusion from First Nations political and community leadership; the importance of supporting children's intersectional identities; the need for greater resources for First Nations communities to access services and supports for deaf children; and youth experiences of learning about deaf culture and sign language, and attending deaf schools These findings also suggested innovative models for including deaf children and their families.

Keywords: deaf children, sign languages, early intervention, Jordan's Principle

Introduction

This paper reports data from a research study about reclaiming Indigenous sign languages and cultures, and strengthening services for Indigenous deaf children and their families and communities. Language reclamation "refers to revitalization efforts that are grounded in and driven by community needs and values" (Leonard, 2018). Reclamation of Indigenous sign languages is aimed at the repatriation of Indigenous land and life (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 1), and it is an

First Nations Child & Family Caring Society

epistemological claim (Garroutte, 2003). The paper also shares information from a Zoom workshop that was held in October 2021. The purpose of this workshop was for presenters to share their lived experiences and knowledge as deaf and hearing Elders, parents, and youth, including what resources were and were not available to them in early childhood. This paper wishes to honour the voices of the presenters and to share information with all First Peoples, non-Indigenous supporters, and service providers regarding the needs of Indigenous deaf children and their families. The study is supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Connection Grant.

This paper aims to centre Indigenous knowledge and worldviews concerning sign languages and services for deaf children and their families. This is done in order to understand important accessibility and inclusion issues for Indigenous deaf children and families with deaf children. These services must foreground children's cultural identities, land and familial connections (Underwood et al., 2019). The next sections of this paper provide some background information regarding policy and services for Indigenous families with deaf children and outline the study methodology. Findings from the workshop are then reported and analyzed as they relate to accessibility and inclusion for Indigenous deaf children and their families.

Background

On June 21, 2019, Bill C-91, *An Act Respecting Indigenous Languages* (also known as the *Indigenous Languages Act*), received royal assent (Canada, 2019c). The Indigenous Languages Act includes Indigenous sign languages within the purpose and direct scope of the Act to support and promote the use of Indigenous languages and support the efforts of Indigenous peoples to reclaim, revitalize, maintain, and strengthen Indigenous languages (Canada, 2019c). Marsha Ireland, a deaf Elder, residential school survivor, and member of the Turtle clan from Oneida Nation of the Thames, played an instrumental role in the addition of Indigenous sign languages to the *Indigenous Languages Act* through her February 19, 2019 presentation to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage (Beatty, 2019). Along with Max Ireland, she has spearheaded the Oneida Sign Language Project (Oneida Language and Cultural Centre, 2020). Marsha desired to participate more fully in Oneida community meetings and transmit Oneida culture to her five deaf adult children and four deaf grandchildren (Albert, 2018). With support from the Oneida Language and Cultural Centre, Marsha and Max worked with a master Oneida speaker to develop an Oneida Sign Language guidebook (Albert, 2018). The effort to document and revitalize Oneida Sign Language holds promise for supporting Indigenous deaf peoples in reclaiming their Indigenous identities as inseparable from their identities as deaf signers (Smiler & McKee, 2007; Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2021). In this regard, the project provides a "model of inclusion" (Underwood et al., 2019, p. 29) and shows how "identity becomes meaningful when it is *lived out* in daily life" (Garroutte, 2003, p. 74, emphasis in original). This project can support other Indigenous sign language and cultural reclamation efforts, and extend the understanding of educators and early intervention service providers. Like other Indigenous communities, Indigenous deaf communities contend with “events that interrupt [their] cultural continuity and create lapses and disruptions that people must actively restore” (Garroutte, 2003, p. 70). The Oneida Sign Language Project attests that Indigenous “cultures contain tools of inquiry that create knowledge” (Garroutte, 2003, p. 107).

On the same day that Bill C-91 passed, Bill C-81, *An Act to Ensure a Barrier-Free Canada* (also known as the *Accessible Canada Act*), also received royal assent. Within section 5 titled “Purpose of the Act,” Bill C-81 includes recognition of American Sign Language (ASL), Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ), and Indigenous sign languages “as the primary languages for communication by deaf persons in Canada” (Canada, 2019a). This recognition takes place within a framework of communication barriers and accessibility accommodations meant to address them (Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2021). These two different laws which in different ways recognize Indigenous sign languages, offer two distinct perspectives on sign-language rights, and as a corollary, on Indigenous deaf people themselves as members of sign-language communities. The relatively narrow scope of Bill C-81, focusing on liberal, white settler conceptions of disability access rather than language revitalization and community empowerment, testifies to how settler deaf community projects and Indigenous decolonization “can only ever be strategic and contingent collaborations” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 28; see also Friedner, 2019; Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2021). This is because decolonization and revitalization of Indigenous languages are accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity, not to white settler concerns (Tuck & Yang, 2012). At the same time, settler and Indigenous deaf communities can build a “politics of solidarity” (Meekosha, 2011, p. 678) that aims to better serve the needs of Indigenous deaf young children and their families and communities.

