The Emerging Indigenous Language Economy: Labour Market Demand for Indigenous Language Skills in the Upper Great Lakes

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ABSTRACT

Language revitalization is necessarily intertwined with economic spheres, as Grenoble and Whaley have expressed that the economic wellbeing of a community influences its ability to engage in such efforts (2006, p. 44). Conversely, health researchers assert that cultural continuity, in which language is inextricably linked, is a prerequisite to self-sufficiency and community sustainability (Oster, Grier, Lightning, Mayan, & Troth, 2014). Nonetheless, the place of Indigenous language(s) within labour market research has often focused on the need for greater access to dominant-language education (MacIsaac & Patrinos, 1995) or the impact on wage differentials (Chiswick, Patrinos, & Hurst, 2000) while research on Indigenous language revitalization in Canada has been largely silent on the relationship to economic spheres, and community economic development literature has engaged with notions of culture more broadly. Drawing on interviews and focus groups from a selection of Anishinaabe communities in Northern Ontario, Canada, this research identifies existing needs for Anishinaabe language speakers within the regional labour market, showcasing the oft-overlooked economic demand for Indigenous language skills. Support for this project was provided by the Ontario Human Capital Research and Innovation Fund from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, The Shingwauk Education Trust, in preparation for program development associated with the Anishinaabemowin (Ojibway language) B.A. program that it offers in association with Algoma University, pursued a labour market survey to investigate demand for speakers of Indigenous languages in a variety of employment sectors. The research additionally sought to identify trends among the skills or training requirements that the same prospective employers seek from would-be employees in order to better tailor the program to meet the dynamic needs of speakers of Anishinaabemowin as a second language. To that end, we asked: In which industries and labour markets is there demand for fluent Anishinaabemowin (or other Indigenous language) speakers? And what specialized skills do graduates require for these occupations?

The research team conducted interviews and focus groups with employers in a variety of industry sectors in Indigenous (primarily Anishinaabe) communities or those serving Indigenous populations in the Upper Great Lakes region corresponding with the judicial districts of Thunder Bay, Algoma, Manitoulin, and Sudbury.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anishinaabe territory and population have undergone cataclysmic changes due to disease, starvation, and war tied to European colonization of the Americas. Anishinaabe language vitality has consequently also suffered, particularly due to policies of forced assimilation, such as those exemplified in the Canadian Indian Residential School system, where children were prohibited from speaking their Indigenous languages throughout much of the 20th century.

While statistical data about Indigenous language knowledge and use are less reliable due to a number of First Nations opting to not take part in the census or National Household Survey (AANDC, 2013), it's nonetheless worth noting the number of self-identified speakers of Indigenous languages. Statistics Canada distinguishes Ojibway, Oji-Cree and Algonquin as distinct languages; however, speakers largely consider all of the categories as varieties of Anishinaabemowin. Likewise, there were a handful of individuals who identified as speakers of languages classified as "Algonquian not included elsewhere." Given the location of these individuals on Manitoulin Island, it is likely that they identify their spoken language as either Odawa or Potawatomi, which are also considered varieties of Anishinaabemowin (Valentine, 2001, 14–17). Cree speakers were also of interest to this study, given a relatively significant population in the region's urban centres.

Table 1 identifies the number of individuals who report either Anishinaabemowin or Cree as their mother tongue. Thunder Bay and Manitoulin Districts have the highest number of individuals reporting Anishinaabemowin as their mother tongue, each with approximately 1500 mother tongue speakers. The Algoma District follows, with 535 mother tongue speakers, while Sudbury has the fewest at 65. Thunder Bay and Algoma report the highest number of mother tongue Cree speakers at approximately 100 each, while Sudbury reported 20 speakers, and Manitoulin only 10.

Predictably, given the hegemonic pressure of English and French within the catchment area, the number of individuals reporting Anishinaabemowin as their language spoken most often at home was considerably lower than those reporting it as their mother tongue. Manitoulin reported the highest number at 555, followed closely by Thunder Bay at 505.

TABLE 1
Mother Tongue

District	Anishinaabemowin	Cree
Thunder Bay	1530	110
Algoma	535	100
Sudbury	65	20
Manitoulin	1330	10
Total	3460	240

Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 97-555-XCB2006016.

The Algoma District followed with 140, while Sudbury included only 15 individuals. Numbers were significantly lower for Cree.

