

STATE OF FIRST NATIONS LEARNING

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by

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STATE OF FIRST NATIONS LEARNING AND EDUCATION

Purpose and Objectives of Report

This report responds to a call from the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) to support the developmental work of the Aboriginal Learning Centre of CCL with a review of literature that would identify the context, learning issues, challenges, and gaps of First Nations (FN) peoples using the literature drawn from research among FN reserves and communities across Canada. In so doing, the review supports CCL's efforts to identify the priorities for the Aboriginal Learning Centre and complements similar literature reviews being conducted among the Inuit and the Métis of Canada. The controlling purpose of report was to offer a discussion paper that would engage discussion among Aboriginal peoples firstly and among non-Aboriginal support allies in the learning and funding priorities for the CCL's Aboriginal Learning Centre.

Some preliminary points must be made about the effectiveness of conducting a literature review on FN learning and programming. The first point is that FN education is the result of federal policy embraced in Indian Control of Indian Education and is funded primarily through federal funds to FN schools. All provinces have control of education for all its citizens, and for FN who are residing off reserve and attending provincial schools, whether they live on reserve or not.

In some areas, the federal government buys provincial education services for resident FN students of FN reserves then manages its fiduciary responsibilities to Indians (FN) primarily through funding of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) that administers its programs to FN. They also support education and postsecondary education as well as support other initiatives dealing with such programmes as FN Cultural Centres, teacher- training programs for FN in several universities and colleges, and First Nations University of Canada, all of which fall under their policy on Indian Control of Indian Education of 1972.

Secondly, this literature review on FN education was not intended to be comprehensive, but rather was intended to draw on research that had been conducted in FN communities and draws on their voices, assessments and visions, and not intended to draw on all available literature on the topic.

Rather it was intended to identify the resonating themes and consensus that most FN communities might choose as they identify their own concerns, issues, gaps, challenges, and recommendations.

It should also be noted that this work was conducted from English-only documents a process that contaminates the process of seeking consensus among all language groups in Canada when working outside of the diverse languages.

The documents from the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, the *Canada-Aboriginal Roundtables*, and Assembly of First Nations represent FN

Finally, given that this report is intended to focus on learning, the literature on the topic of FN learning is sparse, as it has not been well documented or well understood, rather more focus in the literature has been on identification of the diverse educational contexts of FN communities, past and present; diverse experimental programming, including statistical accounts, success features and stories, and needs; and gaps in provincial and territorial learning and education policy, programming, and assessments.

Since the results of this paper and the discussions resulting from them will lead to anticipated thematic priority areas for Aboriginal learning and then research and study of these areas under the Canadian Council of Learning funding program, this leads to another area of concern that has not been fully addressed in the documents. This is a leading concern of research methods and practices of contemporary and past research that have long come under scrutiny from Aboriginal peoples worldwide.

The protection of Indigenous peoples has raised concern about what is researched, how it is researched, who controls research, who benefits from research, who is involved in the research and in the analysis of the data, and how the research is disseminated. Of particular concern is the issue surrounding cultural knowledge and Indigenous knowledge.

research by First Nations and it is assumed they represent the voices of FN peoples for this report.

Any framework for understanding or protecting particular perspectives of Indigenous knowledge must be contextual, decentralized, and respectful of the linguistic categories, rules, and relationships unique to each knowledge system. Furthermore, the modern issue of how best to conceptualize Indigenous knowledge must be handled with great sensitivity because of problems with the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge in the past.

The paper identifies factors, issues and programmes that may enter into the discussions about learning priorities among FN reserves and communities to provide a basis for discussion, guidance and action in relation to Aboriginal learning priorities. Some exemplary practices have been identified as well as the context of FN learning, past and present; the learning challenges and gaps, and areas where improvement in learning and programming need to be strengthened. Finally, the report offers the foundational principles upon which these successes have been created.

Unfortunately, this paper does not document the innovative programs and work being done in FN schools as this assessment would require extensive evaluative research at the local and national level.

The researchers gratefully acknowledge the editorial assistance of Don Cochrane, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Educational Foundations and Sajej Henderson of the Native Law Centre.

Terminology

Terms such as **First Nations and Aboriginal** have been used in this study that relate to the people from the land.

First Nations refers to those peoples who have Aboriginal rights or a treaty relationship with Canada and who have their collectivities represented with a local government defined as Bands under the *Indian Act*.