Indigenous deaf people are multiply marginalized within Indigenous and deaf communities. At the same time, deaf schools and early intervention services for deaf children have often failed to incorporate Indigenous teachings and worldviews; Underwood et al., 2019). The prevalence of hearing loss and deafness is significantly higher among Indigenous peoples as compared to the general Canadian population (Langan et al., 2007), as is true for other Indigenous communities around the world (Smiler & McKee, 2007). This point relates to the “production of impairment” by “processes of colonisation” (Meekosha, 2011, p. 668) that result in poverty, a high prevalence of otitis media, or ear infections, and lack of access to culturally relevant early intervention and educational services (Johnson, 2015; Underwood et al., 2019). In turn, colonialism controls the production of knowledge about Indigenous deaf children and their families. This is because much research and programming in deaf education and sign languages has been shaped and dominated by settler worldviews and by colonial languages (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

The history of colonialism has rendered many Indigenous deaf people more fluent in national sign languages associated with white settlers, such as ASL and LSQ (Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2021). Moreover, Canadian public services for deaf people have rarely considered the needs of Indigenous deaf children or communities. Little research exists that documents the language and communication practices of Indigenous deaf peoples in Canada. Data from the 2016 Canadian Census indicates that nearly half of signers view their language as neither ASL nor LSQ, which suggests there may be multiple undocumented sign-language varieties (Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2021). However, little information is available regarding Indigenous sign languages as compared to research involving national sign languages, which typically emerged from schools for deaf children. Exceptions are MacDougall (2001) and Schuit (2013), who described an Indigenous sign-language variety named Inuit Sign Language. In addition, other researchers describe Plains Indian Sign Language as an endangered, shared sign language historically used by non-deaf and deaf peoples (e.g., David, 2010). However, these older, tribal shared sign languages were historically rejected by deaf residential schools and are not commonly passed down by Elders to Indigenous deaf children today.

Services for Indigenous Deaf Children

Interventions for disabled children often fail to recognize cultural diversity and do not align with Indigenous perspectives on disability as a gift to the community (Ineese-Nash, 2020). These interventions may be harmful to children's cultural identities and family connections, and assessments may be culturally inappropriate. This is because many interventions focus on disability as a medical condition, and assessments are often diagnostic in nature and aimed at assimilation through rehabilitation (Ineese-Nash, 2020). Families with disabled children also experience numerous barriers to accessing services; these barriers may be due to geographical location and lack of supports in some regions as well as the underfunding of services for Indigenous communities (Ineese-Nash, 2020; Johnson, 2015). Early intervention services are also fragmented and depend on organizations to provide services (Underwood, 2012). Indigenous disabled children and their families need services that incorporate Indigenous worldviews on disability and are culturally appropriate (Ineese-Nash, 2020).

The Inclusive Early Childhood Service System Project about childhood disability included 21 participants with children identified as deaf or hard of hearing, and most of the 136 families in the study had encountered infant hearing screening programs (Underwood & Snoddon, 2021).[1] However, no participants reported having access to sign-language programs or services. Underwood and Snoddon (2021) call for sign-language programs and services that serve Indigenous, rural, remote, and racialized communities.

In Ontario, sign-language services for deaf and hard of hearing infants and young children identified by the Infant Hearing Program are provided by a settler service agency, while sign-language programming in education for school-age children is provided through the Provincial and Demonstration School Branch. Other provinces may not have a comprehensive service system for deaf children and their families. Indigenous agencies and organizations are not recognized as part of the service system for early intervention or disability supports (Ineese-Nash et al., 2018). However, as some workshop presenters report below, Indigenous organizations can play a central role in the inclusion of deaf and disabled community members.

---

[1] Here is the website link to the Inclusive Early Childhood Service System Project to learn more (https://www.torontomu.ca/inclusive-early-childhood-service-system/).

Previous work has raised the question of whether the *Accessible Canada Act* and its recognition of sign languages in the domain of federal public services will apply to federally funded reserve schools to implement sign-language-in-education policy for Indigenous deaf students (Snoddon & Wilkinson, 2019). With the passage of the *Indigenous Languages Act*, it is now an open question of whether Indigenous deaf students have the right to learn and use Indigenous sign languages in school regardless of whether their education falls under federal or provincial jurisdiction. Because the *Indigenous Languages Act* falls under the remit of the Department of Canadian Heritage rather than Indigenous Services Canada, the Act may not lead to immediate changes in Indigenous education (Leitch, 2019).

Jordan's Principle is a legal principle that ensures First Nations children with disabilities can receive needed services and supports in their own communities. Jordan's Principle came about through Indigenous advocacy to ensure First Nations children, many of whom live in poverty and experience significant health disparities, receive the same level of services and support as non-Indigenous children (Johnson, 2015). Services and support through Jordan's Principle are decided on the basis of substantive equality, or services and supports based on children's needs rather than on what is available through provincial or territorial services (First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada [Caring Society], 2021). However, not all First Nations children receive the same level of care due to the Canadian government's repeated delays in implementing and funding Jordan's Principle to ensure children can receive services in their home communities. In January 2020, Bill C-92, *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families* came into force (Canada, 2019b). The Act affirms Indigenous communities' right to self-government and jurisdiction related to child and family services and establishes national standards in this area. The Act declares that the rights and needs of a child with a disability are to be considered in order to promote the child's participation in the activities of their family and Indigenous community to which they belong. However, problems remain in terms of a lack of funding and accountability to ensure the Act is implemented (Metallic et al., 2019).

