

# **Educating First Nations Citizens**

A Rethinking of First Nations'  
Responsibility  
to Educate Their Citizens

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## **Introduction and overview: Why do First Nations need a common vision?**

*We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honoured place in Indian tradition and culture. The values which we want to pass on to our children, values which make our people a great race, are not written in any book. They are found in our history, in our legends and in the culture. We believe that if an Indian child is fully aware of the important Indian values he will have reason to be proud of our race and of himself as an Indian.*

National Indian Brotherhood policy paper entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education*, presented to Indian Affairs Minister Jean Chretien in December, 1972.

How well have First Nations manifested that thirty-two year-old vision? First Nations need to be clear about what they have accomplished in the last 30 years, as well as what remains to be done. They have to take a hard look and see if they are reaching the goals that they have set for their educational systems. The numbers speak for themselves: First Nations people in Ontario are nine times less likely to graduate from high school than non-First Nations; 95% of First Nations university students are likely to drop out; First Nations people earn about 1/3 of what the average non-First Nations person earns. Some might say that education has failed us. The truth is that First Nations have generally failed to provide the kind of educational experience that helps their people feel good about learning and becoming more than another statistic.

Just because you put feathers on a horse doesn't make that horse become an eagle. In many ways, First Nations have been putting feathers on the educational system, hoping that it will become an indigenous knowledge sharing centre. Despite the feathers, it is still a horse of a different color. It is time to stop trying to turn a horse into an eagle.

Instead, First Nations must educate their own citizens on their own terms. This may require some dramatic changes, or it may be only a few adjustments to what is already in place. This report advocates for a philosophical retooling that starts with the premise that our First Nations governments have to help our First Nation citizens to better understand their roles and responsibilities through a comprehensive educational strategy no matter where, or by whom, First Nations citizens are being educated. This kind of strategy would result from serious and sustained negotiation with all parties currently involved in education within First Nations.

The First Nations in Ontario have taken important steps in the reclamation of their authority and responsibility for the education of First Nation citizens. They know that their right to an education stems from their aboriginal right of sovereignty and their inherent right of self-determination. From these rights flows the responsibilities to assure that their citizens are educated in the values, beliefs, traditions, languages and aspirations of First Nations. First Nations now see education is also a form of nation-building. This report outlines some of the underlying values and strategies to be considered in developing a more comprehensive philosophy of education for First Nations.

In 1988 the Assembly of First Nations released a report titled, *Tradition and Education – Towards a Vision of Our Future*, that provided an overall picture of the changes needed in the delivery of effective educational programs. The Department of Indian Affairs responded to the AFN recommendations in the 1991 report titled, *Macpherson Report on Tradition and Education – Towards a Vision of Our Future*, written by James C. Macpherson of York University Law School. Macpherson called for sustained negotiations on the matter, with the principles of **sharing, cooperation** and **equality** at the core of all discussions.

These principles become the primary negotiating points in First Nation new collaboration on education. They are sharing the responsibility to educate; they are cooperating with outside governments and agencies; and they expect equal treatment in that process. To address the inequities in the educational systems, the external governments can help

facilitate change, not impose “solutions” upon First Nations. The tone of negotiations on education should be reflective of the values that First Nations want to instill in their people. It is a positive approach, not a confrontational one.

Macpherson pointed out that mere Indian control over education is not enough to assure the reinforcement of Indian identity in Indian children. First Nations need a common vision about what they are expecting education to do for their nations. This paper does not deal with the legalities of the issue. Instead, it takes a proactive stance that First Nations already have the inherent right to determine the nature and scope of education for their own citizens. A common vision will provide for clarity as to the realistic legal, political, educational, social, cultural and spiritual expectations First Nations can have of their educational systems. A common vision will give First Nations strength and unity as they set forth to negotiate the future of their nations.

### **Common Educational Philosophy: Silver Covenant Chain Concept**

In one sense, the cultural/political framework to achieve this retooling already exists. If one looks at the historic function of the Silver Covenant Chain, one finds the cultural-based model for cooperation. The nature of the Covenant Chain is that of a compact, a political union in which the participating Nations are like links of a chain, united together in common purpose. Each link retains its identity, as each nation continues to conduct its internal affairs, but becomes stronger when linked to others who share a common vision of the future. The purpose of the making of the Chain, as of any compact between Nations, is to create a mutually satisfying relationship between equals.

