

*Abstract*

***Advancing Aboriginal Education in Canada: Giving Voice to Our Ancestors***

*The history of Aboriginal People in Canada is a story of social injustice. This presentation will describe how Aboriginal People are using education to address these injustices in ways that inform their lives and gain their security as a people. The link to the Ancestors provided by the Elders is crucial to the movement.*

My very dear good friends,

We give thanks to the Creator for bringing us together in a celebration of learning, of sharing, of joy and of trust. May our time together be one of mutual respect and may our mission of discovering and understanding enhance the lives of future generations.

*They told me to tell you the time has come.*

*They want you to know how they feel.*

*So listen carefully, look toward the sun.*

*The Elders are watching.*

*(Bouchard, Vickers, 1990)*

This verse is from a beautiful book entitled **The Elders are Watching** by Dave Bouchard and Roy Vickers, both West Coast Aboriginal men. In this book, they give voice to their ancestors. Roy Vickers says it is time for change: "Change comes from understanding ourselves, our weaknesses and our strengths. That understanding can be fostered through knowledge of our past, our cultural heritage and our environment. This priceless wisdom is available from our Elders who like us received it from their ancestors".

I am a Muskego Iskwew, a Swampy Cree woman from Ochekwi Sipi in the Interlake area of Manitoba. Throughout my career I have had the privilege of working among many different Nations of Aboriginal people not only in Canada but also in other parts of the world. What I have learned is that while our cultures (languages, customs) do vary, we share a similar history that has shaped our traditions, our knowledge and our core values. We are all

influenced by our backgrounds, by our upbringing, our triumphs and our struggles in the place we find ourselves in society.

The plight of Aboriginal Peoples of Canada has been well documented in recent years. The most comprehensive is the Report of **The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples** released in 1996. The Commissioners began the report with the statement that “Canada is a test case for a grand notion – the notion that dissimilar people can share lands, resources, power and dreams while respecting and sustaining their differences (RCAP, 1996: ix). They report that the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people evolved through the four following stages:

*Stage I: Separate Worlds*

*There was a time when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people lived on separate continents and knew nothing of one another.*

*Stage II: Nation to Nation Relations*

*Following the years of first contact, fragile relations of peace, friendship and rough equality were given the force of law in treaties.*

*Stage III: Respect Gives Way to Domination*

*Then power tilted toward non-Aboriginal people and governments. They moved Aboriginal people off much of their land and took steps to “civilize” and teach them European ways.*

*Stage IV: Renewal and Negotiation*

*Finally, we reached the present stage – a time of recovery for Aboriginal people and cultures, a time for critical review of our relationship, and a time for renegotiation and renewal. (RCAP, 1996:5)*

Is it possible to change the course of five centuries of contact that has profoundly altered the lives of generations of Aboriginal people? Everyday, we witness the struggles taking place as we try to mend our circle that was and continues to be broken. We aspire to be a whole people again, to regain the rights that we have been denied not only as the First Peoples of this land but the rights enjoyed by the people from other countries who now make Canada their home.

One of the most insidious forms of injustice that has been perpetrated on the lives of Aboriginal people has been the Indian Act of 1876. The late Chief Joe Mathias of the Squamish Nation in British Columbia, referred to the

Indian Act as “**The Conspiracy of Legislation**” (1986). “The legislation”, he states, “speaks to a very clear intention to deprive us of our land, destroy our cultures and to deny us the right to make decisions about our own well-being”.

The Indian Act that has undergone a number of revisions over the years essentially had the effect of prohibiting “Indians” from acquiring lands, from conducting their religious ceremonies and potlatches, from raising money and prosecuting claims or retaining a lawyer and even from obtaining higher education on threat of enfranchisement. It discriminated even further against Indian women providing that “an Indian women who married a non-Indian ceased to be an Indian within the meaning of any statute or law in Canada”. This did not change until 1985. A major revision in 1951 lifted the ban on religious ceremonies and potlatches and no longer considered an Indian child who did not attend school, a juvenile delinquent. In essence, the Indian Act has had the decimating effect of destroying the cultures of our people.

Other Acts of the government also limited the rights and freedoms of our people. The Electoral Franchise Acts prohibited “Indians” from the right to vote in federal elections. This did not change until 1960. The Land Ordinance Act (1870) prohibited “any aboriginees of this continent” from pre-empting any tract of unoccupied land, unsurveyed land, and reserved Crown Lands while this right was given to any male person being a British subject who was eighteen years old or over. The Land Act of 1888 continued the practice. Subsequent Municipal Election Acts, Provincial Election Acts and Public Schools Acts all prohibited “Indians from voting. These only changed in the last fifty years.