Methodology

The purpose of the workshop held on Zoom in October 2021 was to mobilize and disseminate knowledge about reclaiming Indigenous sign languages and cultures, as well as strengthen services for Indigenous deaf young children and their families and communities. The research question guiding this study was: what are some important accessibility and inclusion issues for Indigenous deaf children and their families? The workshop was inspired and guided by Marsha Ireland. Originally, the workshop was planned to take place at Toronto Metropolitan University in spring 2020, but the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic postponed these plans and led to the switch to a Zoom workshop.

Dominique Ireland, the research assistant hired for this project to work with Kristin Snoddon as principal investigator, made contact with several presenters and co-authors of this paper. These include Grand Chief Joel Abram of the Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians (AIAI). Joel is from Oneida Nation of the Thames Settlement and a member of the Wolf Clan. Marsha and Max Ireland are respectively deaf and hearing Oneida Elders and speakers/signers. Elizabeth Osawamick is an Anishinaabe Midewiwin-kwe community leader and language teacher, and mother to a deaf youth. Shelly Tanner is from Carry the Kettle First Nation and mother to a deaf youth. Miigwaans Osawamick-Sagassige is an Ojibway deaf youth and a smudge leader. Shayla-Rae Tanner is a deaf youth from the Cowessess First Nation.

The workshop was advertised in the Gathering of Deafatives Facebook group for deaf and Native communities and their families. Information about the workshop was also shared via email with several deaf organizations and educators. People who were interested in attending the workshop were asked to e-sign an information and consent form about the risks of participating in a Zoom workshop that was video-recorded. The workshop and study received approval from the Toronto Metropolitan University Research Ethics Board (REB 2021-243).

Sign-language interpreters Melissa Cyr and Debbie Parliament provided interpretation for the workshop and voice-over and captions for video clips that are available on the Supporting Indigenous Deaf Children web page (https://www.torontomu.ca/supporting-indigenous-deaf-children/). Melissa also assisted in correcting the Zoom transcript from the workshop. The transcript, field notes, and video recording were thematically analyzed following the workshop. Thematic analysis was used for this study to identify, analyze and report patterns in the narratives of different workshop participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This began with Kristin, the first author of this paper, familiarizing herself with the data, generating initial codes from the data, then searching for and reviewing themes (Braun & Clark, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). An inductive approach to thematic analysis meant that themes came from the data themselves rather than predetermined themes or questions (Nowell et al., 2017). However, the themes captured important information related to the research question about accessibility and inclusion issues for Indigenous deaf children and their families.

The next sections of this paper report and analyze workshop findings regarding accessibility and inclusion for Indigenous deaf people, and the experiences of deaf youth.

Accessibility and Inclusion for First Nations Deaf People

Support From Political and Community Leaders

In the presentations by First Nations leaders and Elders, an important theme addressed how Indigenous leadership and political and community organizations are working to support accessibility and inclusion, and how this information should be shared with other First Nations. The workshop began with a presentation by Grand Chief Joel Abram of the AIAI. The AIAI advocates on behalf of approximately 20,000 First Nations members and citizens across Ontario. Both the AIAI and the Oneida Language and Cultural Centre sponsored the Oneida Sign Language Project. Joel holds several portfolios for the Chiefs of Ontario involving children and youth. As Joel stated, due in large part to Marsha and Max Ireland's advocacy, the AIAI has worked to raise awareness about accessibility and provides a sign-language interpreter for community meetings. Debbie Parliament, who has been involved with and has provided sign interpreter services to Oneida for many years, has aided this effort. Joel spoke of the need for other First Nations to have resources and support to provide access for deaf members:

> However, I don't think many First Nations have that ability to provide those services if they have deaf members, and so what this leads to is a lot of deaf Indigenous people being excluded from community processes, from gatherings, engagements, political processes, and I think that's to the detriment, because everyone has that right to be able to participate in community life, political life, or wherever they may choose.

The next presenter, Elizabeth Osawamick, spoke of Anishnaabe community efforts to include deaf youth and other deaf individuals.

Elizabeth spoke of the support she received from First Nations community daycares when her son was identified with hearing loss. Her organization, Anishinaabemowin-Teg, is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting, teaching, and developing Anishnaabe language and cultural pride. This organization was able to secure funding for sign-language interpreters for workshops and conferences. Her son, Miigwaans Osawamick-Sagassige, was then able to participate in community events; as Elizabeth said:

> He's been a youth representative there for many years, and so he's able to help with the youth, and we're grateful that he's there because he kind of represents the deaf nation. And so before COVID happened we were able to get funding for interpreters, because, you know, we're a non-profit organization. We won't have the money. But that one year we were able to access interpreters, and so I am grateful we were able to do that. We had two interpreters each day, and we had a volunteer interpreter from the United States. Because I know that there are a few deaf people in my community, and so they were able to attend. So I'm hoping that we will continue with that once we are able to meet again.

