

A Reunion message to the graduates of the Hamilton Native Teachers Education/Training Program 1974-75.....by Verna J. Kirkness, July 2003

Indian Control of Indian Education: Three Decades Later

It is three decades since the policy of Indian Control of Indian Education came into effect. Is thirty years a long time? What can we expect after thirty years? Do Our People have control of education? And most importantly, do we have Aboriginal (Indian) education? You, who are here today, and have been in the teaching profession since the 1970s are probably in the best position to answer these questions.

In 1974, when we came to the Hamilton Native Teachers Education/Training program to present a few lectures on Indian Control of Indian Education, we heralded this landmark policy and were very excited about the possibilities it presented to change the face of Indian education.

As you will recall, Indian Control of Indian Education followed the startling report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indian Affairs (June 22, 1971) that 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 deceleration 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

This is the sad result of over 300 years of missionary and government administration of Indian education. The vision presented in Indian Control of Indian Education was to change that picture and put in place an education system based on Our Peoples' traditions and cultures. It states very clearly that:

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. The policy goes on to say:

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)

Let's just refresh our memories on other important concepts embedded in the policy of Indian Control of Indian education. Central to this policy are two education principles 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 that distinguishes the free political system of democratic governments from those of a totalitarian nature.

Indian Control of Indian Education was (is) a four-point policy "requiring determined and enlightened action in the areas of responsibility, programs, teachers and facilities".

(1) **Responsibility** -delineating parental and government responsibility. Parents were to have full responsibility and control of the design and implementation of the education of their children. The federal government was to provide funding for the education of Indians as per the treaties and the Indian Act.

(2) **Programs** – developing an Indian oriented curriculum that honours Indian traditions, history, cultures, values and contributions to Canadian society.

The late George Manuel, President of the National Indian Brotherhood (Assembly of First Nations) at that time, made the following observation about Indian education. He said:

"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 fellow men (women) in literature and social studies, and in the process, learn to respect the values and cultures of others.

An Indian philosophy of education 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 life-long commitment (Manuel, circa 1976).

(3) **Teachers and Counsellors** – The federal government must help to train Indian teachers and counselors. Non-Indian teachers and counselors must receive additional training to prepare them for cross-cultural situations and how to make curriculum more meaningful to Indian children. Finally, (4) **Facilities** – called for improved educational facilities.

Let us return now to the questions I raised earlier. Is thirty years a long time? I can hear a resounding “No!” Of course it isn’t, it represents little more than a generation. On the other hand, the missionaries and government had over 300 years to provide an effective education program for Indians and failed to do so. The government of the day needs to be reminded of this fact, as it is so ready to criticize our peoples’ efforts. I recall how Indian Affairs insisted on school evaluations just a year or two after the policy of Indian Control of Indian Education came into being. Meanwhile, evaluations were virtually unheard of when the Department of Indian Affairs ran the schools. Evaluations continue to be a requirement of Indian controlled schools and failure to conduct these evaluations can jeopardize the funding provided by Indian Affairs. (\$80,000)

What can we expect after thirty years? The short answer is that Aboriginal education would be very different from mainstream education and our high school completion rate would have improved dramatically.

This leads us to the fundamental questions of control and Aboriginal education. Do our people have control? Do we have Aboriginal education? The answer to each of these questions is again a resounding “No”. So why is this so? I attribute this to the fact that Indian Affairs right from the “getgo” did not or chose not to interpret the policy as was intended by Our People. We called for *Indian controlled schools*; Indian Affairs soon changed the terminology to *Band-operated schools*. To control and to operate are two entirely different concepts. “Control” connotes power and authority whereas “operate” connotes working on something already in place. In other words, Indian Affairs saw Indians running their programs. Meanwhile, that was precisely what was expected to change.

This led to the detrimental effect of dual administration. Indian Affairs, to this day, has never really let go. The colonial mentality has continued to play out. To take this a bit further, the obvious problem that led to this state of confusion was the Indian Act. The Act states that the federal government can enter into agreements with other governments (provinces), churches, charitable organizations for Indian education but there is no legal authority for government to enter into agreements with Indian Bands. In 1975, an effort was made to change the education section of the Indian Act to accommodate the policy of Indian Control of Indian Education. At the table, negotiating the changes were senior cabinet members (Trudeau) and the Executive Council of the National Indian Brotherhood, known as the Joint NIB/Cabinet Committee. It was an exciting time! However, the political machinery broke down and the task was never completed.

Our people have never had the opportunity to implement the policy to its fullest extent for two reasons. One was the government’s hold on Indian education referred to above; the other was/is our own insecurity, born of years of colonization, to define quality education for Our People based on our respective cultures. What we have been doing over the last thirty years has been emulating the old federal schools and public schools systems and simply including “bits” of our traditions and cultures into the curriculum by

band-aiding, adapting and supplementing when we should have been creating a unique and meaningful education. I guess we can say, we have been in a “**catch 22**” situation.