Aboriginal is used in the *Constitution Act* of Canada 1982 and refers to Canada's acknowledgement of three groups, including Indians (status and non-status), Métis, and Inuit.

Métis refer to people of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry who self-identify and who can trace their lineage through recognized Métis settlements.

Education has been equated with learning, schooling or other formal structures of formal education. Yet many kinds of learning exist, including “informal or primary socialization that takes place for the most part before a child enters school but continues through life; formal education, whose most distinctive characteristic is the credentialing or certification of persons for eventual gainful employment, and structured non-formal education, which is primarily for the personal enrichment of individuals irrespective of whether it takes place in institutional or less formal settings (Zachariah, 1999, p.118).

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“Despite the painful experiences Aboriginal people carry with them from formal education systems, they still see education as the hope for the future and they are determined to see education fulfill its promise” (RCAP, 1996, 3:434).

INTRODUCTION

First Nation (FN) population is growing nearly three times faster than the non-First Nation population (Statistics Canada, 2004). With a multifaceted, growing demographic rate for FN population, a tragedy looms if the educational systems do not correct the educational failures affecting FN students. While Canadian educators pursue this agenda, many have attempted to address these failures by focusing on integration and assimilation based on Canadian values. These long-time and on-going strategies have been repeatedly critiqued for adversely affecting FN peoples with multiple costs to their lives and, in particular, to their distinctive knowledge, heritages, and ways of learning and knowing can only survive with their FN languages and their identities and cultures intact.

FN communities across Canada have begun the process of restoring traditional belief systems and practices that rest on a renewal of FN languages, cultural identities, and a reconstruction from the history of colonization. While many factors contribute to the revitalization of FN knowledge, the renewal and Indigenous renaissance taking place throughout Canada can be attributed, in part, to the work done in the last few decades within FN education and among Indigenous leaders, elders, and scholars. Since the early 1970s, FN leaders,

educators, and community members have fought to regain control of the education of their children. In a relatively short time, this has resulted in numerous positive developments in FN education, yet, despite these successes, many issues remain unresolved. As a result, the education development of FN youth continues to advance more slowly than other Canadian youth.

This report to the Canadian Council on Learning draws on research from a wide variety of resources and perspectives. It attempts to animate the hopes and dreams of FN people across Canada who envision a transformation of FN education. It includes community-based research on FN education such as, *Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of Our Future* (1988), *The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP, 1996), along with subsequent recent developments such as the *Canada-Aboriginal Peoples' Roundtables* (2004). The scope of this report includes the perspectives of FN Elders, leaders, educators, and community members from across Canada.

The research reviewed reveals disparities that reflect the unresolved legacy of a colonial past, a past that witnessed active and aggressive policies of oppression, segregation, and assimilation sanctioned by the federal government. Assimilative strategies have affected and continue to affect the social and cultural lives of FN peoples with trans-generational disruptions that do not build the needed capacity for individual and collective development and action but cause related problems, many of which have been found in the policy repercussions surrounding residential schools.

Many of the recommendations for change reverberated in the studies, as in *Tradition and Education* (1988), *RCAP Gathering Strength* (1996), and a decade later in the *Canada-Aboriginal Peoples' Roundtables* (2004), suggesting the implementation of necessary recommendations have been slow and inconsistent.

These recommendations have been dealing with systematic discrimination and structure issues, but have been inadequate in address the unique learning development of FN students, whether youth or adult. These developmental issues are not intellectual capacity or inferiority of FN students, they are systematic discriminatory educational systems and bias against them and their achievement.

For many years, FN have stated the belief that education is a lifelong process that must be shared in a holistic manner given the spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual dimensions of human development. At each stage of life, important transitions need to be addressed to ensure that FN learners have every opportunity to move successfully along the continuum. Further, the extent to which the cultural and developmental needs of FN learners are met will have an impact on learning outcomes, on their own lives individually and collective well being of their communities.

CONTAMINATED HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

For FN people, colonization is not just a legacy of the past, but it continues to manifest itself in contemporary society every day. The Eurocentric foundations of colonization are solidly entrenched in

the political, social, economic, educational, and spiritual frameworks that continue to marginalize and encroach on FN knowledge, belief systems, and way of life. Schools for Indian students were founded on the assumption that assimilation to English traditions and values offer the easiest avenue toward assimilation into white communities.