These are some of the atrocities that Aboriginal people in Canada have had to endure. The impact has had the profound effect of destroying the social fabric of the people who were once the sole inhabitants of what is now Canada.

*They told me to tell you the time has come  
They want you to know how they feel  
So listen carefully, look toward the sun  
The Elders are watching.*

Our experience in education has not fared any better. Before contact, Aboriginal people were providing their own form of education. In this

traditional education, the community was the classroom, its members were the teachers, and each adult was responsible to ensure that each child learned all he or she needed to survive and to live well. The teachings were based on the peoples' culture and addressed not only the cognitive development but also the spiritual, emotional and physical growth of the child. Through these teachings each individual was helped to develop his/her potential as a contributing member of society.

The late Nishinabe Elder, Arthur Soloman, in his book, **Songs for the People: Teachings on the Natural Way** gives us his perspective on traditional education.

*The traditional way of education  
Was by example and experience and by storytelling*

*The first principle involved was total respect  
And acceptance of the one being taught.  
And that learning was a continuous process  
From birth to death  
It was a total continuity without interruption.*

*It was like a fountain  
That gives many colours and flavours of water  
And that whoever chose could drink as much or as little  
As they wanted and whenever they wished.*

*The teaching strictly adhered  
To the sacredness of life whether human  
Or animals or plants.*

*But in the course of history, there came a disruption  
And 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 our people.*

*(Soloman, xxxx)*

The “disruption and miseducation” that the late Elder refers to is the education provided by missionaries and federal and public servants from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century to the present. This disruption was manifested in policies oriented toward assimilation. Under this system, the greatest negative impact in education was brought about by the residential school policy of 1893 that remained in effect until the 1980s. Dr. Rosalyn Ing, a Cree woman who is a residential school survivor, in her doctoral dissertation, **“Dealing with Shame and Unresolved Trauma: Residential School and Its Impact on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Adults** writes:

“ There are three generations of First Nations people alive who attended residential schools; many of them attended in the 1920s. They were children separated from their parents to satisfy a goal of assimilation in Canadian Indian Policy where institutionalized racism was practiced in many forms. After separation, and away from parents and communities, Aboriginal languages were forbidden, and most children were punished if caught (speaking their Native tongue( (Ing, 1991). Some had needles stuck in their tongues (Chrisjohn, 1997:243) and they suffered many other cruelties and indignities... Schools carried out a program of cultural replacement so severe that it forced some (many) of those leaving the schools to deny their identity as Aboriginal people...’It took me years before I could admit I was an Indian, even to myself’. In the end, most of the children returned from the schools alienated from their communities and unable to fit into Euro-Canadian society because of overt racism. Many of them had few resources to help them deal with this society because that important spiritual element of self-esteem was severely compromised or nearly destroyed (Ing, 2000:36-37).

The residential school was notable for its high mortality rate among 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 residential school of such diseases as smallpox and tuberculosis. It is believed that many died of loneliness. Only recently has the quiet suffering of generations of survivors from these schools finally surfaced making us aware of the true devastation of physical, mental, emotional and sexual abuse suffered under this colonial regime.

Colleen Simard, an Aboriginal journalist in Winnipeg, referred to the Indian residential schools as “the black eye of Canada”. The residential school survivors have been calling on the federal government to compensate them

for the years of abuse in these schools. The latest approach of the government is the ADR or Alternative Dispute Resolution (alternate to the courts) introduced in 2004. There has been much criticism of this process as being far too slow and costly. As Simard reports, so far \$125 million has been spent on administration of the ADR system to settle \$1 million in compensation; 2,500 residential school survivors died in the first 65 weeks of the ADR process and during that time 50 claimants suits were resolved. In a subsequent article in the Winnipeg Free Press on February 23, it is reported that 88-year-old Flora Merrick of Long Plain First Nation received a settlement of \$1,500 that the federal government appealed. The cost of the appeal was \$20,000. Grand Chief Phil Fontaine is calling on the government to pay a lump sum payment to each survivor (\$10,000 + \$3,000 for every year spent at a residential school. He states that this proposal could be completed in five years and save taxpayers \$2 billion compared to the ADR. Fontaine called residential schools, "the worst human rights violation in the history of Canada.