Language revitalization is necessarily intertwined with economic spheres, inasmuch as the economic well being of a community influences its ability to engage in such efforts (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006, p. 44). Similarly, Spolsky has highlighted the business domain as a unique sphere of language management, examining the dynamics of workplace language policies and noting that global economic trends have supported a shift to English that has perpetuated a state of inertia in some circumstances, where companies have ignored or overlooked the multilingual needs of their customers (2009: 55–64). While the pressures of globalization have contributed to the dominance of English in many spheres of international (or internationally integrated) business, such circumstances should not be equated with being prototypical for economic activity, particularly in Indigenous communities.

Turning to Indigenous economies and languages specifically, Loxley has emphasized the importance that Indigenous communities typically place on economic development progressing in congruence with local cultures and tradition. While explicit references to language are absent from his description of the revival of "Native art, poetry, music, oral history, and religion," it is central to nearly all of these dimensions of culture (2010 [1986], 66). Much of the existing literature emphasizes a negative relationship between Indigenous language fluency and economic well-being. Smith (1994) has identified a number of occasions where Indigenous language proficiency could be an asset in the labour market; however, Staples (2015) demonstrated a negative correlation between Indigenous language fluency and income level. Numerous factors influence this correlation, however, including the greater likelihood that fluent Indigenous language speakers will be older, above the habitual retirement age, and live in more isolated communities with less access to the conventional labour market.

Studies focused on Latin American labour markets have similarly noted that monolingual speakers of Indigenous languages have average lower incomes than monolingual speakers of dominant languages (Chiswick, Patrinos, & Hurst, 2000; Patrinos, Velez, & Psacharopoulos, 1994; MacIsaac & Patrinos, 1995). Equalizing access to equivalent human capital resources (MacIsaac & Patrinos, 1995, p. 231) and to dominant-language or bilingual education in particular have been proposed as solutions for mitigating such inequality (Chiswick, Patrinos, & Hurst, 2000, p. 365; Patrinos, 1997, p. 817). Ultimately, however, no

labour market survey has been completed to date that investigates the specific employment opportunities open to speakers of Indigenous languages.

Health researchers, however, have identified the use of traditional languages within Indigenous communities (included within the broader definition of 'cultural continuity') as a key factor in promoting both individual and community health and well-being, particularly within First Nations in Canada (Oster et al., 2014; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998, p. 191). A healthy workforce is, of course, a key component of successful economic development, and research participants link cultural continuity and its health impacts as contributing factors to First Nation self sufficiency and sustainability (Oster et al., 2014).

Underscoring the need for Indigenous language education, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has highlighted the need for Post-Secondary Education Institutions to take a leading role in revitalizing Indigenous languages, echoing earlier calls, including the Assembly of First Nations *National First Nations Language Strategy* (TRC, 2015a, p. 2; AFN, 2007, p. 8). The AFN Strategy also identified "Increas[ing] the opportunities to use First Nations languages by increasing the number of circumstances and situations where First Nations languages can be used" among the five major goals of the strategy, foreshadowing the need for a more secure place for language speakers within the labour market, particularly in fields such as telecommunications (AFN, 2007, pp. 9, 15).

METHODS

Employers and specialists from a cross-sample in Indigenous communities or serving Indigenous populations within the districts of Thunder Bay, Algoma, Sudbury, and Manitoulin were consulted from such sectors as education services; law and social, community and government services; health occupations; arts, entertainment and recreation; and translation services. Consultations included 5 focus groups or group interviews and 23 in-person semi-structured interviews for a total of 37 participants. Questions focused on identifying (i) the needs within respective sectors for speakers of Indigenous languages; (ii) other skills required in those occupations where speaking an Indigenous language is an asset or necessity; and (iii) complementary disciplines or training that increase the employability of Indigenous language speakers. Results were coded for thematic analysis using NVivo.

The region was chosen given it is the source of most of SKG and AU's Indigenous students, and many continue to reside within this geographic catchment area after graduation. Furthermore, the area lies within traditional Anishinaabe territories, where varieties of the Anishinaabe language, particularly those taught in the program, are the dominant Indigenous language.

RESULTS

Demand for fluent Anishinaabe Speakers in the regional labour market has been grouped into 10 thematic categories, the most significant being *Education*, *Health Services* and *Court-Justice Services*, each exerting demand in another sector, that of *Translation or Interpreting Services*. Other themes included *Community and Social Services*; *Media and Arts*; and smaller themes such as *Natural Resources* and *Research and Development*.