The legacy of the reserve system, the *Indian Act*, the pass system, and the residential school system challenge many FN people today. Issues such as poverty, cognitive, cultural and social dissonance, trauma, youth suicide, substance abuse, disproportionate incarceration rates, and low graduation rates from high school continue to afflict FN communities. Along with these significant challenges, the ignorance and indifference of Canadian society of the worldview, histories and cultures of FN people, their contributions and potentials in Canada, constitutes a travesty that manifests itself in prejudice, racism, and illusions of superiority. These illusions reinforce failed assimilation and create special learning challenges.

The effects of colonial policies such as the residential school system on the well being of FN children, youth, families, and communities are not widely recognized. This ignorance, found in the inadequate telling of history, and the absence of FN worldview, ways of knowing and knowledge in Canadian schools, and misinformation and misconceptions generated by the media, continues today. Most Canadians believe that colonization and racism are issues of the past when, in fact, they have become the biggest challenges within the system of education today.

Impact of Education Systems

As a force in human development, education systems lie at the base of achieving effective self-knowledge, self-confidence, self-respect and self-sufficiency in order to attain a healthy society, a stable culture, and self-government.

Since 1970, considerable study, theory, and practice have emerged on the quality and effectiveness of education for FN people in Canada. Some reports dealt with policy and resources, some with rights and responsibilities, and some with structures and programs.

While FN have been given limited access to setting up formal educational centers, the organizational structure, teacher training, curriculum development, and set of standards created for these institutions continues to be determined by the provinces, with some devolution to local school boards. This lack of empowerment affects the life experiences, opportunities, and capacity of FN people who continue to be affected while these issues go unresolved.

In 2004, the Auditor General of Canada reported that FN students were 28 years from parity with the general population in provincial schools. While FN youth are graduating at a much higher rate than previously, they lag far behind the Canadian population.

Three questions evolved from the Canada-Aboriginal Peoples' Roundtables (2004);

- Why are FN students less successful in completing their education than other Canadian students?

- How can schools improve their delivery of programming to FN students?
- What is needed to improve success?

Trying to answer to these questions has led to much thought, dialogue, research, and study nationwide.

Failure to Learn from the Past

With so many sincere efforts to change the quality of FN education, why are the overall results disappointing?

According to the RCAP (1996), federal policy has been moving in the right direction, but the authorities failed to take the decisive steps necessary to restore full control of FN education to FN people. The report indicates that nearly 70% of FN education remains in the hands of provincial or territorial authorities, with few mechanisms for effective accountability to FN people and involvement of parents. It also contends that FN people have been restricted in their efforts to implement curricula that would transmit their linguistic and cultural heritage to the next generation. Finally, the restructuring needed to reverse the impact of past policies has been inadequate. According to the *Report Of The Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous People* (2004),

FN education does not receive the resources it requires at the federal and provincial levels resulting in uneven capacities, curriculum, and programming that result in high drop-out rates, low educational attainment, and uneven-quality schooling for FN students. Despite Canada's long track record in multicultural education, FN heritage, knowledge and cultures are not yet adequately represented in educational resources and in the provincial curriculum. Furthermore, Canadian society has not yet accomplished the necessary power sharing to enable FN people to be authors of their own education. This suggests that there are persistent learning barriers and policy to be addressed if education for FN people is to change. Many current educational policies continue unreflectively to re-infect the wounds of the past with the neglect of the issues of colonization or in their misidentification of the problems and solutions.

Healing and Transformation

Many Indigenous scholars and elders believe that the solutions are first to be found in the economic viability for creating healthy families and the healing of youth and individuals within these communities, through the revitalization of FN language, knowledge, and traditions, and through the reconnections with their learning practices of their communities. This learning and healing require the restoration of balance, harmony, and peace in all areas of life. Learning centers need to be a place for healing and transformation, and changes within current systems of education can only occur when FN knowledge and practices are acknowledged as valid and respectfully included in all aspects of educational reform. The solution also

comes from First Nation people having control over the education of their own people and significant participation in the transformations of educational systems and programs. Correcting the colonial context will require ongoing and active critical analysis on behalf of educators to ensure that research, policy, and practices are done by and in collaboration with FN people.