Education of First Nations citizens is one of those areas of common purpose. It is a treaty obligation, but it is also the responsibility of First Nations to assure that the educational experience advances the state of being within their nations, as well as allows their citizens to interact and succeed in any world they may choose to enter.

As in the past, the Chain needs polishing, to make relationships stronger and to reaffirm the principles that these First Nations people have already established. Coming to an agreement on education is another way to polish the Chain.

The overall goals of a First Nations educational strategy might want to consider the vision created by the Union of Ontario Indians Political Strategic Plan that looks at the re-building and strengthening of the Anishinabek Nation's law-making authority based on its own traditional governance processes. The plan is entitled "*Wedokdodwin (Unity - Helping One Another) A Strategic Plan of Action for Re-Building a Way of Life for the Anishinabek*". Within this plan, the stated 'Goal of Nation Building and Culture' is to protect the quality of life and overall well-being of the Anishinabek people. The plan also outlines the need to promote the concept of Nation Building and Nationhood and what roles and responsibilities First Nation members would play in the process. An overall First Nations education strategy should address these kinds of goals.

If First Nations view themselves as nations, then they must ask how well do their educational services promote good First Nations citizenship for their people. The harsh reality is that Ontario educational guidelines and standards are aimed at informing *their* citizens about *their* history, *their* civic responsibilities and *their* concepts of wealth, business and success. Their goals are not necessarily First Nations goals.

The second harsh reality for First Nations to recognize is that they are still allowing their children to be colonized. While the residential schools of the past have been put to rest, the underlying philosophy of paternalism is still at work. The primary goal of education for First Nations in Ontario appears to be to have their children believe in someone else's cultural worldview, ways of expression and systems of being. Is it no wonder that many First Nations children get confused by this mixed message and grow up questioning where they belong in the world? Is it no wonder that First Nations children reject this imposition and drop out? First Nations should educate their people in what it takes to be a first-class citizen of a First Nation, rather than becoming a second-class citizen to a foreign system.

## **Constructing an Educational Philosophy: What Already Exists?**

To construct an innovative and provocative philosophy it is best to understand what has already been tried and tested. One need not reinvent the medicine wheel every time one thinks of education. It is important to draw from what has already been developed and tailor it to meet First Nations' distinctive community needs. Rather than wait for legislative, constitutional or jurisdictional issues to be resolved, First Nations might take a proactive approach that starts with the community reassessing their ultimate goals (the long-term vision) for education. That vision might be based upon rethinking life-long learning as a form of building constructive citizenship within the nation. It will provide for identity reinforcement, individual skill enhancement, appropriate learning styles and look seven generations ahead.

Each First Nation needs to take the time to clearly define the underlying philosophy of education so that when external negotiations begin, they will already have had a clear understanding within their nation as to what they are trying to achieve. The clearer First Nations are, the easier it is for the external agencies to understand and have empathy with what they are proposing.

Hopefully, First Nations will be able to create a philosophy that will energize external negotiations. This will allow for a new kind of partnership, one that is not based upon complex concepts of law and jurisdiction, but rather, looks to empower its citizens with a stronger sense of identity, self-awareness, skills and understandings that will create a more stable and productive society within First Nations. In reality, this is about nation building, not curricula reform.

Some basics have already been validated. The report, "Gathering Strength" (Volume 3 of the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996) summarized what makes aboriginal programs work best:

- 1) Aboriginal people are central decision makers.

- 2) The programs address the needs and priorities of Aboriginal people.
- 3) The programs include Aboriginal perspectives and methodologies.
- 4) They open doors for the participation of Aboriginal people.
- 5) They emphasize partnerships and mutual understanding.
- 6) They find creative ways to overcome obstacles.