Elizabeth also spoke of being a host parent for deaf students from a deaf school that her son also attended and bringing these students to cultural events. As she stated:

> I was a host parent on weekends, so I was able to look after children from Attawapiskat and Kashechewan, and so I would have them on the weekends. I would always have extra regalia that my children outgrew, so if they came into my home I would get them dressed up, just if they wanted to. They were so proud to wear the regalia to different powwows and the water walks also that we do in the Kawarthas.

However, Elizabeth also spoke of barriers to access to sign-language interpreters for her son's appointments when he was growing up, as well as the need for parents and caregivers to receive more support with advocating for access for deaf children. She also addressed the need for more Indigenous staff members at provincial schools for the deaf in Ontario, where there are many First Nations students.

Supporting Children's Identities

As seen in the above narrative by Elizabeth, another theme addressed the importance of supporting Indigenous deaf children and youth's identities and participation in community life. This theme also came up with the next presenter, Marsha Ireland. As an Oneida deaf Elder, Marsha spoke of the importance of a sense of identity, belonging, and pride for Indigenous deaf children who have intersectional identities. As she stated:

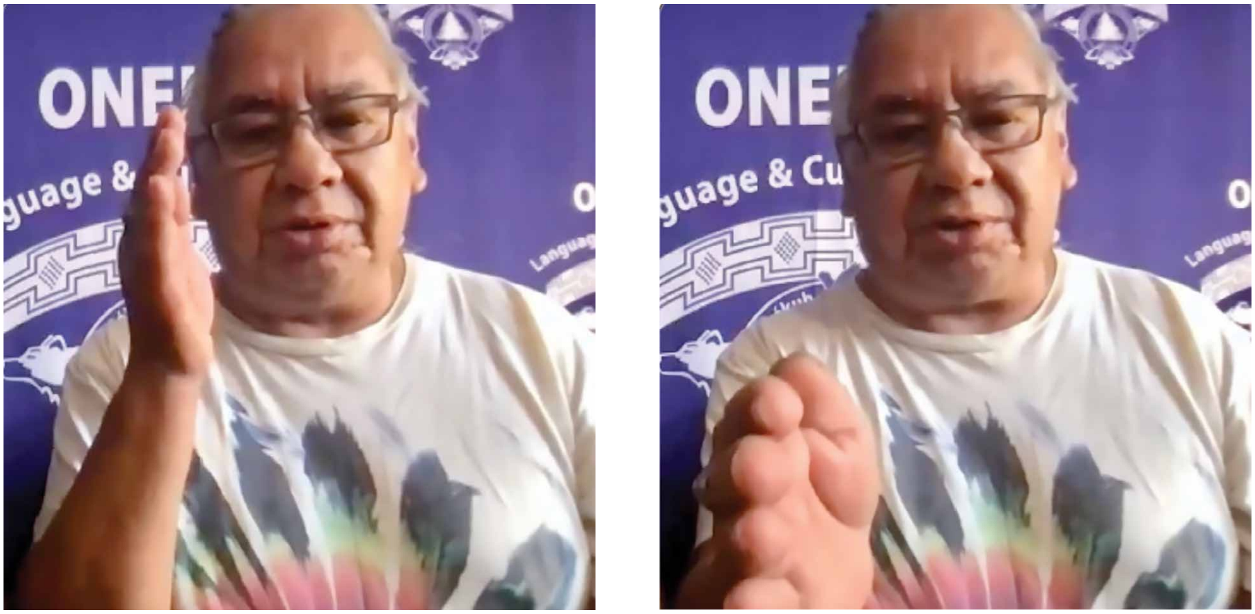
> What is near and dear to my heart are Indigenous deaf children who have no sense of identity. This is a result of colonialism that prioritizes English within our school system. These children grow to be frustrated. Their mental health is impacted. These children experience audism, not only from non-Indigenous hearing people but also from Indigenous people who can hear, as well as experiencing oppression from the deaf community.

Marsha also spoke of raising awareness of the needs of Indigenous deaf children within schools and family service agencies, and of building relationships with sign-language interpreters who can then provide culturally appropriate services to Indigenous communities and support Indigenous deaf people's access to Indigenous culture and language. However, as she stated, settler deaf service agencies should provide more outreach for Indigenous communities to meet health and access needs, and settler deaf advocacy organizations must give greater consideration and respect to Indigenous deaf people. There is also a need for schools to provide Indigenous deaf educational assistants who can share culture and language with, and support the self-esteem of, Indigenous deaf children. Indigenous deaf individuals need better access to health services as well as crisis and emergency communications.

Max Ireland spoke of the need to inform Indigenous nations and Indigenous political leaders of the direction that people wish to take, as he and Marsha did with the Oneida Sign Language Project. Max described the process of this project of developing the Oneida Sign Language guidebook, which now has around 500-600 signs. He shared the Oneida signs for TRUTH and RECONCILIATION and explained the meaning of these signs. As Max described the signs:

> Truth. Truth can't bend. Truth can't bend, it has to be straight. It has to be straight, it has to be direct for it to be actual truth (see Figures 1a and b).