AREAS OF PRIORITY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING IN FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION

Research indicates that significant disparities exist in the development of innovative educational programming for First Nation people. Some models are exemplary. However, despite the continued support for change within the education system, many challenges in each of the educational areas remain of early childhood, elementary and secondary, and postsecondary education.

Early Childhood Education

Much of the research done on FN education points to Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs as the foundation for generating a positive learning experience for FN students. Early childhood development, including prenatal health, is considered the most important stage in the lifelong learning continuum as it provides the developmental foundation for all later learning and increases the likelihood of educational successes (*A Challenge Worth Meeting*, 2004). Much evaluative evidence exists that demonstrates the improvement of developmental outcomes of children and the enhancement of learning outcomes.

Research has provided a strong base to inform ECE program design and delivery. Language immersion and language nests modeled on the exemplary work of the Maori of New Zealand and the Hawaiian Puna Leo programs have been found to be especially effective in ECE. The primary objective of FN pre-school education programs is to provide children with a positive self-concept, a desire for learning, and opportunity to develop social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills. An opportunity for FN to do so in a community-oriented fashion is the key to the successful implementation of a pre-school program.

Life circumstances are equally important as ECE. The prenatal health of both mother and child is critical to postnatal development. While improvements have been made in FN neonatal health, significant concerns remain, especially in rural areas where health services and nutrition are limited. FN women and children are at greater risk for compromised fetal and infant development, a condition that may affect their child's developmental progress.

Parental and community supports are equally important factors in ensuring the developmental foundation needed in early childhood. These circumstances not only affect a student's ability to learn, but also his or her ability to participate in the life of their communities. While all provinces and territories have maternal/child programming in place and investments in early childhood development have increased, only 20% of eligible FN children are able to participate in programs such as Head Start, a program that has been demonstrated to have a

significant positive long-term impact (*Canada-Aboriginal Peoples' Roundtable*, 2004). ECE is not available in most FN communities.

Researchers, service providers, and practitioners need to consider seriously the issue of FN Early Childhood Development. Children of today will be the leaders of strong and influential communities tomorrow, and the early years of these children will form the foundation of that future (*Building a Community of Communities*, 2005).

Primary and Secondary Schooling

FN people want education to serve as a vehicle for cultural and economic renewal, but this cannot happen without fundamental changes in education processes and systems. Evidence of this from the 2001 Census include the following:

- 51% of the FN population has less than a high school graduation certificate compared to 31% of Canadians.
- Only 23% of FN individuals hold a post-secondary certificate/degree/diploma compared to 38% of the Canadian working-age population.
- Approximately 48% of Registered Indians (both on and off reserve) and 53% of Registered Indians on-reserve between the ages of 15-24 are not attending school compared to 37% of all Canadians in this age group (*Canada Aboriginal People's Roundtable*, 2004, p.5).

The *Roundtables on Lifelong Learning* (2004) noted that the transition from elementary to secondary school appears to be one of the most critical passages for FN students in general. The problem seems to be more acute in the western provinces and among FN males.

FN young people are most likely to withdraw between Grades 9 and 10. Some reasons for their withdrawal have been identified: feelings of alienation after spending eight years in a school system that does not support their identity as FN; lack of FN languages, cultures, history and political issues in school environment and curriculum; lack of parental and community involvement especially where there are no local high schools; encountering racist attitudes that undermine self-esteem; the current emphasis of the public school system on intellectual cognitive achievement at the expense of spiritual, social and physical development; and the marginalization of youth in decision making about their education (*Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable*, 2004).

Many specific concerns emerge from the current inability of federal, provincial, and territorial education systems to provide FN people with access to high-quality formal education at levels equal to those of non- FN Canadians. As an institution of mandatory socialization, the educational system values nationalistic “mainstreaming” over more contextualized individualized learning strategies. When viewed from a cultural context, mainstreaming represents assimilation and the loss of a distinctive cultural identity.

Provincial schools have varied success with FN students. In some locations where a high number of FN students attend public schools, boards have implemented programs that have included FN culture and language, environmental learning and welcomed the parents and community members into the educational process. In Toronto, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg, school boards have established urban Aboriginal schools that are demonstrating some successes.

RCAP noted that, while there has been progress in keeping on-reserve children in school to the grade 12-level, the retention rates are still lower than the Canadian standard. Several key factors contribute to the success of FN students, including accommodating languages, curriculum design, FN control, and community involvement.