While this sounds like common sense to most, it may still be news to outside agencies which have institutional myopia – those unable to see beyond their own scope of services. The above list outlines a good set of negotiating points which First Nations can utilize in their efforts to define their educational needs. However, one should not underestimate the need to have stellar people running these programs. People with vision and passion can do more to inspire productive change and community-centered action. Consequently, First Nations need better trained governmental affairs managers, as well as visionary leaders to inspire their people to excellence.

What is the culture of education that First Nations want to foster for their children? A decade ago, organizational culture was a hot topic in the management field. The premise was that cultural (corporate) values should determine how one conducted business. This was intended to create an organizational style or atmosphere which helped staff and employees understand and work to maintain shared values, not just the bottom line. First Nations need to revamp the learning environment, to be more reflective of their goals, drawing upon the concept of organizational culture. The educational system should reflect First Nations values in the way it is organized and the way in which it operates. In this way, First Nations children will see their values at work.

In January 2001, a meeting was held in Kenora, Ontario whereby educators from the Treaty #3 area identified a unified vision and philosophy for Anishinaabe education. It was described as a life-long learning process. Their specific approach to education was based upon a five-point philosophy that could be a model for the concept of organizational culture for First Nations:

- 1) **Acceptance** of all students, regardless of their abilities.
- 2) Provision of a **holistic** approach to education.
- 3) Development of a curriculum based on **Anishinaabe traditions, culture and language.**
- 4) Promoting **cooperation** instead of competition.
- 5) **Remove labeling** from classroom settings in order to achieve equality and non – judgment.

By using these general ideals, First Nations can envision an educational atmosphere that promotes key First Nations values. Those values are important in defining program goals, strategies and performance standards as well. A First Nation could develop a list of the personal characteristics its community would consider essential for a person to be a model citizen of their nation. Once a list has been developed, these ideals might be compared to those educational goals and standards that measure “success” of children in within the current educational system. If these goals match, a community would be well on its way. If a disparity exists between what a First Nation has defined for its nation, and what the schools are defining for graduation, then a problem exists. First Nations cultures, arts and languages will not survive if First Nations do not teach them as essential ways of existing in the modern world. At the same time, they cannot ignore the new technologies, economies and ways of communicating that were unknown to their ancestors. Future generations will need to be master of both the old and new knowledge. As a result, First Nations educational philosophy must be forward thinking.

### **Constructing an Educational Philosophy: Incorporating First Nations Worldviews**

*Education is one key to survival of any society. It is through education that a culture transmits its history, its language, its traditions and spiritual beliefs. Through formal and informal education a culture reaffirms its values and passes them from generation to generation. . . We have to be prepared to answer our grandchildren when they ask,*



*‘where were you grandfather, where were you grandmother, when my culture and education were being decided?’”*

Deputy Grand Chief Goyce Kakegamic, Nishnawbe-Aski Nation  
Education Conference Report, 1997

If First Nations are to survive as nations, they need solid citizens who are willing to defend *their* way of life, *their* beliefs and *their* patterns of behavior. The best defense is a good offense. The living of those beliefs will assure their continuance. Otherwise, First Nations become a museum culture, celebrating the beauty of what used to be. First Nations need an educational philosophy and practice that helps their people understand what it means to be a citizen of a First Nations community, and why it is important to maintain that identity. It is not their right to an education that should motivate this philosophy, but First Nations’ responsibility to help shape the hearts and minds of its populace.

In reshaping an educational philosophy, one must consider what it would take for First Nation citizens to understand the following:

- 1) **Sense of Identity** – Who are we as a nation? Who are you as a citizen?
- 2) **Sense of Self** – Who are we as citizens of that nation? Why is kinship important?
- 3) **Relationships** – How do we relate to each other and to the environment?
- 4) **Intellectual skills** – What decision-making processes do we have?
- 5) **Knowledge** – What types of knowledge are essential to retain our identity?
- 6) **Civic Understandings** – How does our society work? What makes us distinctive?
- 7) **Disposition Toward Values** – What beliefs, traditions and morals do we share?
- 8) **Active Contributions** – How do I participate in the society?

By looking at these aspects of citizenship, one can develop a philosophy, learning atmosphere, teaching strategies and curricula that reflect the core values of one’s society. This will help First Nations redefine the new standards of success. Most First Nations school systems operate under well-defined content standards and performance standards.