Education

The demand for language teachers was universal among those consulted. As communities across Anishinaabe territory devote more attention and effort to fighting the prospect of language loss, demand grows for language teachers at all ages and all proficiency levels. A growing pool of adult learners, for instance, is seeking Indigenous language education from community service providers or post-secondary education institutions.

Participants spoke of a number of complicating factors to Indigenous language instruction, whether it be in classroom or community settings. Urban Indigenous populations face unique challenges, including disconnection from home communities and the specific cultural and linguistic practices that may be different from the norm in urban centres. Recognizing the plight of the 'sandwich generation,' or those beyond school age but who did not acquire Anishinaabemowin as their first language, has also underscored the need for language acquisition opportunities in a variety of settings beyond elementary and secondary schooling. In many communities, particularly urban areas, Indigenous Friendship Centres have fulfilled this role.

Language education goals also included the cultural context of language use, as a number of participants spoke of the need for students to reconnect with the land and to work directly with elders.

Kenjgewin-Teg Educational Institute (KTEI), an Anishinaabe Education Institute in M'Chigeeng, has been a leader among Anishinaabe post-secondary education institutions for integrating Anishinaabemowin within its administration. KTEI promotes Anishinaabemowin acquisition and use among its entire staff through its Anishinaabe Odziiwin passport, which encourages students and staff to monitor their own efforts and progress in acquiring the language. The organization sets minimum hours for language work, which are logged in the passport and are integrated in employee performance appraisals (KTEI, 2014a).

While mainstream universities and colleges in Ontario function primarily in English, there exist a number of post-secondary programs in Indigenous languages or Indigenous language instruction. These programs too, like any others, require instructors and support staff. Other areas of need included Anishinaabe language expertise in marketing and communications offices of the universities or as curriculum developers.

Considerable emphasis is placed on elementary and early-years education within language revitalization circles, particularly following the success of early childhood interventions, such as the Maori language nests of Aotearoa (New Zealand).

To address this growing need, KTEI is launching an Early Childhood Education (ECE) program with a specialization in Anishinaabemowin. The two-year diploma provides advanced adult learners with the opportunity to further their own oral proficiency while acquiring ECE skills. In 2013, KTEI, with the support of the United Chiefs and Councils of Mnidoo Mnising, launched the Mnidoo Mnising Anishinaabek Kinoomauge Gamig (MMAK), an Anishinaabemowin immersion Kindergarten (2014b). While provincially determined institutional and certification requirements have made it difficult for many Indigenous communities to implement similar formal schooling programs, to say nothing of scarce funding, one participant emphasized the flexibility of the language nest model and its adaptability to a number of environments: "Language nests can mean many, many things. Language nests could be at the ballpark on every Saturday. We come and do cheers in the language while so and so plays, you know?" This flexibility of the approach has contributed to its popularity for early childhood Indigenous language acquisition and its utility in developing the foundations for Indigenous language education prior to acquiring institutional sup-

port. It also demonstrates the importance of indigenous language speakers, be they first-language or second-language speakers, in taking active roles in cultivating such initiatives from which more stable interventions can grow.

Health Services

Health occupations ranked among the most significant needs for Indigenous language speakers. With the Anishinaabemowin speaking population being generally older, and thereby more prone to require health care interventions, there is a higher demand for Anishinaabe language services to respond to the needs of these clients and patients. This need was identified for home care, in hospitals and clinics, and in long-term care facilities.

While both doctors and patients often rely on family members to provide interpretation, such ad hoc solutions can compromise patient care. As one participant explained:

> Doctors and medical staff really rely a lot on family to translate, and sometimes family are not the best people to translate either, because of their level of English. Like with me, I feel like I had a good handle on English but I'm often times misunderstood because of the way I say things

Today many hospitals in Northern Ontario are aware of the need for linguistic accommodations and pursuing interventions with varying success and resources. Multilingualism was of significant concern in Thunder Bay, where the hospital has implemented signage in Cree and Anishinaabe syllabics, the dominant orthography in most fly-in First Nation communities throughout Northwestern Ontario that are largely served by the Thunder Bay hospital. Such measures require translation services that some institutions contract out, while others rely on the skills of Aboriginal Patient Navigators (APNs). APNs at Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre and Health Sciences North in Sudbury are tasked with providing some level of language and cultural accommodation, as well as advocacy and support. The Sault Area Hospital, however, in addition to several smaller local hospitals, do not currently offer such services. Even where APNs are available, the demand for their services exceeds their supply. While Thunder Bay has APNs for diabetes or renal care, cancer care, and its emergency department, there remain gaps in maternity, mental health, and other departments. One participant noted the need for longer hours of service, explaining "... in the hospital, especially at night time when the elders come in, there's nobody there after five". Other participants aspired to see more Indigenous people entering health professions and providing services in their own languages.