The majority of provincial schools, however, do not provide programming that would include FN students and their families into the life of the school. While formal education outcomes have improved for FN people between 1996 and 2001, persistent variances in learning remain.

Public schooling has not wholly ignored Aboriginal content. In the many provinces and territories, many if not most schools have taken on the task of finding ways to make their curricula inclusive. But in so doing, mainstream knowledge has not been questioned or reconsidered; rather, the FN history and knowledge is acknowledged as “a” knowledge that FN students may benefit from, but not “the” knowledge that would reach all students. The “add and stir” model of education does little to empower students and reconcile their position in society nor does it provide the needed foundation for students to find the awareness or means to overcome the root problems of their oppression.

Some provincial governments and school boards have begun to implement initiatives that might create a more positive learning environment for First Nation students, such as plans to hire more Aboriginal staff, to review current curriculum, to support continuous learning of teachers, and to develop alternative programs for students who feel alienated by traditional forms of education.

Post-Secondary Education

Post-secondary education provides successful student learning in secondary education with entry into vocational and professional roles that are valued and rewarded in Canadian society (Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2002).

Post-secondary institutions have often been heralded for their freedom of expressions and thought and their ability to nurture individual talents and passions, with the reward of the promise of a better life. In the Canadian labor

force as a whole, people with higher levels of education can generally expect to benefit from higher levels of labor force participation, a higher probability of employment, and higher levels of earned income. The income discrepancy between FN and non-FN people tends to diminish as the level of education improves. This means that investments in education improve economic outcomes and can reduce inequities in the system (RCAP, 1996). For FN people living in poverty, this promise becomes the hope for families and communities to attain a better quality of life.

Until 1950 under the *Indian Act*, only those FN individuals who relinquished their status as an Indian person and became ‘enfranchised’ could attain a post-secondary education. FN people are now claiming that the pursuit of higher education should not mean a choice between assimilation and ancestral identity. In contemporary post-secondary education, the challenge is to enhance FN knowledge, heritage, culture, and teaching.

Today, many more FN are attending post-secondary institutions than previous generations. Also, many adults have had their education interrupted to care for families, return to schools as mature learners, and go on to professional careers (Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2002).

While statistics indicate that more FN were graduating from university, the FN completion rates had grown from 7 percent to 11 percent in 2001 but still does not meet the Canadian average of 26% (Statistics Canada, 2004). The increased disparity is repeated in completion rates in technical and college programs. This is particularly disturbing in a global economy that demands increasingly higher levels of formal education.

It is important to understand the conditions that contribute to the persistence of inequitable education outcomes and to create strategies that support Aboriginal student success in post-secondary education (Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000). Economic opportunity, educational reforms, role models, and the need for Aboriginal control are critical to the success of Aboriginal education (RCAP, 1996, Vol. 2).

It is clear that further collaboration between First Nation communities and educational centers will be essential to improve post-secondary education. Without minimizing the issue of jurisdiction, it is necessary for FN to work with provincial and territorial school systems to better serve the 70% or more First Nation students who are in provincial systems.

The Native Law Centre at the University of Saskatchewan is one frequently mentioned exemplar. When the program in legal studies for Aboriginal people was started at the U of S, as far as could be determined, only four lawyers and five law students were of Aboriginal ancestry in Canada. Of the estimated 800 Aboriginal lawyers in Canada today,

most were introduced to the skills-based study of law through the legal studies program of the Native Law Centre.

University-level education has been developed with a similar FN focus in other centres such as the Indian teacher education programs across many colleges of education, First Nations University of Canada, the Nunavut Arctic College, and the Nisga'a House of Wisdom (Stavenhagen, 2004).

Teacher Preparation

In an effort to improve their results, some school boards have sought to recruit and hire FN teachers and cross-cultural professionals and experts such as Elders and cultural knowledge holders. It has been assumed that FN educators know what is needed, and they can provide a wealth of necessary resources and knowledge. However, FN teachers are a diverse lot who represent many experiential locations, stresses, identity issues, historical and familial connections to colonialism, but more importantly, FN or not, they have been trained in the same teacher training institutions as all other teachers. They receive the same Eurocentric mainstreamed education as other teachers, but are expected to be the solution to the systemic issues affecting students' disaffection with education. Some teachers may speak the students' native language, but they receive little or no language methodologies and cultural pedagogies in conventional teacher preparation. Few universities offer the theories or methodologies, or protocols on learning diverse skills capable of withstanding multiple forces of racism with caring, love, and respect.