Most of these standards were developed and written for general use across the province or local school district, yet they may not address issues of critical importance to First Nations students. To address a similar shortfall, Alaskan Native educators developed a set of culture standards titled, *The Alaska Standards for Culturally-Responsive Schools*, which was adopted by the Assembly of Alaska Native Educators in 1998.

The purpose of these standards was to create “guidelines or touchstones against which schools and communities can examine what they are doing to attend to the cultural well-being of the young people they are responsible for nurturing to adulthood.” The philosophy of these standards is to shift the teaching/learning *about* cultural heritage as another subject to teaching/learning *through* the local culture as a foundation for all education. In this way, all forms of knowledge (ways of knowing and worldviews) are recognized as equally valid, adaptable and complementary in mutually beneficial ways.

A local model can be seen in the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation Education Conference Report of 1997 which identifies several additional philosophical ideas that other First Nations might consider:

- 1) **Holistic education** is needed, to integrate all aspects of personal growth(mental/emotional/ social/physical/spiritual and academic).
- 2) Education should provide a **solid cultural foundation**.
- 3) Education should be **bi-cultural**, not just native focused.
- 4) **Academic excellence** is needed in order to interact with mainstream society.
- 5) While we need to live in harmony within the First Nation, children also need to be prepared to **live in two worlds**.
- 6) **Parents, elders, community** play a key role in teaching history, culture, tradition and language.
- 7) Every child has the **right to learn** and a right to pursue their own educational goals.

## **Constructing an Educational Philosophy: Some New Ideas**

*In order to teach responsively, you need to examine how students experience learning. It is important to know the symbolic significance students ascribe to your actions. For students, your choice of exercises, materials, and assignments evokes meanings you may not have intended. . . Knowing how they react to criticism, how they deal with failure, and how they move out of frustrating period of being stalled or blocked is crucial to your practice.*

Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher - On Technique, Trust, and Responsibilities in the Classroom*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1990

Most theorists agree that learning is an emotional experience. As our students learn new ideas or new perspectives, they can have conflicting emotions about what they have learned. One cannot underestimate the physiological impact of acquiring knowledge, experiencing transformative identities and dealing with historical trauma. Some studies have shown that students experience a certain amount of grieving for the lost certainties, even if those old ideas were incorrect. New First Nations educational philosophy must consider the whole person – mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual – and begin to build positive personalities earlier so that cultural identity does not come as such a shock later in life.

The learning environment should be the place that enhances the development of positive values and productive attitudes that are deeply rooted in, and reflective of, First Nations cultural values. It has to be mentally, emotionally and spiritually supportive. Look at the place where children spend most of their day and ask if that environment nurtures the values defined for good citizenship by First Nations communities. Or, does the arrangement of the space, the hierarchy of the staff and the subtle messages of external culture overwhelm the values First Nations hold dear?

Often, First Nations people appear to be torn over what a cultural-based education should be, and question if it can truly prepare its citizens to survive in the external world as well. First Nations have come to recognize that they need to blend the best of all worlds so that

their citizens can be productive world citizens as well. First Nations seek to create a strength of being that allows their people to venture forth into other realms without fear that those realms will gobble them up or confuse their minds.

Many First Nations students now excel in the sciences and it is important to help them see how those sciences can be used to the benefit of the community. Otherwise, First Nations communities suffer a brain-drain whereby many of its bright and creative citizens are forced to leave the community in search of employment in their chosen field.

This is not an easy path to define. The Haudenosaunee have an illustrative tradition called the Two Row Wampum. This actual wampum belt dates to the earliest of agreements with the Europeans. More than a treaty, this wampum creates a vision of the future. The message of the Two Row Wampum states that the First Nations float on the River of Life in a canoe filled with their culture, laws and traditions. The Europeans float on that same River of Life in their own ship, which is full of their culture, laws and traditions. Each culture has an equal right to exist on the river, but are not to interfere with one another.