Figures 1a and b
Oneida Sign Language, TRUTH



Reconciliation is like this. It's going to start out slow, slow, slow, slow, slow, slow, slow, slow, slow, and hopefully get to the point of mutual recognition, response, respect, and equality (see Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c).

Like Marsha, Max spoke of the intersectional identities of Indigenous deaf people: "We're a world within a world, within a world, that's within a world. How and what can we do to expand to those outer worlds, is what we need to do." Here, Max appeared to refer to the worlds of Indigenous deaf people within their families and within wider societies and governance structures of Indigenous communities. In turn, these communities comprise Indigenous peoples in relation with the world, including land and animals. Max spoke of the need to raise awareness among bands that funding is available for people with disabilities, including for sign-language interpreters. As he stated:

> You have to ask questions, know your traditional rights, and know your human rights … If you have questions, look for answers. It's the only way that anything is ever going to improve … So when you ask questions, that creates awareness, and that will be beneficial to everyone.

He spoke of the current COVID-19 pandemic that has caused people to stay within their communities more than ever, and has created a greater reliance on services for deaf people that need developing and expanding. Max discussed the benefits of having a full-time interpreter for the Oneida community for everyone who needs access to systems such as health care, courts, emergency response, and education. As he stated, "We need Native interpreters for Native people."

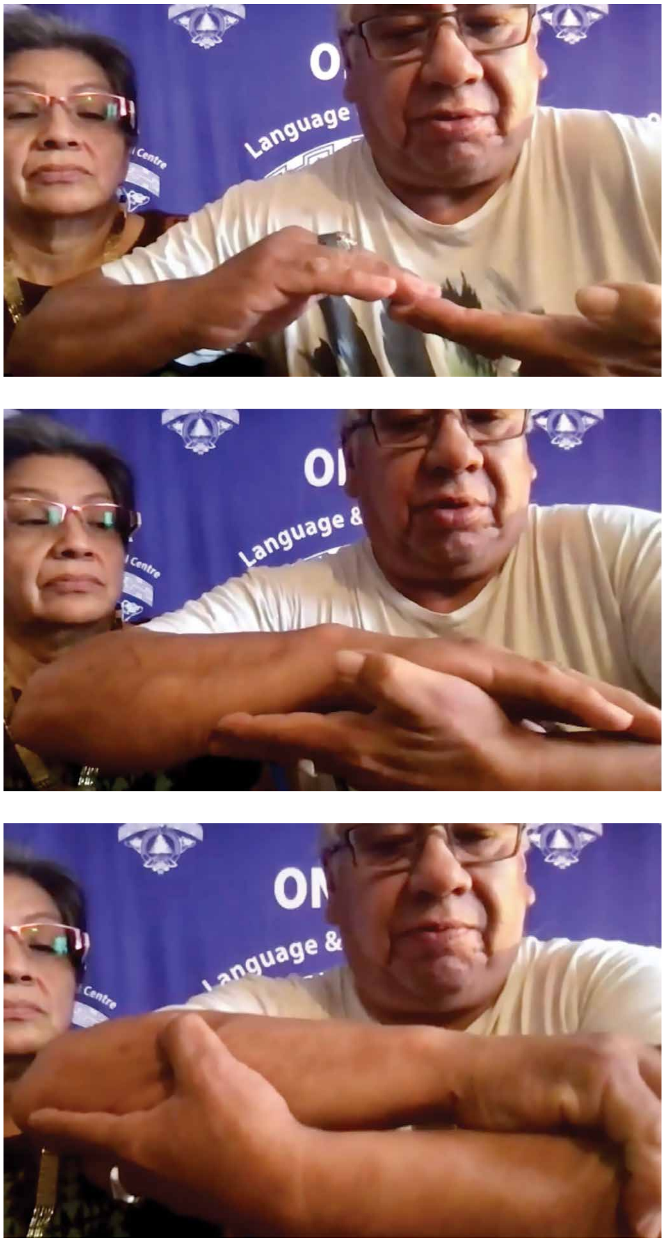
Max also spoke of his childhood memories of going to the longhouse where his grandmother was a clan mother, and the importance of a spiritual connection for youth. As Max stated:

> So I encourage the youth I talk to, anyone I talk to, to develop a greater relationship with who you believe to be a greater power, whatever that may be. And that understanding, well, it isn't going to come right away, but it will come. And it's not all going to come at once. It takes time. So nature will play a big part in that, and that's, that's within our signs that we use in Oneida Sign Language.

The discussion of the needs and experiences of deaf youth continued with the next presenter, Shelly Tanner.

Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c

Oneida Sign Language, RECONCILIATION



Deaf Youth Experiences

Limited Resources and Finding Services

Another theme addressed how parents of deaf children and youth navigated around a lack of supports in some regions. Like Elizabeth Osawamick, Shelly Tanner spoke of the experience of raising a deaf child and of limited access to resources for First Nations deaf children in Saskatchewan. As Shelly stated of her daughter Shayla-Rae Tanner's experiences:

> So she didn't get much hearing or much learning from Grade 1 to 6, for her elementary years. From Grade 7 to 9, she was just kind of shuffled through the system again with very limited resources. So finally in Grade 9, I and her resource teacher and speech pathologist sat together. And we sat down and we said, like she's going to be starting high school,

> you know, we got to do something about this, you can't have her shuffle through with no education.