The need for services in Anishinaabemowin was particularly evident among those speakers living with dementia. Describing the impact of Anishinaabe language use in this context, one participant explained:

> [W]hen they hear the language, it again reconnects them back to a point in time when they were younger and it helps bring them to a calmer level, so they can sit there and take on any kind of instruction when it's done in the language.

For those health centres that offer connections to traditional healing for their patients, language skills were seen as essential to such services. One health centre administrator noted:

> [T]he communities are demanding it, the communities expect us to have language speakers so there are a number of our programs including the traditional program that we have, we expect the individuals to be speakers [...] the traditional program, it really would not make sense if the person did not speak the language.

Some participants also remarked on the demand for traditional end of life ceremonies, which in many practices must be carried out in the ancestral language. One participant expressed a desire for "an elder in residence" at the hospital to assist in providing such care, as she noted the person that had been assisting in this capacity was operating on a volunteer basis.

The availability of Anishinaabemowin speakers played a significant role within health services in many parts of the research area, whether provided by paid staff or on a volunteer basis by friends and family of those requiring health or long term care services. With the majority of language speakers approaching advanced age, there is a risk that without conscious planning or robust language revitalization efforts that future generations of patients and clients may not benefit from the services that the generation preceding them experienced, however haphazardly.

Justice Services

The importance of interpreters and general linguistic accessibility was also a consistent and stark theme within the justice system. This need is particularly significant in Manitoulin Island and in the Northwestern areas around Thunder Bay, given the higher number of Indigenous language speakers in these areas.

According to the Ontario Government, the Ministry of the Attorney General's Court Services Division provides accredited freelance court interpreters (Ministry of the Attorney General, 2015). Among these, the Ministry distinguishes 6 Indigenous languages, including Cree (West Coast Swampy), Mohawk, Ojibway (Kenora), Ojibway (Manitoulin), Ojibway (Sioux Lookout), Ojibway, and Oji-Cree. Court interpreters, however, are employed on a freelance basis, and are not necessarily available or accessed through the entirety of the legal process outside of the courtroom.

Court Worker programs typically assist any Indigenous person involved in the justice system with navigating the bureaucracy, understanding their rights, and providing cross-cultural interpretation. Court Worker programs are offered by a variety of Indigenous Friendship Centres and Indigenous Legal Services in Ontario.

Stemming from the Supreme Court of Canada *R. v. Gladue* and *R. v. Ipeelee* decisions, Canadian courts must consider the "unique circumstances of Aboriginal people when passing sentences on Aboriginal offenders" and during bail hearings (NALS, 2016). Consequent to these Supreme Court decisions, Gladue Court Workers compile reports stipulating those unique circumstances at the bail and sentencing stage and recommend alternative sentencing, each based on an interview with the defendant pertaining to their background and family history (NALS, 2016). One such worker described the significance of Anishinaabemowin in their work, explaining the crucial role they play for Indigenous defendants:

> [P]eople come in all the time speaking the language, asking about language and other cultural aspects, right? They're asking for smudge, they're asking for the feather, they're asking for these things and nobody knows how to respond to them.

Despite the occasional availability of courtroom interpreting in Anishinaabemowin today, there remain issues of access stemming from the pressure of living within a hegemonically English society. One participant expressed concern that those who need services in Anishinaabemowin may be so accustomed to the service being unavailable that they don't know how or if they can request it:

> What I know is that the clients are not coming in requesting their language. Which, is for me, different than needing it because they might indeed need to speak their mother tongue, their language, in order to receive the service, the proper service.

Many participants working in the justice system noted that knowledge of Anishinaabemowin was particularly useful or necessary when interacting with speakers who are in crisis, working among older Anishinaabe populations in the Manitoulin area, who predominantly speak Anishinaabemowin as their first language, providing courtroom interpreting, and developing rehabilitative programming. Recognition of Anishinaabe language skills thus facilitates equitable access to justice and is a potentially powerful mitigating factor in the over-representation of Indigenous peoples among incarcerated populations. The absence or insufficiency of such services places many Indigenous peoples whose dominant language of communication remains their Indigenous language at risk of inadequate representation in situations of great personal and legal consequence.

