Secpemculecw, the land of the Secwepemc people is a vast territory in East Central British Columbia. From the Arrow Lakes, north to Quesnel, roughly bounded on the West by the mighty Fraser River, and on the East by the magnificent Rocky Mountains, Secpemculecw covers roughly 180,000 sq km. The Secwepemc people, called Shuswap by the English, were a semi-nomadic group, often travelling tremendous distances for fishing, hunting, and gathering in this expansive and diverse landscape. Generation after generation lived off these lands, accumulating a vast wealth of indigenous knowledge from salmon runs, to elk migrations and seasonal harvest of berries, nuts, and other bounties of the land. Their indigenous place-names, like Swetsmellp, now called Salmon Arm, was named after the abundant amount of the soap-berry bush found around Secwepemc Lake.
Unfortunately, as has been the case in much of the rest of the world, colonization by Western Europeans has dramatically changed the Secpemculecw. Mining, commercial fishing, urban sprawl, and the never-ending demands of tourism, especially eco-tourism, have made traditional ways of life endangered, and in some cases distinct. With 75% of all of British Columbia’s Indigenous Peoples no longer living in reserves, the Secwepemc people are faced with tremendous barriers as they try to retain their culture, language, and their indigenous knowledge.

In the Randy N Bezeau directed film, “The Fallen Feather” documents the Canadian Government’s role in the creation of Residential Schools in British Columbia, using the Kamloops Residential School as a backdrop to the entire story. Residential Schools were initially set up to “Solve the Indian Problem”. That problem of course was that the Canadian Pacific Railway, the major carrot to British Columbia’s involvement in Confederation, went through Secpemculecw, as well as other indigenous territories. The Residential School was intended to “pound” the language out of the native students, thereby eradicating their native language and replace it with English. Intentionally, or otherwise, Residential Schools also destroyed the family unit. Student were taken from their families, both immediate and extended, and just as damaging, they were taken from their indigenous homeland. Cut off from the vast stores of indigenous knowledge, passed on from generation to generation, they were forced to learn Western knowledge, ironing, cleaning, and speaking English. Harsh treatment, beatings, and lack of appropriate food and healthcare made the Residential School a living hell for most students. Parenting took a major kick as well. Without their children, native parents lived in a vacuum. With no one to pass on their knowledge to, they lost some of that ability, and when the children did come home from school, this disconnect was even more apparent. Parents, not having seen their children for 10 months of course wanted to spoil them, while the children, used to the rigorous demands of the Residential School, had trouble with the indulgent ways of their parents. Add to this the ever growing gap between the Indigenous language spoken in the home by the parents, and the English language spoken by the children, one can easily determine that Residential Schools created more of the “Indian Problem” than they solved. Over the course of several generations, students from Residential Schools had no connection to their native land, spoke a language different from their parents and grandparents, had no parenting skills since they grew up devoid of parents as positive role models, and had been brainwashed and beaten into believing they were “Dirty Indians”, and should follow the ways and belief of their Western Colonizers. Add to this the stereotyping of Indians in the media, both written and in film, and you can see why the core of the Secpemculecw People is troubled.

Recently Prime Minister Steven Harper formally apologized to Canada’s Indigenous people for the “genocide” (my word) caused by Residential Schools. Ironically, the “Fallen Feather” shows how the Kamloops Residential School has now been converted, at least partially, into a museum, documenting the school and its use over the 65 or so years of its use. Initially this seems like an appropriate way for the Colonizers to say sorry and offer some recourse to the way they treated the Secpemculecw People. I recently talked to several Secpemculecw Elders. They view the museum as a substantial reminder of a very Black part of their recent History. Some cannot even attend Pow Wows on their traditional grounds because of the horror that the building itself radiates for them. I, like them, am inclined to see the building levelled, thus reducing at least the negative visual impact
Think globally, act locally.

A popular slogan used by the Western media to promote things like recycling, reduced use of fossil fuels, and sustainable water use, seems to be appropriate when talking about efforts by the Secwepemc People to retain key components of their culture. Change of any kind is slow. Everyone must take small steps. Local change, small pockets here and there, is essential if Indigenous People are to recover from the devastating and far reaching effects of Western Colonization.

Language is the key concept of every culture. Indigenous People throughout the world are taking measures to retain, and in many cases, revitalise their native language. Elders, often the last bastions of language in a community, are essential components of any revitalization program. Technology, in various forms, is a tool currently being used to retain and teach language, as well as promote and enhance all forms of Indigenous culture.