Adult Education and Skills Development

Secondary school completion rates remain at seriously low levels as previously noted. As previously mentioned, many factors have been identified as causing this long-standing problem. Not surprisingly, many of these youth return to school as adults wanting to complete their education in order to go on to post-secondary institutions or into the work force. However, many of these adults also have added family and economic responsibilities that make it difficult to return to mainstream school systems.

While some programs in urban centers help support FN returning to complete their education, many inequities remain. Some education centers offer Adult 10 and Adult 12 programs to students who have been ill served by their elementary or secondary education. These programs, however, can be difficult to access and are more likely found only in urban centers, although typically these centres do not focus on FN learning theory.

Statistics reveal that, in spite of some positive advances in adult education programs, more FN students complete non- university programs than university programs. A pressing need continues for more program development and learning theory in adult education. Where FN-run programs do exist, they survive on unstable project funding. This often discourages program and curriculum development. Student funding is also frequently a problem for FN students.

FN adult education centers and technical institutes have often made progress in spite of funding cuts. These institutes are important resource centers that have

become a support for FN adults who seek to complete their education. Aboriginal programs in academic upgrading, adult basic education and literacy succeed when they include elements that strengthen Aboriginal identity and self-esteem and build support networks among the students for them to be successful.

The concept of providing work-study re-entry programs for high-school dropouts has also been used with marked success by some FN. Courses and credits can be obtained by students in employment skills like carpentry, business, accounting and basic academic skills such areas as English, mathematics, and science. These programs can be integrated into the community and encourage students to re-enter high school or go directly into advanced post-secondary training. Bridging FN students and developing appropriate learning theory need to be established among all institutions, whether they are secondary schools or adult education programs.

BUILDING CAPACITY: THE CROSS CUTTING ISSUES

Culture and Language Revitalization

The destiny of a people is intricately bound to the way its children are educated, and for this reason, control over the education of their children has been a pressing priority for FN people. FN people want education to prepare them to participate in Canadian society, but know that education must also develop children and youth as citizens who can linguistically and culturally assume the responsibilities of their nation (RCAP, 1996, Vol.3: 434).

The needed skills for a life of long learning go beyond academic preparation and attend to critical learning, environmental learning, knowledge of traditional protocols, learning through oppressive conditions and cultural conflicts, spirituality, revitalization, artistic and creative expressions, language and philosophy. Current education policies and practices fail to realize these learning goals. The majority of FN youth does not complete high school and leave their education without the skills for employment, and without the language and cultural knowledge of their people. At the centre of this crisis is a lack of understanding of FN student learning.

Consistent with FN traditions, FN people believe education must develop the child in a holistic manner—intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Traditional FN methodology of teaching and learning must be taken into consideration. It is imperative that FN place education into culture rather than continuing the practice of placing culture into education (*Tradition and Education*, Vol. 1, 1988).

Those who continue in Canada's formal education system face regular encounters of systemic racism, not only expressed in interpersonal exchanges but also through the educational denial of FN values, perspectives, and cultures in the curriculum and the structure of the institution. The cost of the failure of these institutions to address the needs of FN people is immeasurable, diminishing the creative potential of individuals and communities throughout Canada.

Culturality and Learning

Indigenous knowledge cannot be separated from an individual's relationship with the language of their people, the land on which they live, or the beliefs of their community. Elders contend that language and culture cannot be taught from a blackboard. FN students must be immersed in their culture in order for them to truly develop a clear understanding of the language, knowledge, and wisdom of their people. Language is the dynamic container that encompasses FN knowledge, learning, and a historical and spiritual relationship with the land. Learning from the land is understood as being more than knowledge of the physical geography; it is becoming in tune with the energy that reverberates from all living things on the land—the animal life, plant life, as well as the people. It is the interconnectedness of the relationship between all things that pose a challenge for FN peoples to adapt the holistic nature of their language, knowledge, and culture into a fragmented contemporary society.

The institutional nature of Canadian culture, particularly in education, has divided language, knowledge, learning, and skill development into compartments, which are taught and learned separately. Consequently, the learning is one of division and fragmentation rather than interdependence.

