

Wahbung: Our Tomorrows – 37 Years Later

Introduction:

Tansi niche okiskinow-humakay-wak. Good morning fellow teachers. I hope you are not thinking, I'm not a teacher, I'm a counsellor, or a student or a parent. In the old Indian way, the belief is that everyone is a teacher and everyone is a learner. I was asked to come here today to talk about Wahbung: Our Tomorrows. I believe it is because I was there 37 years ago in the midst of it all. There aren't many of us oldies left. Is there anyone here who participated in any way in the work of Wahbung? It was a challenge for me to recall the events during that time. Of course, the golden book, Wahbung: Our Tomorrows is available and I reviewed it as I'm sure you did in preparation for today. I will take the privilege to mention some information not contained in the book. I did check the information out with a few others who were there at the time but any inaccuracies are my responsibility. I will talk about Wahbung and leave it to you to keep in mind, the 37 years later as you are the ones active in Aboriginal education today and are in the best position to assess where we are nearly four decades later. I will use the term Indian to refer to us as it was used in the document.

What is Wahbung:Our Tomorrows?

In 1971, 37 years ago, the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood (Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs) presented to the federal government its position paper entitled, Wahbung: Our Tomorrows. It was part of a national movement. All across the country, Provincial and Territorial Indian Organizations prepared position papers expressing adamantly their views on the direction they wanted to go to become self-reliant. The papers were a reaction to the federal government's 1969 white paper on Indian Policy. As part of Prime Minister Trudeau 's plan for a Just Society, the Indian Policy was to remove the "special status" of Indians and make us like everyone else, supposedly equal. The new Indian

Policy clearly was an abrogation of the rights of Indians and the Indian leaders took action. As in Wabung, the discussion and recommendations centered around on-going relationships with the federal government and development. Specifically, the topics in Wabung include:

- (1) treaty and Aboriginal rights
- (2) land
- (3) hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering rights
- (4) Indian Act
- (5) culture
- (6) health and social services
- (7) education
- (8) social development
- (9) economic development
- (10) reserve government

Alberta was the first to produce its paper entitled “Citizens Plus” (red paper)

BC’s paper was referred to as the Brown Paper

Manitoba presented Wabung: Our Tomorrows in October 1971

In 1969, Indian leader (the late) Harold Cardinal from Alberta published his book entitled, “The Unjust Society” that describes how Indian people held out so much hope when Trudeau was elected in 1968 because he promised to revolutionize Indian Affairs and dialogue with Indians through consultation meetings. Instead, in 1969, the government of Canada issued a (white paper) on Indian Policy fundamentally different from his initial promise. It was clearly a betrayal once again and this time by the Trudeau government. Cardinal stated, “ I challenge the Honorable Mr. Trudeau and the Honorable Jean Chretien (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development) to re-examine their unfortunate policy, to offer the Indians of Canada, hope instead of despair, freedom instead of frustration, life in the Just Society instead of cultural annihilation” (Cardinal,

1969).

So what has changed in the overall picture in 37 years? Is the Indian Policy of 1969 still at work? It would take a massive study to examine the particulars surrounding this issue. It is a study that should be considered by those Aboriginal scholars who are doing graduate work. The short answer to the question, in my opinion, is not much changed overall and it would appear that the 1969 policy is still at work. We only have to look at our on-going struggles today that strongly suggest that the government is still not dealing with us in a “just” manner and assimilation continues to be the goal. And the challenge for our people continues.