The Haudenosaunee are to steer their own canoe. That takes a skill and understanding which needs to be taught to their children. They need to know their own laws and how they work. They need to understand the laws of nature and how they work. For Haudenosaunee culture to thrive, they need to have their feet firmly planted in their canoe. If a Haudenosaunee person tries to put one foot in the canoe and the other in the ship, s/he may fall into the deep and murky waters of uncertainty. It is a First Nations' responsibility to assure that its citizens can survive those murky waters. This will take a new combination of new skills balanced with the wisdom of their ancestors. In the Two Row Wampum, the Haudenosaunee people are warned about what they import into their canoe. Too many outside ideas will overburden the canoe. Education is the vehicle by which the Haudenosaunee will help the people to know what to do.

In reality, the new educational canoe is the entire community, not just the school building. To reshape First Nations philosophy one has to consider the whole child, the

concepts of whole health, as well as the ramifications of the whole world. First Nations need to create, or clarify, the vision of the nation, as it is connected to that larger world. That understanding will drive the interconnectedness of education – where art, culture, belief, science, and the humanities can provide a solid springboard to the future. The leaders of the community need to set the tone and help to foster the desire for good citizenship, good education and ultimately, good conduct.

Using the Akwesasne Mohawk philosophy, First Nations need a 200% education. This means that they will get a 100% aboriginal education (to understand the traditional values) as well as 100% larger society education (to gain skills to apply the traditional values to our decision-making). The challenge for First Nations will be in investing properly in both kinds of education so that they will no longer be cheated, out-manuevered and subjected to legalism beyond their collective comprehension. Education must be a perimeter defense for what they cherish and what they hope to pass on the seventh generation to come.

Roger Buffalohead, a Ponca Indian educator, defined several types of traditional education that can serve as an intellectual models for assessing what First Nations really want for their children. Traditional education, according to Buffalohead (1976), includes the following components:

- 1) Ceremonies
- 2) Apprenticeships
- 3) Learning games
- 4) Formal instruction
- 5) Tutoring
- 6) Tag-along teaching
- 7) Oral history
- 8) Teaching stories

These components can be used to develop an educational experience that recognizes both cultural standards and academic standards. What the actual educational experience will look like depends on the local culture and the ability of the teachers. First Nations must take some time with respected elders in their communities and talk about how people learned things in the past. Buffalohead's list might be utilized as a starting point. What unique features does First Nations society have that assure the sharing of knowledge, the acquisition of skills and the expressions of culture? Once those answers are uncovered, a traditional style of learning for a community can be defined. Those styles will then need to be reflected in a community's philosophy and practice.

What one develops will depend on the veracity of those traditions. Some things may have fallen out of practice. Some research might be necessary to recover some of the practices or to reconnect some of the oral traditions. A people who have lost their stories might have a difficult time connecting the dots for the learners. Part of a First Nations educational strategy is the commitment to preserve information as the community deems appropriate.

First Nations are facing a unique problem. Their greatest cultural resources – their elders – are dying at a fast pace. First Nations must find ways to share what they know, how they feel and their aspirations for the future. Oral history recovery and documentation might be a necessary tool to assure that the oral traditions survive, especially if a community or educational systems is teaching indigenous languages as a *second* language. Many of the current generations of elders who are good storytellers might not be around by the time the younger generation obtains a level of fluency needed to understand the meaning of these stories.

## **Native Models**

First Nations must also be mindful of what their children expect from their education. If they have inherited or have developed negative attitudes about education, they will not see the value in their schooling. First Nations can work at reducing the level of

confrontation by making the educational experience more meaningful to their students. One way is to see education as a connection to the cultural inheritance of First Nations ancestors. The Onondaga Nation School is an example in which these ideas are framed by a vision statement, which is posted on the walls of school:

We will be of good mind, good heart and keep peace around us.

We are respectful of ourselves, each other, our school and our community.

We appreciate each other's uniqueness and gifts.

We are patient.

We are polite.

We help and cooperate with each other.

We are considerate and understanding.

Now our minds are one.

