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Cultural Education for Aboriginal People: Is It Attainable?

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Nine years ago I spoke to the youth at a conference in Vancouver. The theme of the conference was "The Year 2001 and Beyond. I entitled my talk "To be successful... we must pick up the eagle feather". I borrowed this title from Larry Courchene, a young man in Manitoba who had written a dedication to Elijah Harper in the Weetahmah newspaper. Larry's message was that, "In order to be successful, we must put down the bottle and put away the drugs. Let's pick up the eagle feather, as Elijah Harper did, for his people". The youth who attended that conference will all be over 25 years of age today. I wonder how their lives are.

In my address, I raised the question of what it means to "pick up the eagle feather"? I suggested that it means knowing who you are and knowing who you are means knowing the history, the traditions, the culture and the values of your people. Knowing who you are means practicing those aspects of your culture that have meaning for your life today. **We must know the past in order to understand the present to plan for the future.**

In another excerpt from my talk, I stated, "As you learn the history of our people, you become aware of many positive facts about Aboriginal people. Knowing what our ancestors contributed to the world economy and culture will be an inspiration to you. On the other hand, you also become aware of the tragic effect that colonization has had on our people. The consequence of this experience is that our "circle of life" was broken. *"To be successful...we must pick up the eagle feather"* By picking up the eagle feather, you are making a commitment toward completing the circle.

Picking up the eagle feather also means a commitment to facing up to the most defeating element in society – racism. Knowing who you are will give you the courage to meet this challenge". My final point was that "Picking up the eagle feather means taking responsibility for making wise choices, reclaiming life –your life, my life, our people's lives".

This metaphor illustrates the pressing need for our schools/educational institutions to address Aboriginal education by acknowledging the importance culture plays in learning. I am defining culture here as "a way of life of a people". Cultures are dynamic and thus encompass both traditional and contemporary ways of life.

The landmark policy paper of 1972, "Indian Control of Indian Education" was the first national statement made by our people to address the inadequacies of the education provided by church and state for over three hundred years. The same issues that are raised today as problems/challenges in Aboriginal education were identified in the early 1970s. These included a high drop-out rate, related unemployment, age-grade deceleration, bias in textbooks, few Aboriginal teachers. The policy called on the federal and provincial governments and the Indian people to develop an Indian oriented curriculum.

The policy stated,

“ 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 achievement.

It further stated,

Unless a child learns about the forces which shape him: the history of his people, their values and customs, their language, he will never really know himself as a human being. Indian culture and values have a unique place in the history of mankind. The Indian child who learns about his heritage will be proud of it. The lessons he learns in school, his whole school experience should reinforce and contribute to the image he has of himself as an Indian.

The monumental challenge faced by us, as educators, over the last three decades has been to identify an Indian oriented curriculum. How do we create a meaningful education for our people based on our world view (philosophy of life), and rooted in the cultures of our respective nations? How can we design a curriculum based on the concept of “education into culture, not culture into education”. In our effort to address this question, too often we have simply performed band-aid solutions by merely adapting or supplementing the existing curriculum.

Nishinawbe Elder, Arthur Soloman, in his book "Songs for the People: Teachings on the Natural Way" gives us his perspective on cultural 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 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 that 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 the 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.

Twenty-eight years ago, Aboriginal people made a clear statement, an agenda, which called for a very particular kind of curriculum that would celebrate our cultures, our history---the true account of the way it was, the way it is. From there, we were to build on how it will be.

What have we done so far?

1. We have done some curriculum adaptation.
 2. We have created relevant materials.
 3. We teach Aboriginal languages.
 4. We have urban Aboriginal Schools
 5. We utilize Elders as resources.
 6. We have Early Childhood Programs.
 7. We have Aboriginal Libraries
 8. We have Cross-cultural courses in colleges and universities.
 9. We have Native/Aboriginal Teacher Education Programs.
 10. We have Native/Aboriginal Studies Courses/Departments.
 11. We have Aboriginal Programs such as Ts'kel Graduate Program, First Nations House of Learning (UBC), Medicine, (U of Man.), Counselling (Brandon U)
 12. We have Aboriginal Post-Secondary Institutions (SK Indian Federated College, Institute for Indigenous Government, Nicola Valley Institute of Technology, Red Crow College, Blue Quills College
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13. We have numerous studies, theses, dissertations on Aboriginal issues
14. We have organizations such as First Nations Education Steering Committee (BC First Nations Summit), Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre (Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs)
15. We have organizations such as the Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies (CAAS) (The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives), Crossroads 2000 (The Council for Canadian Unity), Canadian Education Association
16. We have an Aboriginal Television Station (APTN), radio programs
17. We have Aboriginal authors/books/journals
18. We have many Aboriginal Newspapers.
19. We have Aboriginal Resource Distributors (GoodMinds.com at Six Nations)
20. We have Cultural Education Centres across the country

This is an impressive list, is it not? Why, then, are we still floundering around, trying to identify cultural education for and about Aboriginal people. What is all this, if not cultural education?

I suggest that there is something very wrong with this scenario. Basically, I would say that the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. Educators, schools, colleges, universities, organizations are working in isolation. With the modern technology of today, we should have access to all this information. We have the makings of the kind of education that was spoken of in Indian Control of Indian Education. We have the wherewithal to help Aboriginal people to "Pick up the eagle Feather".

I would also suggest that cultural curriculum is available that is not being used.

What kind of study does this imply? That is where we go from here.

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