As a result, the resource teacher began making contact with colleagues in Regina, and at age 15, Shayla-Rae left her parents and First Nation to attend a high school in the city that had a resource class for deaf students with a signing deaf teacher. In this program, Shayla-Rae was able to learn ASL. As Shelly stated:

> From that time forward, she was able to take ASL, which helped with her communication, her learning, and she really, I guess, blossomed then and excelled. She was able to communicate. Whereas before her communication was limited, so from Grade 9 she really picked up and was able to learn a lot. She was able to communicate with her fellow classmates, with her teacher. She was able to understand.

However, Shelly spoke of the difficulties her daughter was then experiencing as a student at the First Nations University of Canada without access to sign-language interpreters:

> Right now, with her back to being at university with her first year, she did sign up and apply to go back this fall, but she just felt a little, just like frustrated, so she's on some time off right now, just to get things in place and I guess refocus, then have that year to kind of re-energize yourself and hopefully things will be in place, because without an interpreter and tutor, and university, it's very hard, because you're on your own. Like you're learning on your own.

Shelly's comments are reminiscent of what the Caring Society (2021, pp. 39–40) describes as the need for Jordan's Principle as a legal principle to cover post-majority support for young people with disabilities as well as a legal principle to ensure children with disabilities can receive services and support in their communities that are needed in order for children and youth to thrive. There is also a need for culturally relevant services and support to continue as young people transition to adulthood.

Discovering Deaf Worlds

An important theme for deaf youth participants related to their learning about deaf culture and sign language, and connecting this to their Indigenous identities. After Shelly spoke, Shayla-Rae Tanner shared her identity as a youth from Cowessess First Nations who first encountered ASL in Grade 9:

> I didn't know how to sign. I was just watching. I was incredibly nervous ... And I learned a lot, this is where I learned sign language and within six months, I was pretty fluent. I was motivated and energetic and wanted to learn more and more.

Shayla-Rae shared her experiences with learning about deaf culture from a deaf teacher and finding her identity as a deaf person:

> I really didn't know what it meant to be deaf, what deaf culture was about, and it really took some time to learn, like what does it mean to be deaf or hard of hearing and to discover deaf culture, and through this I was really able to find my deaf identity. Before that, I thought, oh I was hearing, you know, that's the way I thought. But now I've learned who I am.

Shayla-Rae discussed her experience as a part-time student at First Nations University of Canada: "I'm alone in the mainstream again. I'm alone, there are no other deaf students. It's difficult online." While Shayla-Rae receives support from her sister and family, as she stated:

> The university is not able to provide interpreters or other supports that I need, so it's incredibly frustrating and overwhelming. I feel lonely. And it can have an effect on your mental well being. But I just have to continue to persevere.

Shayla-Rae thus gave voice to her experience of what Max Ireland called "worlds within worlds," where she learned about her deaf identity when she left her First Nation and her ongoing struggles to gain access to needed resources and supports within her First Nation.

Shayla-Rae spoke of her dramatic performances as a place where her deaf and First Nations identities found expression. As a member of the Deaf Crows Collective (2019), she has participated in storytelling performances for theatres in Regina and Edmonton. Shayla-Rae shared video excerpts from the plays *Deaf Crows* and *Apple Time* and announced upcoming performances in *One Thousand Ladders* and *Deaf Settlers*.[2] In her *Apple Time* performance, Shayla-Rae tells a story about being a Wolf in a family of Eagles. As she shared in her workshop presentation:

> This story is about a dream. So my family clan is Eagle and I'm Wolf. And I've been trying to connect, but I didn't feel I succeeded, so in this dream I met with my grandmother. And she passed a long time ago; I wish I had the opportunity to meet her. So this dream is the first opportunity that I can meet with her. And I talked to her about how I can survive, how I can connect with my family, and in the end, Grandmother says, no it's not about that, it's about accepting and learning about who you are and your identity. And I felt that spiritual connection to my grandmother, and, you know, I am Indigenous and deaf.

Shayla-Rae's presentation testifies to the power of artistic performance in affirming youth identity and self-expression. However, another deaf youth presenter reported some negative as well as positive experiences of participating in settler deaf schools and deaf communities.

---

[2] Several videos from these performances can be viewed on the Deaf Crows Collective website (https://www.deafcrowscollective.ca/).

Mixed Experiences in Deaf Schools

Another theme addressed was the experiences of First Nations deaf youth in deaf schools. The other deaf youth presenter, Miigwaans Osawamick-Sagassige, spoke of his experiences with learning sign language as a young child and interacting with his hearing family. He spoke of communication difficulties in the First Nations daycare he attended before transferring in kindergarten to a provincial school for the deaf in Ontario. As Miigwaans stated:

> The kindergarten teachers were kind and good people, and I learned more ASL from them. But then in Grade 1, things changed. Teachers would yell at me and scare me. I became fearful and anxious all the time, even while doing my schoolwork.