Today, at this your tenth annual Lighting the Fire Education Conference, we will limit ourselves to a discussion of education as provided in Wabnung. I am here today because it was my job as the Director of Education to put together the education section with the help of colleagues. As I think back to that time, I recall the process we used and the time it took to be quite remarkable. It took about a year to put Wabnung together. The Chiefs of the day were the key players in the design and content of the paper. There were three or four Chief’s meetings held in Winnipeg where the various topics were discussed. What was really great was that the discussions were in the Indian languages making it easier for the chief’s to communicate their thoughts to us. At that time, most of the chief’s were more fluent in their Native languages than they were in English. After each two or three day meeting, the writing team would organize the discussion and the next meeting, these reports would be reviewed by the Chiefs and revisions and additions made until we arrived at the final version. It is important to remember that our leader was Grand Chief Dave Courchene who was a very effective and powerful leader who did much to give a voice to our people. It is well to remember all the chiefs that were involved in this process. It is good to remember that you are “standing on the shoulders of giants”.
(READ NAMES)

In the prologue, Wabnung states:

“The history and past policies regarding the Indian people cannot and must not be ignored, for their effects are with us all in the present Indian fact. To deny the past and to refuse to recognize its implications, is to distort the present; to distort the present is to take risks with the future that are blatantly irresponsible” (Wahbung: 1971). In other words, **“we must know the past, to understand the present, to plan (in an informed way) for the future.**

It is this approach that was followed in Wahbung (1971) where we spoke first to the history of education, the present state of Indian education at that time and directions for the future. What follows is a brief look at the past.

The Past: Pre-Contact

Traditional Indian Education – I like to start here because too often, the literature suggests that education started for our people with coming of the Europeans. We should all be aware that long before Europeans arrived in North America, Indians had evolved their own form of education. It was an education in which the community was the classroom, its members were the teachers, and each adult was responsible to ensure that each child learned how to live a good life (National Indian Brotherhood, 1973). Central to the teaching was the belief in the Great Spirit. In the Gospel of the Redman, it states that "The Redman has the most spiritual civilization the world has ever known.... His measure of success is 'How much service have I rendered to my people?'... His mode of life, his thought, his every act are given spiritual significance (Seton, 1977)". This was expressed in their daily living, in relationship of one to another, in humility, in sharing, in cooperating, in relationship to nature---the land, the animals, in recognition of the Great Spirit, in the way our people thought, felt and perceived their world. Traditionally, our people's teachings addressed the total being, the whole community, in the context of a viable living culture.

In “Songs of Our People: Teachings on the Natural Way, Elder Art Soloman writes about Education:

*The traditional way of education
was by example and experience
And by story telling.*

*The first principle involved was total respect
and acceptance of the one to be taught
And that learning was a continuous process
From birth to death.*

*It was a total continuity without interruption.
Its nature was like a fountain
That gives many colours and flavours of water
And whoever chose could drink as much or as little
As they wanted to and whenever they wished.
The teaching strictly adhered
To the sacredness of life whether of human
Or animals or plants.*

*But in the course of history there came
A disruption
And then education became “compulsory miseducation”
For another purpose, and the circle of life was broken
And the continuity ended.*

*It is that continuity which is now taken
up again in the spiritual rebirth
of the people.*

I believe that to provide an effective education for our people today, we must get back to the principles and values practiced by our ancestors.

Then came the change...what Ojibwe Elder Art Solomon referred to as miseducation.

Our Second Past: Contact

Colonial Domination – over 300 years

In the early 17th Century, European missionaries came to establish schools for Indians. It was believed that this would be the best method of civilizing the "natives". Day or Mission schools were the first to be established. The day school concept was largely abandoned in favour of residential (boarding) schools in the 1800s. The highest recorded number of residential schools, which were located all across Canada was 80 in 1933. The enrollments ranged anywhere from fifty to over four hundred students of all ages.

You are all very familiar with boarding/residential schools as many of you here today came through that system. If not you, your parents and grandparents likely did.