FN continue to resist assimilation because it would mean the end of a synchronicity of time and place, language and knowledge, and a spiritual relationship with all things that determine purpose within the community. To assimilate would mean the end of the ancestral wisdom passed down through the learning continuum. Educational institutions that continue to separate and devalue FN language and knowledge will struggle to initiate successful programming for FN students.

First Nations Parental and Community Development

Parental involvement in education is a critical component in the success of First Nation students. Schools need to be an extension of the community.

Many First Nation parents do not become involved in their child's formal education for many reasons. Some feel alienated by the environment; many have first languages that are different from the teachers; and parents may feel that the educational personnel do not respect their values. Teachers who only contact parents when a child is in trouble may further alienate the parents (Tradition and Education, Vol.1, 1988).

First Nation parents should have the same rights given other parents in Canadian society to determine the type of education that would best suit their children. While this is happening more often in band-operated schools, it has only increased marginally in provincial schools. At present, all provincial systems of education have been generated without Aboriginal peoples' input in policy, curriculum, standards, and practices. Generally, parents are only invited to participate in limited

ways such as field trips or lunch supervision, and are not active generators of knowledge and skill building.

FN peoples value the role of Elders, parents, and community members in the development of culture, language, curricula, and resources that will help to give children the foundation they require. In order to make this a reality, educators must work with community members to decide together what role they can play teaching traditional skills, coordinating language activities, or leading and supporting in other areas of learning.

Literacy

Educators and the literature agree that literacy is a key issue for the success of First Nation students in education. Yet, there are many different kinds of literacies, including those involving FN languages, orthographies, and symbolic learning, involving diverse skills and knowledge. The most effective practices for teaching and learning literacy are those that perceive learning to be directly relevant to the students' own socio-cultural context. FN learning requires a distinct, appropriate, and holistic perspective on teaching literacy skills. The most successful programs for teaching literacy are culturally appropriate models that are flexible, and motivate the learners to participate.

Literacy practices must also reframe FN perspectives and content in a positive light. FN literacy is distinct from mainstream literacy in that it is intergenerational and affects all areas of life. It is a learning process where teachers become learners and learners become teachers. However, very little understanding, funding or support for, FN literacy programs exists that include intergenerational participation and practices (*Literacies Researching Practice: Practicing Research*, 2003).

Information and Communications Technology

Information and communications technology (ITC) has the potential to promote language, culture, and community connectedness, particularly among isolated communities.

Technology offers the potential to promote and strengthen FN identity, and offers new possibilities for the teaching and preservation of FN languages.

According to UNESCO (1996), approximately half of Canada's 50 FN languages are endangered or facing extinction. As more and more FN people move away from traditional communities into large multicultural urban societies, technology can help safeguard the right of FN youth to learn their cultural practices and speak their Indigenous languages.

Increased access to distance education is another advantage to e-learning. Many rural, remote, and northern communities face difficulties in access to learning opportunities. As a result, there is growing interest in distance learning as a means of overcoming the challenges of geography and isolation.

Although ITC and e-learning offer a powerful way to acknowledge and promote FN culture, language, and knowledge, as well as improving FN education throughout Canada, some growing concerns need to be addressed. The appropriation and distortion of FN knowledge is a considerable risk that requires ethical measures be adopted and based on FN considerations of what is appropriate and what should and can be done to mitigate risks of inappropriate access and use of this knowledge. Another access issue looms within the economic realities of many FN in both urban and remote communities: what funding programs will be allocated to provide sufficient technical access for everyone?

Gender and Learning

According to Statistics Canada in 2001 (2004), the number of FN women completing a post-secondary education has doubled in the last 20 years, exceeding the number of FN men who have post-secondary schooling. This indicates that FN males are being further marginalized and alienated in the current education systems in ways that FN women are not, or may be experiencing, but are finding ways to overcome. Despite the fact that women are receiving more education than men, Statistics Canada (2004) show FN men have higher employment rates than women. Overall the employment rates of both FN men and women continue to be lower than non-FN people.

According to the *Canada-Aboriginal People's Roundtables* (2004), all FN governments, programs, and services should include a standard policy to include a gender-based analysis of the issues. Women need to be provided with a stronger voice in decision-making and should be consulted on all issues affecting them and their children. Full and equal representation of women in the decision-making process at local and national levels would help improve the overall socio-economic status of women.