Miigwaans spoke of how some elementary school staff would unexpectedly put him in timeouts for no apparent reason. Other classroom and residential experiences were mixed:

> Grades 7 and 8 were okay. I enjoyed school okay, except for one teacher who would always yell at me for no reason over homework, which made me a little bit sad. Through high school, Grades 9 through 12, when I was 14 to 19, school was fine, and you know, students were okay, and I was learning. But then, at night when I would go back to the residence, that's where I was yelled at and got in trouble a lot for no reason, and it made me anxious and scared all over again.

Miigwaans spoke of the school's efforts to recognize National Indigenous Peoples Day:

> When I was 19, on June 21st [the school] held an event to recognize National Indigenous Peoples Day at school. But teachers weren't celebrating. They weren't happy to be there, and I felt like I was being watched, and it made me feel really uncomfortable.

However, Miigwaans also spoke of receiving a Defty Award for his ASL story from the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf:

> Last September 29th, I was 18, I won second place. I went to Toronto for a day of celebration and there were so many people, both deaf and hearing. There were storytellers and interpreters, and I was overwhelmed. There were so many stories shared by deaf people in sign language, and I was so happy to be a part of it. I learned so much that day because I could understand everyone signing.

The deaf youth presenters thus shared narratives of needing to connect to both Indigenous and deaf communities in culturally affirming ways that do not diminish children and youth's self-esteem. This speaks to the need for settler deaf schools and deaf advocacy organizations to take up the work of reconciliation. As Grand Chief Joel Abram stated during his closing remarks, before reconciliation can happen, truth related to Indigenous peoples' experiences must be known, and this is equally true for First Nations deaf people. Miigwaans concluded his presentation by offering a smudge to honour Indigenous leaders and for the future of Indigenous people.

Discussion and Conclusion

As Grand Chief Joel Abram stated during his closing remarks for the workshop, doctrines of superiority have enabled and provided moral justification for the treatment of Indigenous peoples throughout history. This history continues with the underfunding of First Nations so that sign language is often not provided in schools, universities, and daycares on reserve and deaf children must leave home to access education in sign language. Joel spoke of Jordan's Principle, which states children and youth are able to access services and supports for education and health in their own communities (Caring Society, 2021). Jordan's Principle also ensures First Nations families have the right to access sign-language services for deaf children in First Nations communities where they live. The *Indigenous Languages Act* supports community efforts to reclaim and strengthen Indigenous sign languages, which are a critical avenue for Indigenous deaf people to connect with their families and cultural identities. Deaf Elder and youth workshop presenters identified this connection with cultural identities and traditions as a fundamental need. This issue also speaks to the intersectional identities of First Nations deaf children and youth.

Initiatives such as Nshwaasnangong Child Care and Family Centre (https://www.nshwaasnangong.ca/) that incorporates Indigenous languages and teachings in centre programming may offer promise for future models for supporting deaf children and their families through sign languages in culturally appropriate ways. The Oneida Nation's and Anishinaabemowin-Teg organization's efforts to provide sign-language interpreters for community and cultural events are models of community access and inclusion that can guide other First Nations communities. Postsecondary institutions need adequate funding to ensure culturally responsive sign-language interpreters and other needed supports are available to First Nations deaf students.

The findings reported in this paper suggest that many First Nations deaf children and youth must leave home to access sign-language services and education. At the same time, settler Deaf schools and advocacy organizations may not have paid sufficient attention to truth and reconciliation efforts and responsibilities, so that the lived experiences of Indigenous deaf people can lead to more culturally congruent, respectful, and responsive spaces within their walls and mandates. This can be advanced by working in partnership with First Nations communities and by employing First Nations educators and paraprofessionals at deaf schools, as several presenters recommended. Deaf youth also desire to participate in their communities in terms of cultural events and political processes, and presenters stressed the importance of advocacy and raising awareness among bands to enable the provision of sign-language interpreters and thus greater participation by deaf people. The Oneida Sign Language Project and related efforts to support access and inclusion for deaf people are an example of what communities can achieve in terms of sign-language reclamation projects and training culturally responsive sign-language interpreters.

Some limitations of this study include the relatively small number of participants who were included in this workshop. Participants may not have fully represented the great diversity that exists among First Nations and Indigenous peoples. Further research should include collaborations with additional communities and families from other regions. The October 2021 workshop has led to ongoing information-gathering and advocacy for enhancing awareness and resources for providing sign-language services in First Nations daycares and schools. A second Zoom workshop in August 2022 shared information about issues in Indigenous sign-language reclamation. Work is ongoing to spread awareness in First Nations, settler, and deaf communities about the intersectional needs and identities of Indigenous deaf children.