In short, Residential Schools were devised as a means of isolating the Indian child from his parents and the influences of the reserve. They were noted for their high mortality rate among the the students. At the turn of the century, an estimated 50% of the children who attended these schools did not benefit from the education they received. They died while at the boarding school of diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis. It is believed that many died of loneliness. On April 10 of this year (2008), it was revealed for the first time the location of 28 massive graves across Canada holding the remains of hundreds and possibly thousands of Aboriginal children who died in Indian Residential schools. In Manitoba, three on the list were Brandon, Portage la Prairie and Norway House. According to the article, an inquiry by an International Human Rights Tribunal into

Genocide in Canada is being conducted under the authority of hereditary chiefs to look into the death and disappearance of children in these schools. These graves show that many were buried at the residential school and parents never got to take them home.

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission has also been launched said to be “part of an overall holistic and comprehensive response to the Indian Residential School legacy in a sincere indication and acknowledgement of the injustices and harms experienced by Aboriginal people and the need for continued healing”. Heading the Commission is Judge Harry Lafond. (From Truth to Reconciliation, 2008) (website:www.ahf.ca)

Having generations of Indian children removed from their parents, denying them a normal childhood and the teachings of their people resulted in the loss of their cultural traditions including their native languages. It is a dark period in the history of Indian education, the repercussions of which, continue to be felt today. The weakening of Indian society as a whole can be attributed to residential schools. Cultural conflict, alienation, poor self-concept, lack of preparation for jobs and for life in general derive from this deplorable experience. Research by Dr. Roz Ing indicates that not only are those who actually attended these schools affected but so also are the generations that followed.

The government decides on another approach...

Federal Indian Day Schools

Integration

"To civilize and Christianize" gave way in the 50s to a rise in the number of federally run Indian Day Schools on reserves to accommodate the closure of residential schools. At the same time a policy of integration was put into effect. By 1970s, the government of Canada has succeeded in making provisions for approximately 60% of Indian students in

public schools.

The integration concept was a continuation of government control over the lives of Indian people. It was introduced with little or no consultation with Indian parents, Indian Bands or Indian Organizations. No particular preparation of teachers or of curriculum was made to accommodate the children of another culture.

Chief Dan George in his soliloquy, "A Talk to Teachers"(George, circa 1972) made this comment on integration: *"You talk big words of integration in the schools. Does it really exist? Can we talk of integration until there is social integration...unless there is integration of hearts and minds you have only a physical presence ...and the walls are as high as the mountain range.*

There has been no notable improvement in the overall achievement of Indian children in integrated schools. Studies on the effects of integration have shown that Indian children reveal patterns that can be identified as alienation and identity conflict. The Indian child is caught between two cultures and is therefore, literally outside of, and between both. The panacea of integration failed to provide the answer to education for Indian students.

Finally, a monumental breakthrough...

The Third Past:

Colonialism Under Attack - Late 1960s

Wahbung: Our Tomorrows

Indian Control of Indian Education

In the wake of a school strike in North-east Alberta in 1971, protesting school facilities on reserves and the release of a government report, education was thrust to the forefront.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Indian Affairs presented its report on Indian education on June 22, 1971. It unfolded before the Canadian public the educational problems facing Indian people. Some of the findings were:

"-A drop-out rate four times the national average (96% of Indian children never finished high school)

_A related unemployment rate averaging 50% for adult males, going as high as 90% in some communities

"-Inaccuracies and omissions" relating to the Indian contribution to Canadian history in textbooks used in federal and provincial schools

-An age-grade retardation rooted in language conflict and early disadvantage, which accelerated as the child progressed through the primary and elementary grades

-Less than 15% of the teachers had specialized training in cross-cultural education and less than 10% had any knowledge of an Indian language

-The majority of Indian parents were uninformed about the implication of decisions made to transfer children from reserve schools to provincial schools.

From this report, it was obvious that the missionaries and governments had failed in three hundred years to administer an effective educational program for Indians. The failure has been attributed to several factors, namely: the absence of a clear philosophy of education with goals and objectives, failure to provide a meaningful program based on Indian reality, a lack of qualified teaching staff and inadequate facilities, and, most important, the absence of parental involvement in the education of their children (Wahbung:1971).

