

Increasing/Raising/Examining Our Expectations of Aboriginal Learners

by

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ABSTRACT

As Aboriginal people, we have over the last thirty years, tried to influence change in education to make it meaningful, satisfying and even enjoyable to Aboriginal learners. Our expectation is that by providing an education that respects their cultural integrity, they will be successful. Educational institutions, (schools, colleges, universities, school divisions) for the most part, expect all students to come and partake of what the institution has to offer and to be successful.

It is, however, a well known fact, that when the learner's heritage and culture does not comply with the status quo, a "one-size fits all" does not work. In the case of the Aboriginal learner, history and culture has to be addressed if we expect them to fulfill their aspirations.

This presentation, then, will begin with an overview of where we have been in education, briefly outlining the history of Aboriginal education. In considering the present, we will look at how the institutions can be more effective in honouring our philosophy of education through a culturally responsive curriculum and culturally responsive teachers.

Traditional Indian Education

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.

Then came the change...

Colonial Domination

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 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. Most of the residential schools were phased out in the 1960s.

Residential Schools were devised as a means of isolating the Indian child from his parents and the influences of the reserve. As one government inspector stated in the mid 1800s: *Little can be done with him (the Indian child). He can be taught to do a little farming, and at stock raising, and to dress in a more civilized manner, but that is all. The child who goes to a day school learns little while his tastes are fashioned at home, and his inherited aversion to toil is in no way combatted* (Indian Affairs Branch, 1879-1880).

The residential schools were oppressive. Separated from their parents for long periods of time, the students, who ranged in age from three to eighteen, were subjected to a severe regimen. The boys were expected to clean the stables, attend to the livestock, mend broken machinery, and work in the fields. The girls had to attend to the upkeep of the school, washing and mending clothes, doing kitchen chores, scrubbing floors and doing other domestic duties. While former students of these schools do not take particular issue with such work, for many years it meant that the students only spent a half day in the classroom. What was provided was a very basic education designed to prepare the children for a domestic, Christian life.

The residential school was notable for its 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. Only recently, has the general public become aware of the true devastation suffered by many former residential school students as they reveal the physical, mental and sexual abuse encountered under this colonial regime.

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. It is evident that not only are those who actually attended these schools affected but so are their children and their communities. (Anecdote: my experience when invited to visit the site of the Brandon Residential School)

Federal Indian Day Schools

In the 1950s, there was a rise in the number of federally run Indian Day Schools to accommodate the closure of residential schools. A number of day schools did exist on reserves throughout the residential school era. According to the Treaties signed in the latter half of the 1800s, the federal government promised to build schools on reserves when requested by the Indian people. For the most part, these Federal Indian Day schools followed the provincial curriculum with no particular effort made to facilitate learning for Indian children. For example, while at the time, many Indian children entered school fluent only in their mother tongue, teaching in the child's language was forbidden as the strict policy of "English Only" was enforced. (Anecdote" Basal Readers had mainly foreign content)

The government decides on another approach...

Integration

Integration, as it occurred, can be described simply as the process of having Indian students attend public schools. In some cases, residential schools (in the 50s) were transformed into student residences and the students attended the nearest public school. In other cases, reserve day schools were closed and children were transported from their homes on reserves to adjacent public schools. By 1970s, the government of Canada has succeeded in making provisions for approximately 60% of Indian (First Nations) students in public schools. Today, the percentage is even higher. According to RCAP (1996), 70%

of Aboriginal children are taught in provincial and territorial 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. Joint school agreements were signed between the Federal government and the provincial school districts which included the sum of money per capita that the federal government would pay per child. For many years this trend continued and was perceived by First Nations as signing a blank cheque for which there was no accountability.

The late 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.*

Integration has been, in most schools," only a physical presence". This approach to education has not been one of true integration where the Indian cultures are respected and recognized. Rather, it has been a process of assimilation where Indians are being absorbed into the non-Indian society.

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. As stated in Indian Control of Indian Education, "integration viewed as a one-way process is not integration, and will fail. ...it has been the Indian student who has been asked to integrate: to give up his identity, to adopt new values and a new way of life".

Finally, a monumental breakthrough...

Indian Control of Indian Education

In the 1960s, Indian leaders began to speak out and react to the deplorable conditions of their people. In response to the educational concerns being raised by Indian people, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indian Affairs prepared a report on Indian education . This report, presented to Parliament on June 22, 1971, 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). Today, 62% of Aboriginal Manitobans have less than a high school education (StatsCan, 1996).

_A related unemployment rate averaging 50% for adult males, going as high as 90% in some communities. Today, Labour Force rates for Aboriginal Manitobans remains lower at all levels except for those who have completed university (StatsCan, 1996).

-“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.

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 (Indian Tribes of Manitoba, 1971).

In 1969 the Government of Canada issued a white paper on Indian policy, based on the elimination of the special status of Indians. The embittered provincial/territorial Indian organizations responded by issuing their respective position papers related to their ongoing relationships with the federal government which included treaties and Aboriginal rights as well as delineating their positions in education, housing, health, and in social and economic development.

In the wake of a school strike in North-east Alberta in 1971, protesting school facilities on reserves and the release of the Standing Committee Report, education was thrust to the forefront. The National Indian Brotherhood (now known as the Assembly of First Nations) established a working committee to prepare a national position in 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 philosophy of education is in many ways more valid and universal than the one which prevails in educational circles today. Instead of a one-sided view of history, we want our children to learn a Canadian history which 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 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).

As I look back over the years, I'm amazed at how consistent, we, Aboriginal people have been in articulating a common philosophy with goals and objectives. The 1972 policy of Indian Control of Indian Control Education resonates through all the succeeding studies such as *Tradition and Education: A Vision of Our Future* (AFN, 1988) and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1996).