Translation and Interpreting Services

The previous discussions of health and justice services demonstrate a significant need for simultaneous or consecutive interpretation between English and Indigenous languages. Service providers in larger urban centres or near the overlap of distinct language groups, however, must also be mindful of Indigenous language diversity. The Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre, for instance, contracts interpreting services from the local Indigenous Friendship Centre; however, the Centre only provides interpreting in Anishinaabemowin, while many of the patients at the hospital require services in Cree, whether they are from the local urban Indigenous population or patients flown in from communities across Northwestern Ontario.

Several agencies and private companies provide written translation services, such as Wawatay Native Communications Society, who offer services for several varieties of Anishinaabemowin and Cree. These organizations have a significant need for fluent speakers who are proficient in a number of the common orthographies of their respective languages and knowledgeable with respect to sometimes very specific vocabularies.

Despite the existence of such services, however, one participant noted the benefit of having local speakers "in-house," to verify that, even if translations need to be contracted out, that the work can be verified quickly to ensure that the translator understood the context of a text.

Demand in Other Sectors

Indigenous media is growing throughout Canada, both through independent local productions made possible due to the low cost of online platforms, as well as in larger companies and agencies, many of whom benefit from such programs as the National Aboriginal Broadcasting program, other forms of arts funding, and private advertising, sponsorship, or fees for service.

One such example is the previously referenced Wawatay Native Communications Society, which runs radio stations out of Sioux Lookout and Timmins with programming in Anishinaabemowin, Cree, and English, as well as a newspaper and online news. The service is looking to develop an additional radio station in the Thunder Bay area in the future, requiring the hiring of additional Anishinaabemowin speakers with broadcasting skills. "For

us," one participant connected to the company noted, "the language is our bread and butter and we have an aging workforce."

Creative industries provide many opportunities for speakers and aspiring speakers of Indigenous languages, inasmuch as many of the few grants available to fund Indigenous language programming are offered by Heritage Canada or other arts organizations, such as the Aboriginal Languages through the Arts stream of the Aboriginal Artists in Communities program offered by the Ontario Arts Council

Numerous community service agencies were identified as having a need for more Anishinaabemowin speakers in their workforce, particularly in the Thunder Bay and Manitoulin Districts. One participant described the breadth of need as follows:

> In Thunder Bay we have a very high Aboriginal population and there are a number of Aboriginal organizations that are doing work in various fields, from employment and training to addictions counselling. A lot of those organizations are trying to strengthen the cultural basis of their work, so the language has to be central to that.

One child and family services agency reported conducting a 'cultural audit' that emphasized the need to promote the Anishinaabe language in the workplace as a means of contributing to the cultural revitalization to which the agency wanted to contribute. Likewise, Kina Gbezhgomi Child and Family Services on Manitoulin Island instituted language 'lunch and learn' sessions in the workplace that have been facilitated by staff at KTEI.

Gaps in Demand and Research Limitations

As the literature review revealed, there is a strong connection between the health and well-being of both individuals and communities and Indigenous language use, yet a healthy workforce was not identified by study participants as a crucial factor to consider in hiring language speakers. Additionally, despite significant cultural tourism in the region (e.g., Great Spirit Circle Trail), this sector did not report a strong need for Anishinaabemowin speakers.

While a number of other sectors did not report a significant demand for Anishinaabemowin speakers, the demand that was discussed is nonetheless noteworthy. Language skills bring an important lens to work in natural resources sectors, and provide crucial access to 'inside information' for many researchers, and cultural tourism is an increasingly lucrative area for development. Given the limited research that we were able to conduct into these sectors, little can be concluded. Nonetheless, as businesses and service providers catch up with the demand for Indigenous language skills in their respective sectors, and especially if education interventions are successful in cultivating new generations of speakers, the value and recognition of Indigenous languages across all sectors will continue to grow.

DISCUSSION

The systematic devaluation of language skills and the need for language accommodation was a recurring theme throughout the research. While some of those interviewed were able to meet their workplace needs for Indigenous language speakers themselves or by hiring other fluent speakers, many others expressed that translation or interpreting services were

seen as a "nice to have," or an "add-on" that could easily be done by any speaker in addition to their regular work duties or on a volunteer basis. Such approaches devalue the time and labour that is necessary to offer quality translation or interpreting services, negate the mental energy exerted in transforming the mental concepts of one worldview into those of another, and further marginalize Anishinaabe people in the workforce.