One such global (not geographically, but as it pertains to the Secwepemc People) program is headed by Dr. Marianne Boelscher Ignace, Associate Professor of Anthropology. She is the Academic Coordinator of the SFU Program in Kamloops, where she also teaches. Married to Chief Ron Ignace, (Edmonds Creek Band), Dr Ignace (non-aboriginal) is fluent in the Secwepemc Language, and has in the past offered a 16 month course in the City of Kamloops. Graduates of this course are now equipped with two major components of Language Revitalization. They are fluent in the language, and unlike some elders, have the ability to teach the language to a new generation of learners. (Like all educational programs, enrolment and cost are factors in the program being offered)

School District 83 (North-Okanagan Shuswap) is situated in the South Central part of Secpemculecw. With boundaries ranging from Armstrong to Malakwa to Salmon Arm, it is home to four Secwepemc Bands: The Neskolinth, Adams Lake, Little Shuswap Lake, and Splat’sin (Spalumcheen). For the last four years, District Principal of Aboriginal Education Irene LaBoucané, and her staff of Aboriginal Counsellors and Educational Support workers have worked under the mandate to implement programs and services of the “Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement”. Supporting over 1000 students of aboriginal descent in SD 83 (14 % of the entire district student population), Irene and her staff spend 80 % of targeted funds on staffing to enhance academic, social, and cultural aspects for aboriginal students. She believes that “we need to put people in front of kids to provide these enhanced services”. While reporting to the superintendent of SD 38, Irene also reports to the First Nation Educational Council, a political body made up of 9 members. The superintendent and she are Non-voting members who join 7 voting members, the Education Coordinator from each Band, and off Reservation Member, a Métis Member, and a Board of School Trustee Member. This First Nations Education Council meets 5 times per year to discuss budget and programming concerns.

School District 83 offers aboriginal content to all students in various forms. BC First Nations 12, along with English First Peoples 10, 11, and 12 all have Integrated Resource Packages (IRP’s) with specifically targeted Aboriginal Content. BC First Nations 12 has been taught in various pockets throughout the District since its inception, with the intent that the course be taught by an Aboriginal
teacher. In a few cases where an Aboriginal teacher has not been available, the teacher has used elders from the community, along with members from Irene’s educational team, for support. English First Peoples 10, 11, 12 has had marginal implementation success due to the number of smaller schools in SD 83, and thus the lack of student enrolment. Despite this, most of the District’s English teachers have undergone extensive in-service in the IRP’s of these courses and integrate content whenever appropriate.

The Grade 4 social studies course is entirely devoted to Aboriginal People. Irene’s team has developed cultural units for the seasons of Fall, Winter, and Spring. They can either parachute into a Grade 4 class, or provide support for Grade 4 teachers.

Language is seeing renewed interest in many of the SD 83 schools. Currently Salmon Arm West offers the Secwepemc Language one day a week. Students of A.L Fortune, although not currently well versed in their mother tongue are very interested in learning the Secwepemc Language, and two elders from the local community are very interested in teaching it to these students. (It should be noted that these elders must go before a panel of elders to determine if they are fluent enough in the language to be able to teach it.)

Principal LaBoucane concedes that technology in School District 83 is an area that can see significant growth in the future. Currently, due to the pockets of language interest, technology must go to the elders, and then be distributed from them. Some courses are offered online, and the Aboriginal Branch of the Ministry of Education host Webinars for all District Staff, but at this time the use of technology in the context of aboriginal materials is generally vacant.

Written technologies are also experiencing pockets of success. Library materials are generally left under the direction of local school librarians. Eagle River Secondary in Sek’mews (Sicamous) has a library full of aboriginal content, well in excess of the percentage of aboriginal students in the school. Other libraries have yet to match pace with Aboriginal student enrolment, or to cull their current library of stereotypical materials and books. In an attempt to lead the way, the District Resource Center is reconfiguring its resources. Along with culling stereotypical materials from its collection, the Center is offering all of its cultural material for use to all district staff, and having targeted 5 elementary schools, under the Aboriginal Pals Program is giving all kindergarten students an aboriginal book, and all other schools get the same book for teacher use.