Education administered by Federal Indian Residential and Day schools and the Public School system has fallen far short of providing a meaningful education for Aboriginal people. In a nutshell, missionaries and governments failed in three hundred years to provide an effective educational program for Aboriginal people in Canada. The failure has been attributed to "the historic exclusion of First Nations (Aboriginal) peoples from the formation of formal education that has resulted in a foundation and superstructure that have been biased against First Nations precepts and customs in the curriculum, testing, protocols, and administration... (CJNE, Vol.21 #1, 1995:182) This type of education for Aboriginal people has contributed to the weakening of Aboriginal society as a whole.

**The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples** characterized the current conditions of Aboriginal People compared with non-Aboriginal people as follows:

- illness is more common
- life expectancy is lower
- human problems from family violence to alcohol abuse are more common
- fewer children graduate from high school
- far fewer go to colleges and universities

- housing is sub-standard and homes are overcrowded
- water and sanitation are more often inadequate
- fewer Aboriginal people have jobs
- more spend time in jails and prisons

(RCAP, 1992:2)

*They told me to tell you the time has come  
They want you to know how they feel  
So listen carefully, look toward the sun  
The Elders are watching*

The late Elder, Solomon spoke of the rebirth of our people. “It is that continuity which is now taken up again in the spiritual rebirth of our people”. Over the last three decades, the Aboriginal people have made a great effort to mend our broken circle of life. Rebirth has been all around us as we strive to overcome the past and to make the lives better for our people. We believe that the answers to our survival and prosperity lie within us. We are seeking to break from the colonial past of dependency perpetrated by governments who treated us as “wards of the government”. We face a monumental challenge to govern ourselves as to do so is a threat to the livelihoods of those who make their living administering our misery.

We are striving to uphold our treaties, to regain our lands, to control our education, our social and health services, to correct injustices and to determine our future. Education has been at the forefront of this movement paving the way to self-determination in 1972 by issuing a policy of **Indian Control of Indian Education**. Despite the years of disappointment and frustration with an imposed system of education, Aboriginal people continue to believe that education is necessary to function meaningfully and equally in today’s society. Our people put forward a policy that addresses our philosophy, our principals, goals and directions. This landmark policy is historic in the sense that it represents the first time that Canada’s Aboriginal people collectively took a proactive stand against government policy. **Indian Control of Indian Education** was based on two fundamental principles: *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 that distinguishes the free political system of democratic governments from those of a totalitarian nature.

**Indian Control of Indian Education** is a four-point policy “requiring determined and enlightened action in the areas of responsibility, programs, teachers and facilities”. **Responsibility** explains the delineating of the responsibility between parents and the government. Parents are to have full control of the design and implementation of the education of their children. The federal government is to provide the financial resources as per the treaties and the Indian Act. **Programs** were to be developed that honoured Indian traditions, history, culture, values and contributions made to Canadian society.

The late George Manuel, President of the National Indian Brotherhood (now Assembly of First Nations) who led the action to formulate a policy designed to change the face of Indian education observed that:

*Indian philosophy of education is in many ways more valid and universal than the one that prevails in educational circles today. Instead of a one-sided view of history, we want our children to learn a Canadian history that attaches honour to the customs, values, accomplishments and contributions of this country's original inhabitants and first citizens, the Indians of Canada.*

*We want our children to learn science and technology so that they can promote the harmony of man with nature ...not destroy it.*

*We want our children to learn about their fellowmen (women) in literature and social studies, and in the process, learn to respect the values and cultures of others.*

*An Indian philosophy looks at learning and teaching as an integral part of living both for the teacher and the child. It is not a five-hour, five-day a week exercise for a dozen years or so. It is a lifelong commitment (Manual, circa 1976).*

The third point dealt with the need for the federal government to provide the resources to prepare Indians (who were grossly underrepresented in the field at that time) as teachers and counselors. Finally, the policy called for improved **educational facilities** on the reserves.



The policy of **Indian Control of Indian Education** has been in existence for over thirty years. While we do not hear direct reference to the policy in education circles today, what we have/ and are experiencing in terms of efforts being made to make education better for our people is based on that landmark policy. What kind of a grade would we get if we were to assess what has happened in just over thirty years? I believe we have done very well in spite of the fact that the government has not acted in good faith. The policy of assimilation is alive and well in governments, schools and institutions of higher learning today. Were it not for the perseverance of our Elders, parents, organizations, graduates and social activists, we would not be experiencing any positive changes. It is difficult to erase a 500-year-old plan.