Dah neh to

Their educational "mission" is drawn directly from the traditional knowledge of their nation and reflects the kind of behaviors to be considered acceptable for a citizen of the Onondaga Nation. The culture is the vision of the future. This approach also puts the focus on the quality of the thinking of the individual, the quality of the relationships between Onondaga citizens as well as the collective consciousness that shapes Onondaga identity. It builds respect for the school as a part of the nation

The book *Teaching Wigwams – A Modern Vision of Native Education* by Ron Common and Lorraine Frost discusses a thirteen-step program to take First Nations from the status quo to an entirely new native education system. The process of change will take time and First Nations will need to negotiate and build, not simply demand, a better educational delivery system. The premise of this model is that people have to move from being manipulated by the system, through token consultation and past placation, to reach a new partnership whereby full managerial power over the system that educates our citizens is achieved (pages 18-20).

Common and McAlpine wrote an enlightening piece titled “Doctor, Lawyer or Indian Chief: A Study of Comparative aspirations and influences among Inuit, Ojibway and Dominant Culture Students.” Their study focused on comparing attitudes among the Ojibway from Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve on Manitoulin Island, the Inuit of Pond Inlet, and Non-Native students from a Mississauga, Ontario school. They looked at how these three groups perceived external and internal influences and expectations. The study showed that 1) education; 2) internal personal decision-making and; 3) family had the biggest influence on the students. For any new philosophy to work, First Nations must help the learner value their education, help them make better decisions and help their families to be more supportive and an active part of that education.

First Nation government needs to provide a diversity of educational experiences, so that parents have a free choice in how they want to bring up their children. While most educational reformers want a cultural-based form of education for First Nations, the reality is that many families might prefer a mainstream or Christian-based education. In addition, there are other First Nations people or non-Natives in First Nations communities and therefore, one cannot assume that all want to be of the dominant culture of the community. Anishnawbe living in a Haudenosaunee community deserve an Anishnawbe-based form of education as well. First Nations need to find ways to respect all of the cultures within their communities. This may be a difficult issue to address, but First Nations must educate all people within their borders. Given that 50% or more of band members in many communities may be marrying non-band members, this issue will become more significant as time rolls on. Inclusiveness and sharing are part of First Nations traditions and therefore, the Silver Covenant Chain idea must be utilized to make peace among all the people in and around First Nations communities.

In reality, there is no sure roadmap to assure success. Each community has slightly different needs, attributes, resources and people. Each First Nations will have to find what works best for its community and what works best with the educational partners they bring into the process. Keep it simple, keep it flexible and keep it fresh.



## **Non-Native Models**

One educational philosophy First Nations might consider is the concept of education put forth by Waldorf Education, a world-wide association of schools, founded in 1919. Waldorf education is based upon three values: Goodness, Beauty and Truth. The program emphasizes disciplined creativity, wonder, reverence and respect for nature and for human existence. This is how they describe themselves:

*Waldorf's time-tested pedagogy is designed to address the whole child: head, heart, and hands. It stimulates the mind with the full spectrum of traditional academic subjects. It nurtures healthy emotional development by conveying knowledge experientially as well as academically. And it works with the hands throughout every day, both in primary academic subjects and in broad range of artistic handwork and craft activities. . . . Waldorf Schools strive to awaken and ennoble capacities, rather than to merely impose intellectual content on the child.*

This is very much in line with First Nations traditional patterns of knowledge sharing. Consider the typical medicine wheel. Holistic learning encompasses four elements of the whole child: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. The Waldorf philosophy mimics what First Nations people have intuitively understood. They have simply found a good way to organize their teaching to assure that their shared values are first and foremost.

Additionally, the Waldorf model focuses on visual learning. We know that this is one learning style that is common to many First Nations children. Through art, First Nations children can have a real connection to the voices/beliefs of their ancestors. Art is the primary way in which culture is manifested. In First Nations communities, elders and artists passed on their knowledge and experience in situations where the children learned by doing. As they made pottery, they talked about the earth as mother. They talked about the designs. As they wove fishing nets, they talked about fish. As they gathered berries, they spoke of the use of medicines, shared stories on the origin of medicine and gave

examples about when the medicine worked. By sharing knowledge around these activities, the young people recall the learning every time they exercise the practice. These practices inspired the artist within.