Wahbung addresses Indian Education

Position on Education

“To be effective, education must be nurtured in relevancy, commitment, motivation and identifiable purpose. The process must be part of community activities and community

progress.

We, the Indian people of Manitoba believe in education:

- As a preparation for total living, and in this context it extends far beyond the boundaries of what is conventionally considered schooling;
- As a prime means of improving our economic and social conditions;
- As a means of providing that which should be the right of every citizen, namely the choice of where to live and work along with required skills that will allow this privilege of choice;
- As a means by which we can be enabled to participate fully in our own social, economic, political and educational advancement;
- As a comprehensive program which must be designed to meet the needs of the total community by including offerings to people of all ages”.

Recommendations:

(Paraphrased)

1. We call upon the federal government to live up to its obligation for education.
2. Control of education must be transferred to local authorities (Band Councils)
3. There must be a redefinition of education to reflect the total concept
4. There must be parental participation
5. Research must be conducted and at least controlled by the organization representing the Indians
6. Excellence in education must be stressed.

In addition, 12 specific recommendations were made including: classes for four-year olds, instruction in the Native languages, more Indian teachers and teachers-aides, that parents be involved in decisions regarding the school program, high schools be established at

various reserves, that there be adequate Indian representation on public school boards, that upgrading classes continue on and off reserve.

Two Step process

First, set up school boards on reserves to oversee curriculum development, administer the physical plant, coordinate educational programs and to develop adult education facilities.

Second, do a comprehensive education study on Indian education in its total context. That the study be implemented and controlled by the Indian organization representing the people.

We did not get federal government support to do the comprehensive study but we were able to get a small grant from the Local Initiatives Program to undertake a couple of small studies.

(1) Education is Failing the Indian (1972)

Objectives:

To determine the drop-out rate and reasons for drop-out

To determine how many Indian students are in slow learner classes and OEC

To determine the age-grade distribution of students

Sample:

Twelve of the larger communities in the six regions from 1966-72

South-west region – Sandy Bay & Sioux Valley

Interlake region – Peguis & Fisher River

South-east region – Fort Alexander & Roseau River

North-west region – Norway House & The Pas

North Region – Nelson House & Pukatawagan

North-east region – Garden Hill & St Theresa Point

Findings:

Drop-outs

-the greatest drop-out rate occurs at grades 9 and 10

-the greatest drop-out rate is at ages 16 and 17

-some students drop-out prior to grade 7

-drop-out rate is higher on reserve than off-reserve

-90% of Indian students are not reaching grade 12

Reasons for drop-out

-not interested

-social problems

-wanted to work

-didn't like school system

-dissatisfied with accommodation

-attitude of principals, teachers and counsellors

-parental call back home

fear of failing

Slow Learner Classes and OEC

-a disproportionately high number of Indian children are placed in these classes. Example: one community upon learning that most of their children were placed in Special education classes and OEC took action and pulled their children out of that school and negotiated with another school to take their children on their terms.

Age-Grade Distribution:

Indian children are older for their grades than their counterparts

(2) The Shocking Truth about Indians in Textbooks

This was a study undertaken by the MIB. It looked for bias and discrimination in the social studies textbooks used in grades four to six. The result was that many authorized textbooks in use at that time contained a lot of negative portrayals of Indians. For example, the grade four social studies textbook, Manitoba, It People and Places devoted only a few pages to Indians. These pages showed pictures of Indian children and the captions read, “Does he look less clever than you? Do you think their father works? When we took issue with this textbook, we were informed that it was the enquiry approach.

At a ceremony, the results of the study was presented. Of course, the Minister of Education for Manitoba was invited. At the last minute, we learned that he would not be there but the Minister of Corrections would stand in for him. Years later, I learned that the people at Walpole Island had presented that study to their authority and the outcome was a committee of Indian people to screen textbooks before they are approved for use. That is the outcome we were looking for but got nowhere.