References

Albert, A. (2018, April 15). *Oneida sign language created to connect deaf community with their culture*. CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/oneida-sign-language-culture-deaf-1.4605295

Beatty, J. (2019, May 14). *Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage (CHPC): Presenter A and Presenter B as individuals: Oneida Nation and Turtle Clan*. [Status update]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/jeffrey.beatty.94/posts/10156833771850862

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Canada. (2019a). An Act to ensure a barrier-free Canada, SC 2019 c 10. https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/a-0.6/

Canada. (2019b). An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families, SC 2019 c. 24. https://laws.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/F-11.73/index.html

Canada. (2019c). An Act respecting Indigenous languages, SC 2019 c 23. https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/i-7.85/index.html

Davis, J. E. (2010). *Hand talk: Sign language among American Indian nations*. Cambridge University Press.

Deaf Crows Collective. (2019). *Home page*. https://www.deafcrowscollective.ca/

First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada. (2021). *Jordan's Principle and children with disabilities and special needs: A resource guide and analysis of Canada's implementation*. https://fncaringsociety.com/sites/default/files/jordans_principle_resource_guide_2021_final.pdf

Friedner, M. (2019). Praying for rights: Cultivating deaf worldings in urban India. *Anthropological Quarterly, 92*(2), 403–426. https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2019.0020

Garroutte, E. M. (2003). *Real Indians: Identity and the survival of Native America*. University of California Press. https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/2027/heb.33858

Ineese-Nash, N. (2020). Disability as a colonial construct: The missing discourse of culture in conceptualizations of disabled Indigenous children. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies, 9*(3), 28–51. https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v9i3.645

Ineese-Nash, N., Bomberry, Y., Underwood, K., & Hache, A. (2018). Raising a child within early childhood dis-ability support systems Shakonehya:ra's ne shakoyen'okon:'a G'chi-gshkewesiwad binoonhyag: Ga-Miinigoowozid Gikendaagoosowin Awaazigish, Ga-Miinigoowozid Ga-Izhichigetan. *Indigenous Policy Journal, 28*(3).

Johnson, S. (2015). Jordan's Principle and Indigenous children with disabilities in Canada: Jurisdiction, advocacy, and research. *Journal of Social Work in Disability & Rehabilitation, 14*(3–4), 233-244. https://doi.org/10.1080/1536710X.2015.1068260

Langan, L. A., Sockalingam, R., Caissie, R., & Corsten, G. (2007). Occurrence of otitis media and hearing loss among First Nations elementary school children. *Canadian Journal of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology, 31*(4), 178–185.

Leitch, D. G. (2019, December 8). *Indigenous language rights: Moving beyond C-91* [Conference presentation]. National Colloqium on Canada's Indigenous Languages Policy in the Wake of Bill C-91, Glendon College, York University, Toronto.

Leonard, W. Y. (2018). Reflections on (de)colonization in language documentation. In B. McDonnell, A. L. Berez-Kroeker, & G. Holton (Eds.), *Reflections on language documentation 20 years after Himmelmann 1998* (Language Documentation & Conservation Special Publication No. 15). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. http://hdl.handle.net/10125/24808

MacDougall, J. C. (2001). Access to justice for deaf Inuit in Nunavut: The role of "Inuit sign language." *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne, 42*(1), 61–73. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0086880

Meekosha, H. (2011). Decolonising disability: Thinking and acting globally. *Disability & Society, 26*(6), 667–682. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2011.602860

Metallic, N., Fridland, H., & Morales, S. (2019). *The promise and pitfalls of C-92: An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families*. Yellowhead Institute. https://digitalcommons.schulichlaw.dal.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1134&context=scholarly_works

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Oneida Language and Cultural Centre. (2020). *Oneida Sign Language*. https://oneidalanguage.ca/learn-our-language/speak-oneidalanguage-now/oneida-sign-language/

Schuit, J. (2013). *Signs of the arctic: Typological aspects of Inuit Sign Language* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Amsterdam.

Smiler, K., & McKee, R. L. (2007). Perceptions of Māori deaf identity in New Zealand. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, 12*(1), 93–111. https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/enl023

Snoddon, K., & Wilkinson, E. (2019). Problematizing the legal recognition of sign languages in Canada. *Canadian Modern Language Review, 75*(2) 128–144. https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.2018-0232

Snoddon, K., & Wilkinson, E. (2021). Vulnerabilities, challenges, and risks in sign language recognition in Canada. In C. Cunningham & C. Hall (Eds.), *Vulnerabilities, challenges and risks in applied linguistics* (pp. 111–127). Multilingual Matters.

Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 1*(1), 1–40.

Underwood, K. (2012). Mapping the early intervention system in Ontario, Canada. *International Journal of Special Education, 27*(2), 126–135.

Underwood, K., Ineese-Nash, N., & Haché, A. (2019). Colonialism in early education, care, and intervention: A knowledge synthesis. *Journal of Childhood Studies, 44*(4), 21–35. https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs444201919209

Underwood, K., & Snoddon, K. (2021). *IECSS Policy Brief No. 10: Deaf childhoods and inclusive early childhood education and care* (Policy Brief No. 10). Inclusive Early Childhood Service System Project.: https://www.torontomu.ca/content/dam/inclusive-early-childhood-service-system/findings/publications/PolicyBriefNo.10_Deafchildhoodsandinclusiveearlychildhoodeducationandcare_FINALupdated_May17,2021.pdf