This presents an answer to our question, “**Do we have Aboriginal education?**” We have failed in thirty years to define Aboriginal education. Some may reply, “Well, we have done all we can under the circumstances”. Perhaps, that is so. We can still break the record that missionaries and the federal government set. But can we afford to take another 270 years to get this done? In fact, can we afford another ten years? About 70% of our Aboriginal population is under 15 years of age. And about that same percentage do not complete high school today. In 30 years, we have gone from a high school completion rate of 10% to 30%. We have a long way to go to achieve the vision set out in Indian Control of Indian education but we are making progress.

About ten years ago, I was invited to speak at a Treaty 7 Conference in Alberta on First Nations Education. It was well attended with a number of chiefs present from the treaty 7 territory. I decided to entitle my talk ***First Nations Education: Cut the Shackles, Cut the Crap and Cut the Mustard.*** This talk has appeared in a number of journals. To “cut the shackles” I stated that we must disestablish many of the theories and practices of the society that has dominated us for so many years. We must cut the shackles that bind us to Indian Affairs and provincial government thinking that is based on making us “in their image”. That has not worked! Instead we must release Our People from this bondage and create a kind of education that celebrates our cultures, our histories so our children can know and understand the way it was and the way it is. I believe *we must know the past to understand the present to plan for the future.*

Secondly, we must “cut the crap”. Here I refer to the rhetoric of the current day. It is common to hear our political leaders and educators speak very eloquently about the importance of education and what we must do to improve it not only for today but for future generations. We are good at talking about it but when it comes to action we fall short. For example, we have heard, read and even said many times over the last thirty years that quality education for Our People must be based on our cultures and on our history, yet we continue to base education on white urban, male, culture and history.

We say that language is culture and culture is language and that to be Ojibwe, Cree, Odawa, we must speak our respective languages yet we continue to teach our languages for only a few minutes a week in our schools while knowing that this approach is ineffective.

We say that our education must respect our values and customs, yet we encourage competition over cooperation, the individual over the group, saving over sharing, etc. Our people are uncomfortable when time is spent outdoors learning from the land because we have been conditioned to believe that education occurs in the classroom.

We say it is important to learn from the Elders as they are our connection to the past. They are our libraries, our archives and possess the wisdom and knowledge that must be the focus of all our learning. It is through them that we can understand our unique relationship to the Creator, our connection to nature, the order of things, and the values that enhance the identity of Our People. Not properly acknowledging the Elders is probably the most serious mistake we make as we attempt to create a quality education for Our People. Elders should be the focus of the changes we want to make yet we rarely engage them in a traditional way.

We talk also about the need for balance in our learning. We say that we must not only address the mind but we must address the spiritual, emotional and physical growth of the child as well. Is there evidence of this balance in your school?

The rhetoric goes on and on. There is no doubt that we have mastered the art of expressing important elements that should comprise Aboriginal education. Is there substance to the rhetoric? I believe that what we are saying is inarguable. The challenge we face is putting the rhetoric into action. That is why I advocate that we must first “cut the shackles”, then we must “cut the crap” and finally, we must “cut the mustard” and begin to “practice what we preach”.

To “cut the mustard”, we must return to the two education principles that formed the basis of Indian Control of Indian Education, namely, “parental responsibility and local control”. In fact, the whole community must be involved if meaningful change is to occur. This means mothers, fathers, grand parents, high school and post-secondary students must be aware of the current situation and examine the action/inactions that led to the education system as it exists today. Then together they must decide on a model of education excellence based on their beliefs and rooted in their respective cultures. Change can only occur when all the people of the community are involved. As it has been noted, “it takes a whole community to raise a child”. That is how it was traditionally. It is important to remember that answers to education for our respective communities are found in the community not elsewhere. **“The answers are within us”**.

While we have not achieved in thirty years what we set out to do in 1973, we have made strides in the right direction. The policy of Indian Control of Indian Education did open doors for greater involvement of Our People. As a result we have experienced a higher rate of student retention, improved attendance, inclusion of relevant curriculum, better graduation rates, development of early childhood and adult education programs and the teaching of our languages in our schools (Kirkness, Bowman, 1992).

In addition, our numbers of Aboriginal teachers and counselors continue to increase. Aboriginal graduates can be found in universities and colleges working as professors and instructors. Aboriginal expertise can be found in departments/ministries of education where they can affect policy development and curriculum. We have scholars who have produced studies based on sound research. We have written books.

There is no doubt that we have proven that “the answers are within us”.

As we look forward to another decade, confident in our knowledge of what Aboriginal education should be, and passionate enough to “cut the shackles” and to “cut the crap”, the picture in 2013 will show that Our People have chosen the fast track and a do-it agenda.

Those of you who began with the Hamilton Native Teachers Education/Training Program back in 1974-75 are entering another very important phase of your contribution to the education of Our People. You will be the new Elders. Your knowledge, experience and wisdom that include “the best of times and the worst of times” will be needed to continue this challenging journey in Aboriginal education. I wish you all the very best in your on-going endeavours.

Thank you for inviting me to share in your reunion and giving me the opportunity to reflect on Indian Control of Indian Education: Three Decades Later.