Significance of Wabung: Our Tomorrows

What was the significance of Wabung:Our Tomorrows in terms of education? It was a marvellously and efficiently conceived statement; the likes of which had not been previously seen nor produced in succeeding years. It stands alone.

1. It was the first position paper produced jointly by the Chiefs of Manitoba, on behalf of the Indian people of Manitoba, that provided the government of Canada (and indirectly Manitoba) with a clear statement of what we wanted in education in terms of principles, values and overall direction.
2. It signified that colonialism would no longer be tolerated by our people. It was time to take control of our own lives through the control of education and parental participation
3. It called upon the federal government to live up to its fiduciary responsibility while devolving education to the local community
4. Most importantly, it contributed substantially to the policy of Indian Control of Indian Education, a national Indian education policy by the National Indian Brotherhood (1972), that impacted the education of our people all across the country.

In 1971, the National Indian Brotherhood (now known as the Assembly of First Nations) established a working committee to prepare a national position in education. As previously mentioned, each provincial and territorial Indian organization prepared a position paper that included education. The education working committee was made up of provincial/territorial representatives. As education director of MIB, I was the Manitoba representative on the working committee. Other members were: (SEE ICIE)

The national education policy was based on the our respective position papers. Upon review of the papers, what stood out was the common thread that ran through all the papers that called for control of education and parental involvement in the education of their children. This was totally coincidental and amazing. In our work in Manitoba, I don't recall ever speaking with people of other provinces and territories who were working on their papers. It is easy to understand this as it was in the early 70s, long before

faxing and e-mail were available, let alone teleconferencing. Even long distance calls cost a lot. The national policy became known as Indian Control of Indian Education.

Basing its findings on the various position papers of the provincial/territorial Indian Organizations, the policy of *Indian Control of Indian Education* was tabled with the government on December 21, 1972. In February, 1973, the Minister of Indian Affairs, the Honourable Jean Chretien, gave official departmental recognition to the policy stating "*I have given the National Indian Brotherhood my assurance that I and my Department are fully committed to realizing the educational goals for the Indian people set forth in the Brotherhood's proposal*" (Cardinal, 1977).

Indian Control of Indian Education is based on two education principle recognized in Canadian society: parental responsibility and local control. It recognizes that Indian parents must enjoy the same fundamental decision making rights about their children's education as other parents across Canada. It promotes the fundamental concept of local control which distinguishes the free political system of democratic governments from those of a totalitarian nature. The policy recognizes the need to improve educational opportunities for Indians.

It states:

"Our aim is to make education relevant to the philosophy and needs of Indian people. We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity with confidence in their personal worth and ability.

We believe in education...

...as a preparation for total living.

...as a means of free choice of where to live and work.

...as a means of enabling us to participate fully in our own social, economic, political and educational advancement: (National Indian Brotherhood, 1973)

Indian Control of Indian Education is a four point policy dealing with parental responsibility, school programs, teachers and school facilities.

RESPONSIBILITY

The government's financial responsibility does not justify its dominance over the lives of Indian people. This policy statement demands that Indian parents participate as partners with the government in the education of their children.

PROGRAMS

The curriculum must be structured to use the child's awareness of his own cultural environment as a springboard for learning about the outside world. The community must participate in program change.

TEACHERS AND COUNSELLORS

The federal government must help train Indian teachers and counsellors. Non-Indian teachers and counsellors should receive additional training to prepare them for cross-cultural situations and teach them how to make curriculum for Indian children more meaningful.

FACILITIES

Educational facilities must meet the needs of the local population. Substandard buildings and equipment must be replaced.

Indian Control of Indian Education has been hailed as a landmark policy. Through it our

communities have greater involvement and control. It has truly made a difference. Having said that, let me share with you some information that you are not likely to find written anywhere. I have argued that ICIE did not play out as was envisioned in 1972. Had it been, we would likely be much further ahead today than we are.