ICIE (1972) states: "Unless a child learns about the forces which shape him: the history of his people, their values, their customs, their language, he will never really know himself or his potential as a human being. ...The present school system is culturally alien to native students. Where the Indian contribution is not entirely ignored, it is often cast in an unfavourable light. School curricula in federal and provincial schools should recognize Indian culture, values, customs, languages and the Indian contribution to Canadian development".

Tradition and Education states (1988): "First Nations students have a right to education programs and services of the highest quality which incorporate culturally relevant content and academic skills....First Nations must control the development of curriculum materials...to ensure that they eliminate stereotypes about First Nations and teach pride in our heritage, provide cultural content and promote feelings of self-worth.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) recommend(ed) that:
Provincial and Territorial ministries require school boards serving Aboriginal students to implement a comprehensive Aboriginal education strategy, developed with Aboriginal parents, elders and educators, including

- goals and objectives to be accomplished during the international decade of Indigenous Peoples (1994-2004) {Note: there are points (a) to (k)}
- curriculum in all subject areas, that includes the perspectives, traditions beliefs and world view of Aboriginal Peoples
- education programs that combat stereotypes, racism, prejudice and biases

I came across a copy of Minister Jean Chretien's address to the Council of Ministers of Education dated June 23, 1972 (10 pages, single spaced). I was shocked but pleasantly surprised to find how informed the talk was. Speaking of integration, he said, "Integration interpreted as a unilateral change is not acceptable. It must recognize the contribution Indian culture and language have made to the Canadian way of life. If it does not, the school can serve no purpose in the child's world". Regarding curriculum, he acknowledges that there had been little recognition of the importance of cultural heritage in the learning process. He goes on to say, " We now know that it is desirable to foster cultural differences and to create a classroom climate in which the unique potential in each child will have the chance to emerge and develop".

To develop an appropriate curriculum for Aboriginal learners has been one of the greatest challenges, we, as educators, have had to face. While sincere efforts have been made to create a meaningful education for our people based on our world view and rooted in the cultures of our respective nations, I don't believe we have identified what really works. The evidence of this is found in the high attrition rate of Aboriginal high school students. The data indicates that in 1971, 96% of Aboriginal students did not complete high school and in 1996, 62% did not complete. This is a very modest improvement over a thirty year period. So we are still left with the question, "How do we design a 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?" This is a critical approach as 70 % of Aboriginal students are in public schools.

What are some of the things we have done so far?

(1) my experience in the Curriculum Branch (1968-1971)

...social studies supplements

...native language pilot project/ PENT

...Bibliography of resources for and about Indian people – still continuing

(2) Native Education Branch (twig)

...didn't like the idea of centralizing/ghetoizing

...was great at its height (Flora Zaharia)

Examples: Developed the TAWOW Kit, developed teaching materials (languages, science, math, etc., provided resource people to schools

(3) Native Education Directorate

...decentralized – you know the rest of the story better than I.

New curriculum-need Ph.D to understand it.

-Believed to lend itself to inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives/ world view (MFNERC- have Aboriginal consultants working with teachers in Band Schools on the new provincial curriculum.

Another attempt to address what is taught/learned by Aboriginal students is the creation of urban schools such as Niji-Makwa and Children of the Earth. Is there something to be learned from these schools that can be incorporated into other public schools?

WHAT WE TEACH IS IMPORTANT! Curriculum

WHO TEACHES IS ALSO IMPORTANT! Teachers

We can create the ideal curriculum for Aboriginal learners but if the teachers are not familiar with Aboriginal peoples and cultures, nothing changes. Ignorance is excusable if teachers just have not been exposed to cultures other than their own. However, it is our

expectation that universities that provide teacher education will prepare teachers for cross-cultural school situations. In 1972, in Indian Control of Indian Education, we asked that, “During initial training programs, there should be compulsory courses in inter-cultural education, native languages and teaching English as a second language. In 1988, Tradition and Education stated, “ ... mandatory cross-cultural training for all non-Native and First Nation staff must be provided by teacher training institutions”. RCAP (1996) recommended that Provinces and Territories require teacher education programs to (1) “include at least one component on teaching Aboriginal subject matter to all students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal in their teacher education programs”. They further recommended that programs be implemented that would combat stereotypes, racism, prejudices and biases. After this consistent request over thirty years, I do not know of any university teacher education program that has a compulsory course that would help teachers better understand Aboriginal learners.

There is a huge increase in the number of Aboriginal teachers today. Many are working in Band Schools and very few can be found in provincial/public schools. There are many sad stories told by Aboriginal teachers who have attempted this experience. They face the same alienation/discrimination that the children do. This suggests that much work has to be done to sensitize school divisions to the need for culturally sensitive/responsive teachers.

The approach to Aboriginal learners has to change from the “deficit paradigm” of “blaming the victim”, and labelling them as “deprived”, “disadvantaged” or “at risk”, that somehow they need to be fixed to fit in with society. Instead, the teachers (the education system) must acknowledge what the Aboriginal learner brings from his/her culture and build upon that knowledge for the good of all students. The deficit paradigm perpetuates the stereotype and the self-fulfilling prophecy continues and our children continue to leave.

I will conclude with the late Elder Arthur Soloman’s perspective on cultural education. It

is recorded in his book entitled, “Songs for the People: Teachings on the Natural Way”.

The traditional way of education was by example and experience and 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 humans
Or animals or plants.

But in the course of history there came the disruption
And the education became “compulsory education”
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.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you.

Revise later

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