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As a direct response to the policy of **Indian Control of Indian Education** teacher education programs burgeoned across the country as did Native Studies Departments, Native Law Programs and various courses dealing with Aboriginal people that were introduced in colleges and universities. Whether we are speaking of education at the primary, elementary, secondary or post-secondary levels, the greatest challenge has been to design curriculum for and about Aboriginal people that will enhance Aboriginal identity and also provide an appreciation of Aboriginal peoples to the rest of the population. We have worked with Departments of Education to prepare appropriate curriculum guides and resource materials in areas of social studies, Aboriginal languages, and other subjects. First Nations schools have made significant advances in having First Nations teachers and appropriate curriculum. Some provinces have completely taken over the education of their people such as the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia (real ICIE), others have organized resource centers to serve the provincial education needs of Aboriginal people such as Manitoba and British Columbia (MFNERC, FNERC). Such urban areas as Winnipeg and Edmonton have established all Aboriginal schools. Critical for effective change in all these areas, is qualified professionals.

As this is the purview of universities it is, therefore, incumbent on universities to be willing to be flexible in their programming to attract and

hold Aboriginal students. One important move is to introduce an admissions policy that would enable more students to enter university. In an article entitled, **First Nations and Higher Education: The Four R's – Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility**, co-authored by Dr. Ray Barnhardt of Alaska, we discuss the need for universities to **respect** the cultural integrity of Aboriginal students, to create programs/courses **relevant** to Aboriginal perspectives and experience, to engage in **reciprocal** relationships whereby every one is a teacher and everyone is a learner, and to encourage **responsibility** through participation.

Much has been accomplished but much remains to be done. As we pursue an agenda of independence, we must have Aboriginal trained professionals in the areas of law, medicine and engineering, as well as in various technical and vocational areas. It was on that premise that we created The First Nations House of Learning at the University of British Columbia in 1987. Its mandate was/is to expand the range and depth of program and course offering (beyond education and law), both for and about First Nations, within the University's faculties, schools, and institutes. I attended the annual Aboriginal graduation celebration at the First Nations Longhouse at UBC a couple of years ago and was delighted to see that the graduates were from ten different faculties (Science, Arts, Library, Archival and Information Studies, Social Work Education, Forestry, Law, dentistry, medicine and graduate studies, one honorary doctorate). To me, this was evidence that the House of Learning mandate was taking effect. The First Nations Longhouse on the UBC campus was opened in May 1993. It is a magnificent 2,043 square metre Coast Salish style longhouse constructed of West Coast red cedar logs that serves as a "home away from home" on the campus.

Our people are the fastest growing population in Canada and, at the same time, are experiencing the highest drop out rate. There has been a high success rate among mature students who make up the majority of the current university population. There continues to be a bottleneck at the secondary school level. Therein is the greatest challenge that Aboriginal peoples and post secondary institutions must address. Are universities doing enough to prepare teachers at the secondary level to work with students of another culture? Are Aboriginal parents convinced that higher education will bring due rewards?

On the positive side, there are a growing number of Aboriginal people who have completed graduate studies. The bonus related to this achievement is that Aboriginal students are engaged in research to answer their own questions. As Dr. Carl Urion (1991), a Metis professor at the University of Alberta explained: Aboriginal people' research discourse has as its final assumption, the integrity of the person. It assumes a context in which there is unity and wholeness to be discovered or affirmed...It is thus essentially empirical. The major requirement is that subjects and researcher should engage together in creating the discourse. The participatory research using tradition as a base for change, is a means of gaining security as a people.

Research by our people is important as a necessity to inform our lives, to counteract flawed research by outsiders, to be objects of our own research, to own our research. I spoke earlier of Roz Ing's dissertation, **Dealing with Shame and unresolved Trauma: Residential Schools and Its Impact on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Adults**. Other titles by Aboriginal graduate students are: **Jurisdiction and Control in First Nation School Evaluation, Indian Control of Indian Education, the Path of the Upper Nicola Valley, Language Renewal and Language Maintenance: A Practical Guide, Compassionate Mind: Implications of a Text Written by Elder Louis Sunchild (Canadian Journal of Native Education)** to name a few. The Status of Women Canada has just released a publication entitled, **A Holistic Framework for Aboriginal Policy Research** by four Aboriginal women.

I hope that I have managed to provide you with a glimpse of our history, its affect on succeeding generations, and how we are attempting to inform our lives and of those yet unborn. I will assure you that we have done more to address the education challenges before us in thirty years than what was accomplished in the previous three hundred years. Education has been my whole life and I know the efforts to make positive change by people of my generation will be carried on by succeeding generations as more and more become educated and are committed to a mission of service to our people.

*They told me to tell you the time has come  
They want you to know how they feel.  
So listen carefully, look toward the sun  
The Elders are watching.*

Cree prayer

Thank you.

Verna J. Kirkness