First, it was our understanding that our people would control education in their communities lock, stock and barrel. Indian Affairs saw the process as an extension of Indian Affairs “having Indians run Indian Affairs programs, thus Indian controlled schools became Band-operated schools. Two very different concepts. Control connotes” power and authority” and to operate connotes “working on something already in place”. This issue was directly related to the Indian Act.

Second, was the issue of legislation, The Indian Act did not allow for agreements to be made between the Minister of Indian Affairs and Band Councils. They could enter into agreements with the provinces, territories, religious or charitable organizations but not Indian Bands. We set about to revise the education section of the Indian Act along with officials from DIA. We made good progress and all indications were that it could be done. George Manuel had negotiated with the federal government to establish an NIB/ Cabinet Joint Working Committee to look at Indian issues. Education was discussed at this, the highest level of authority, and work continued. It is my recollection that we had almost completed the work on the revision to the Indian Act when an NIB election was called. George Manuel had decided not to run for President again. Several of us resigned at that point not knowing who the new president would be. The new president disbanded the NIB/Cabinet Joint Committee process and the work on the Indian Act among other important directions died, so to speak losing the opportunity for our people to table budgets directly through Treasury Board..

Third, NIB called for the federal government to provide start-up funds for those communities that wanted to take over education. The funds were to be used to hold

community meetings to evaluate their current system and to make plans about how and changes would be made to provide a better education for their children. This was done for a couple of years then the funding was cut-off.

It is my opinion that had the process we had in mind been followed, having a mutual understanding of Indian control, revising the Indian Act and an opportunity to plan for takeover, we would have a very different picture today.

However, despite the many problems experienced, progress is noted through various reports and evaluations conducted within the last few years. The involvement of Indian people in the education of their children, has resulted in:

- ⑩ greater retention of students
- ⑩ improved attendance
- ⑩ inclusion of relevant curriculum
- ⑩ better graduation rates
- ⑩ development of early childhood programs
- ⑩ introduction of adult education programs
- ⑩ teaching of native languages

(Kirkness, Bowman, 1992)

Despite repeated efforts on the part of churches, successive governments, institutions, various interest groups and individuals, we have not allowed ourselves to become completely assimilated. Through education, we must continue toward the realization of our place in this country. We have shown that despite all odds, we have maintained our identity as Indian peoples.

As I reflect on these last 37 years, I feel both comfort and sadness. I feel very privileged to have been a part of Wahbung: Our Tomorrows. What this statement did for Indian education is immeasurable. It did thrust us ahead and because of it many of our people have been able to take advantage of education to prepare them for the choice of where to

live and work, for social and economic independence. What saddens me is that we still have not found the answer to educating the masses of our people. You, that are here today have been a part of the positive movement and second and third generations are following. There is strength in numbers and commitment and they will continue to strive for that excellence in education that we dreamed of in 1971, 37 years ago.

Ekosi

All my relations.

References:

Assembly of First Nations, *Conference Proceedings, Assembly of Chiefs*, Ottawa, 1981

Canadian Education Association, *Recent Developments in Native Education*, Toronto, 1984

Cardinal, H., *The Rebirth of Canada's Indians*, Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton, AB, 1977

Department of Indian Affairs, *Indian Education Policy Review: Phase I*, Ottawa, 1980

George, Chief Dan, *A Talk With Teachers*, Unpublished Soliloquy, circa 1972

Government of Canada, *Report of the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs*, Ottawa, 1971

Indian Tribes of Manitoba, *Wahbung: Our Tomorrows*, Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, 1971

Kirkness, Verna J., Bowman Sheena, *First Nations and Schools: Triumphs and Struggles*, Canadian Education Association, Toronto, 1992

Seton, E, and Seton, J.M., *The Gospel of the Redman*, Mary Scorer Books, Winnipeg, MB, 1977

Verna J. Kirkness

MFNERC

Lighting the Fire Conference

May 21, 2008