An additional concern is that *all* of the participants who spoke of insufficient or no resources for translation or interpreting services were referring to public sector workplaces (such as universities, courts, school boards) or not-for-profit organizations that receive the bulk of their funding from government sources. Adequate interpreting services can prevent misdiagnoses in health professions and avoid wrongful convictions in courts. While public funds are often understandably lean, such frugality should not come by denying quality services to predominantly elder speakers of Anishinaabemowin and other Indigenous languages. Reflecting on the Federal government's record of restitution for the language loss provoked by the Indian Residential School System, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded the following:

> [T]he Government of Canada must abandon its tightly controlled model of program-based heritage subsidies, and instead provide sustainable resources to recognize that the Indigenous peoples of Canada have language rights tied to their protected Aboriginal rights, including their rights to self-determination. (TRC, 2015b, p. 117)

The Commission also noted the disparity of funding offered for Official Languages and Indigenous languages, noting that the government spends 25 times as much in protecting official-language minorities alone (TRC, 2015b, p. 117).

While there exists demand for Anishinaabemowin, Cree, and other Indigenous language speakers in a number of occupations across traditional territories, the effort to preserve and promote Indigenous languages necessitates creating economic opportunities for younger language speakers and learners. Such opportunities grow when we value Indigenous language skills for the effort, time, and momentous expertise they entail, and when these language skills are valued on par with those languages that carry significant symbolic capital, such as French.

The value of cultural continuity in creating a healthy and vibrant Indigenous workforce and supporting the self sufficiency of communities has been clearly demonstrated by health researchers, yet language proficiency has rarely, if ever, been considered as part of an economic development strategy. More research into the relationship between cultural continuity, including language usage, and successful economic initiatives in Indigenous communities needs to be undertaken to shed greater light on the potential value of this linkage.

Many communities have expressed significant support for language initiatives, ranging from communities with few speakers, such as Batchewana First Nation, to communities with a comparatively significant number of speakers, such as those on Manitoulin Island. The United Chiefs and Councils of Mnidoo Mnising, for instance, passed the Anishinabek Language Declaration in 2012, which asserted that "UCCMM will take effective measures to ensure that this right [to language] is protected, and will ensure that individuals employed in the UCCMM First Nation territory perform and provide all work and service functions in their ancestral language by the year 2030" (UCCMM, 2013). While participants offered differing accounts as to whether the declaration had been followed up with sufficient action, the goal speaks to a strong need to increase the number of fluent speakers within the workforce.

CONCLUSION

The research highlighted the overlooked labour market demands stemming from the needs of speakers and communities wishing to revitalize their Indigenous language(s), and revealed a significant demand for fluent Indigenous language speakers, particularly in fields such as education, health services, justice services, translation and interpreting services, as well as in media and the arts, community and social services, among others.

While this research is ultimately unable to assess any quantitative evaluation of the degree to which demand for Anishinaabemowin skills are being met within the labour market, the general impression conveyed by participants was that the demand far exceeded the supply. This was particularly expressed within the education sector, where there was considerable anxiety about the fluency of many teachers. Consequently, there is a significant onus on institutions that offer or aspire to offer Anishinaabemowin or other Indigenous language education.

While the needs of Indigenous language speakers have been overlooked in the past, largely due to colonial and racial bias that denied the legitimacy of Indigenous peoples as a population worth accommodating, meeting the needs of elder speakers is now not only a moral imperative but one of cultural survival for Indigenous peoples. Indeed, meeting such needs is congruent with the economic development goals of many Indigenous communities — if not explicitly in development planning, at least in the aspirations of many community members. Many communities have begun to take steps to provide that accommodation for elder speakers and/or to implement measures to foster new generations of Indigenous language speakers. Yet given the devaluation of linguistic labour and of Indigenous languages in particular, learners are often left wondering if their efforts will be rewarded or punished economically. This research helps to affirm that there are numerous occupations where Indigenous language proficiency is either a necessity or a strong asset in addition to other skills. Still, more support is necessary from private, public, and social economy sectors to meet the challenge posed by language shift and to offer future generations local economies that can promote and maintain Indigenous language vitality.

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