Learning Pedagogy

Most school environments alienate First Nation students. Exemplary practices for First Nation students mirror those needed for all students, but must also include an underlying foundation of respect for the knowledge and perspectives of FN people. One of the most important practices educators must use to enhance the learning environment is to build solid relationships with students founded on trust and mutual respect. The bonds that are built between teacher and student make the classroom a true community of learning. Studies done on human resiliency indicate individuals who succeed despite the odds do so often because of the support they receive, even when it is only one person who supported and believed in them.

It is important to acknowledge and validate the various types of learning and intelligence within each classroom. Most education centers continue to focus on academic ability, which cripples the self-esteem of students who are gifted in various other ways. Teachers must find creative ways to support academic ability, while giving value to other

abilities that students display or they want to develop.

FN students must be given the opportunity to make decisions within the classroom and the school regarding their own education. This kind of collaboration empowers students to take ownership of their own learning and allows them to determine how their needs can best be met. Using a variety of pedagogical approaches, or 'holistic' approaches to teaching helps to engage students who have many different learning styles.

The integration of media literacy, visual arts, industrial arts, physical education, and music into all subjects enhances learning for students who have visual or oral learning styles. It is also important to integrate theory *and* practice, or a 'hands on' approach to learning whenever possible. Many individuals will attest to the fact that when they read about something, it becomes more meaningful if they can transfer that knowledge into practice.

Students must be given the knowledge, skills, and materials that are relevant and meaningful to them. The most effective learning occurs for any student when they can relate their learning to their own experiences.

CONCLUSION

Transforming FN education is framed within the innovative need for learning: concepts of dialogue, respect for diversities, and for self-representations, as well as deconstructing decisions about curricular knowledge and reframing education and knowledge to the contexts of peoples lives, a *sui generis* education. It is not singular but multiple in approaches. However, learning outcomes and the analysis of that data must take in account the travesties on FN people, treaties with FN people, their trauma with colonialism, their healing project, their voice, and their vision.

Restoring a balance in relationships, control, and authority over lives and, thus, the future will enable a harmonious and empowering relationship with one other. Love, respect and care have raised the current level of high school completion to 32%, which has not been much higher than residential school education.

FN peoples are interdependent with their ecology and environment, and schools will have to develop institutions, policies and practices that signal the respect for their diversity and interdependences.

Foundational Principles for First Nations Learning and Education

A synthesis of the reports and literature on FN learning and education has resulted in a number of core foundational principles for FN learning and education. These have surfaced frequently and consistently as the following:

- The significance of FN land, knowledge, language and culture as an integral part of the learning and education process.
- Learning is a lifelong process that requires both formal and informal opportunities for learning within each age group.
- The recognition that the issues faced by FN people have been created by a legacy of colonization and oppression that continues today.
- The recognition that systemic racism in all of its forms continues to be the biggest barrier for FN learning.
- FN peoples value education as a vital area for learning and transformation of their economic livelihood.
- Learning, selecting and legitimating curricular knowledge in education are issues of power, voice, and agency and questions of whose knowledge is included in the curriculum, whose languages are considered as legitimate vehicles for carrying the knowledge, and who is to decide on this knowledge are legitimate questions for curriculum development.
- Research needs to focus on FN learning development and its connections to FN language or knowledge and culture.

- Learning development must focus on individuals in a holistic manner based on their spiritual, intellectual, emotional and physical selves.
- The participation and involvement of parents and community is an essential part of building a successful learning continuum and healthy communities.
- While academic subjects and skills are valued highly in Canadian society, it is important to acknowledge and foster other gifts and abilities among FN students.
- FN youth have the responsibility of comprehending, learning and maintaining FN languages and cultures and must be given the opportunity and capacity to become leaders within their communities with these socio-cultural tools.
- The legitimate right of FN peoples across Canada to develop and control all aspects of their own education.
- The inequalities in educational programming and funding for FN people require immediate fiscal and applied solutions.
- The concepts of ‘knowledge’, ‘learning’, ‘evaluation’ and ‘standards’ need to be expanded beyond traditional mainstream definitions to conform to FN learning theory.
- The continuous learning of teachers, Aboriginal and not, of FN issues, histories, student’s learning, cultural communities, knowledge, protocols, and their interdependencies with their land, relationships, languages, and so forth.

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