The largest band in School District 83 is the Splat’sin Band. (Spalumcheen) The Splat’sin Reserve is found on the South end of the Town of Enderby, and is home to the Shihiya School. Behind the steering of Education Director/Coordinator Darrell Jones and head-teacher Reidun Kopp, Shihiya School houses 34 students from Kindergarten to Grade 6. While attended mostly by students from the Splat’sin reserve, non-reserve and non-status students also attend Shihiya, set in a beautiful old log building approximately 8 km from the center of Enderby. Parents make the decision of whether or not to attend Shihiya school. Small class sizes, mixed classes, often containing relatives, and the ability to accelerate through grade levels are a few of the many benefits Shihiya school offers to its young students. While initially run by a Splat’sin Band Parent Committee, for the past 25 years Director Jones and his Shihiya staff (along with parent input) has set the course for the students who attend Shihiya.
Initially, language and culture were the over-riding focus of the school, and as students moved into grade 7 in the public system of SD 83, many did not have the academic skills to be successful. The school now follows the same curriculum of all public schools in the Province of British Columbia, yet works tirelessly to integrate Splat’sin culture and language into all components of learning. For the past dozen years, Shihiya students have benefited from a comprehensive (3 times per week) language program, taught by Elders from the Band. The dynamics of having outside people teaching at Shihiya continues to challenge Darrell and Reidun. While Elders may have the language, being non-teachers posses some minor problems. Say and Repeat, picture cards, and Bingo games are some of the strategies used do deliver language. Students who leave Shihiya at the end of Grade 6 often have better language skills than their parents. This bodes very well for the revitalization of the Secwepemc language. Field trips are used extensively by Shihiya to enrich the culture of its students. Trips to Mable Lake Salmon Enhancement Center, skating, or more ambitious week long trips to Vancouver offer Shihiya students opportunities they might not enjoy otherwise. Field trips offer opportunities for students to tie learning back to the curriculum, through classroom discussions, journal entries, etc. Community members often join Shihiya students on these field trips, an arrangement symbiotic to all.

With the very recent (last month) introduction of a satellite, technology at Shihiya School has received a tremendous upgrade. A 12-station computer lab in the basement of the school now has access to the internet, and head teacher Reidun Kopp is very excited about the possibilities for her students. Success Maker, an individually paces Math, Science, and Reading program will allow students to work at their own pace, and progress only when mastery has occurred. First Voices, a website that can support the teaching of the Secwepemc Language will provide a fun alternative to the language program already in place. The First Nation School Association is currently lobbying for addition funds. A smart-board, laptop computer, and digital camera are at the top of the list of purchases as Shihiya students move forward in the 21st century.

Across the vast Secpemculecw, healing is taking place. Despite the horrendous treatment by Western Colonization, cultural revitalization is happening. Technology and Education are being used in many ways to make the Indigenous Voice heard in our Digital Age. Indigenous movie-makers like Randy Bezeau, using Native Narrators and first hand interviews with Indigenous Elders are attempting to right some of the wrongs of the past. They put forth powerful and compelling commentary, entirely from a First Nations perspective, helping to eliminating the bias and stereotyping so prevalent in previous corporate based productions. Local School Districts like SD 83 faithfully acknowledge the Indigenous People and the Land on which the school is built. Armed with Provincially supported curriculum, schools are more able (and willing) to celebrate and promote the Culture, Language, and Customs of their First Nations Students. E-Spirit, the A.L. Fortune Native Drummers, and SD 83 First Nations Graduation Ceremony are now part of the culture of the schools, beside basketball and yearbook club. Reserve Schools, like Shihiya on the Splat’sin Reserve, offer more focused language and cultural opportunities to their students, taking advantage of small class sizes and increased access to Elders.

As progress continues and the Chains of Colonization are slowly being shed, the Social Capital of individuals and communities grows. All change takes time. Substantial change can only
result on the heels of many small changes. Every Pocket of Decolonization, no matter how small, is significant.

Note:

Much of the content of this paper has been derived from personal interviews with the following people.

Irene LaBoucane:  District Principal of Aboriginal Education, School District 83
Darrell Jones: Education Director/Coordinator Splat'sin Band
Reidun Kopp:  Head Teacher, Shihiya School
Shane Coulee:  Vice-Principal, Salmon Arm Secondary School
Doodie Jones:  Aboriginal Education Support Worker, A.L. Fortune Secondary School

I would very much like to thank them for the time and resources they provided. Upon reading this paper I hope they find some satisfaction in the fact that their leadership has a tremendous positive impact on everyone they contact.

Addition Resources:

The Fallen Feather. Directed, Produced, Written and Edited by Randy N Bezeau

http://landoftheshuswap.com/msite/land.php
http://www.firstnations.de/development/secwepemc.htm