

Empowerment of First Nations through Education

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This was an empowering experience! We have just spent 3 to 5 days together thinking about/discussing the education of our people, the First Nations of North America.

- * Many very important statements have been made.
- * Many difficult questions have been raised. We have asked What? not Why? What suggests looking ahead.....action! We spent many years asking Why? I believe we had to.....Now, we are at a different stage -- now we ask What. Action is empowerment.

The colloquium on Saturday and Sunday dealt with questions related to "*Native Teachers in the Classroom*". A number of research studies were presented. I made a lot of notes intending to use them extensively tonight. I've decided not to -- at least not directly. It is sufficient to say that the research supports the general view held by First Nations that: "*First Nations teachers are critical to the realization of quality education for our people*". Key words used were: Trust, culture, values, experience, relevance, pace, rhythm, humour, expectations, role models, language.

I have believed that First Nations teachers are the key to our progress for many years. Back when I started teaching in 1954, there were very few First Nations teachers in Canada -- there may have been six in my province (Manitoba). Today, there may be 1500 First Nations teachers in Canada, many more in the Lower 48 and an increasing number here in Alaska. With this trend, there is hope (empowerment) for our future generations.

However, as was pointed out several times, "*Being a Native teacher is no picnic*". As First Nations teachers we are continually pressured to conform to prescribed teaching practices of western society. A good First Nations teacher is one who resists conforming; is courageous; is strong in his/her own beliefs as to what constitutes a good education, and practices good First Nations pedagogy.

So, I say to First Nations teachers:

- (1) Continue to follow your instincts; you know what works and what doesn't.
- (2) Continue to pass on the culture, the values, the language, the traditions, the love and respect of your people.
- (3) Continue to laugh and make learning a part of everyday life.
- (4) Continue to use your community as your library, your archives, your resource centre.

- (5) Continue to use your elders, parents, young people as teachers. In the way of our people "*everyone is a teacher and everyone is a learner*".
- (6) Continue, through your teaching to legitimize the reality of your people; to create knowledge that is part of the learner's cultural capital.

This is what Paulo Friere, a Brazilian educator advocates. If not, he says, all we do is teach the thinking of the dominant culture; thereby perpetuating that culture. Empowerment is based on creating knowledge that will help us to make sense of our life-world.

Ira Shor, a colleague of Friere's, wrote a book called "Culture Wars". In his book, he suggests that the education system provides an arena in which different groups with different conceptions of what is important to know, fight it out; so to speak. The culture that ultimately finds its ways into the school is the result of these battles. I believe we are in a culture war! You as First Nations teachers are cultural warriors. There are other cultural warriors in our midst; some have gone on. Chief Dan George makes reference to warriors. In his book, "My Heart Soars", he says:

There is a longing in the heart of my people to reach out and grasp what is needed for our survival; there is a longing among the young of my Nation to secure for themselves and their people the skills that will provide them with the sense of worth and purpose. They will be our new warriors - their training will be much longer and more demanding than in the olden days. The long years of study will demand more determination, separation from home and family will demand endurance - but they will emerge with their hand held forward, not to receive welfare but to grasp the place in society that is rightly ours. I am a Chief, but my power to make war is gone, and the only weapon I have left to me is speech, it is only with tongue and speech that I can fight my people's war.

In a similar vein, Chief Dave Courchene, one of the leading cultural warriors of the 70's in Manitoba made this statement:

"Education is the golden key to the future and the educated is its protector. To our Indian students I say that you must take advantage of all the education offered you because our forefathers gave up the entire country so that the right would be yours. Our people need you like never before. You have an entrusted obligation to return to their midst, prepared to fight for the cause--your weapon being education and your shield being determination.....We have placed a sacred trust in you--with education, positive views, and constructive action you have an obligation to prepare our people for the exodus to independence."

To the First Nations teachers of Alaska, I want to say, I believe you are closer to achieving the quality of education you want for your children. It is evident that your cultures; your languages are much more alive than in many other situations. That puts you further ahead. Where our languages are lost, or nearly lost, our struggle is great. But our hope lies in recovery of our languages; our cultures.

At the present time, we all stand in the middle zone. Circle A represents the western world, Circle B represents the First Nations world. Where these circles intersect is the zone we're in. We can call it a war zone or a peace zone. As we do battle, let us not forget our allies -- use them! Sometimes we alienate the very people who can help us. In Alaska, I believe you have allies -- people in high places who know and who understand your hopes and aspirations.

They understand where we are coming from. They know that "many teaching practices implicitly assume that conceptual knowledge can be abstracted from the situation in which it is learned and used. They know that this assumption inevitably limits the effectiveness of such practices. They know that recent research into cognition as it is manifest in everyday activity argues that *knowledge is situated*, being in part the product of the activity, the context and culture in which it is developed and used. (Educational Researcher 1989.)

As First Nations teachers, we do have a challenge. Our people have faced many challenges over the years.

"Our grandfathers faced and endured physical violence of wars, famine, and disease. They survived. We endured the social violence of legal disabilities and administrative oppression. We survived. Our past history and our faith in the future are united. We are neither the beginning nor the end." (George Manuel - Fourth World)

So we press on with hope and love and in the comfort that we stand together, you in Alaska, others in the Lower 48 and us in Canada.

I will close with the words of Chief John Snow of the Stoney Indians of Alberta.

"As I look across this beautiful valley, it seems I am looking across the next one hundred years. I am reassured about our future because I have faith in the Great Spirit, the Creator, and I am reminded of the Hebrew prophet of old and I repeat;

*They that wait upon the Great Spirit shall renew their strength,
They shall mount up with wings as eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint. (Is. 40:31)*

The old path is a proven path to travel on; it has withstood the test of time, not only over centuries, but over thousands of years. This is the path my ancestors walked on and it shall be the path my future generations will walk on. It is the path of the Great Spirit, the Creator.

It is the path of empowerment.

Thank you for this opportunity to visit your land and to talk to you.

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