One does not gain that same quality of experience by reading a book or hearing a lecture. If we make more use of song, dance, poetry, painting and drama as learning tools, First Nations children will increase their ability to do creative problem solving. Intellectual growth is then combined with artistic expression and practical application. Creative play is key to connecting the child to the cultural foundations. How we teach is just as important, if not more so, than what we teach. Education can be based upon a productive relationship between learner and facilitator.

### **Primary-level learners**

*The educational survey of Treaty No. 3 area indicates that Indian identity is the most important factor affecting the success of the Indian child. Indian identity means to have knowledge and understanding of Indian history, culture and language. . . . Those students who have a better Indian identity stayed in school longer. They also have higher aspirations in their occupational outlook.*

J. P. Kelly, in *Educational Expectations: A Study for Grand Council Treaty No. 3*. (April, 1972).

In the native models of education, identity is the driving force. First Nations want to connect their children to the identity of their ancestors and keep those traditions going to assure that this unique identity continues for many generations to come. As the child grows, their sense of beauty increases. Storytelling is an essential factor in relating First Nations cultural understanding of what is considered beautiful about life on Mother Earth. Children are like sponges absorbing ideas and feelings about who they are and the way their families and communities live. The child looks for validation of the cultural values in the behavior of adults. What they absorb becomes their model for the future.

As we grow, the sponge of one's experiences may become soaked with negativity. If one sees inconsistencies, the truthfulness of elders will be questioned. If adults act pitiful, the children too, will become pitiful. If children hear their teachers raising their voices, commanding them to sit up, shut up and put up, they might learn resentment and fear. However, if children see sober people doing good things, speaking kind words and using the Good Mind, then these behaviours will be emulated. If children see strong people treating each other with kindness, they will see how to be independent but connected. If what one says is actually reflected in how one acts, then children will see a consistency and stability in First Nations culture. They will see value in keeping the old ways. They will take responsibility for their own conduct.

In this regard, one can think of culture as having three components: the **ideals** that are woven into the First Nations way of life; the **act** of developing the spiritual, intellectual, moral and artistic faculties to comprehend the full scope of those ideas; as well as the ability to **communicate** that understanding to others and thereby seek excellence on cultural performance. To gain cultural fluency, First Nations learners will need an educational philosophy that is aware of the interplay of ideals, acts and communication. They are influenced by culturally-defined protocols and relationships that should be factored into a comprehensive educational strategy. Helping First Nations children understand the cultural metaphors and practices early will enable them to fold those concepts into their own decision-making later on.

## **Secondary-level learners**

What works for young children might not work as well with teenagers and post-secondary students. The key here is to develop a comprehensive educational strategy that grows as the learners grow. Within First Nations traditional world views are understandings about what the people need to learn at various stages of their lives. This is what makes rites of passage important. A community or nation's educational philosophy should be reflective of that time-tested sequence. In fact, one may be able to restore some

of the older practices through an educational plan.

By the time puberty hits, children are seeking a sense of truth that will shape the rest of their life. They are looking for validation of the cultural values in the behavior of the adults. It is also a time when they want to do some independent thinking. Adults must be patient with them as they come into their own. It is here where core values are tested. The way in which children are disciplined is also important. By using traditional practices, First Nations may restore social values of discipline. How First Nations schools disciplines children is a critical part of the new educational philosophy.

The question First Nations must address is: Who sets the standards for good behavior, good thinking and good relationships within the community? An educational philosophy must advocate, enhance and assure those kinds of behaviours, thought and relationships. If First Nations commit to building strong character among their citizens, they will ensure that future generations will want to maintain those systems which produced such character.

## **Young Adult learners**

Change can be a threatening prospect. For young people, this can be a confusing time as they begin to understand their personal identity. Some people suffer from poor self-image – a feeling that they can't compete, aren't smart enough or don't deserve to learn. Attitudes of self-defeat have a tendency to become self-fulfilling. First Nations need to overcome the inherited resistance to learning experienced by some families. As a result of negative residential school experiences, some First Nations people have a negative view of education. To others, education is still viewed as a form of assimilation and forced change. Negative behaviors do not make for a strong citizenry.

In fact, when First Nations see themselves only as victims, they destroy their own vitality. A First Nations educational philosophy must unburden its citizens of these detrimental patterns and replace them with healthier ways of being. First Nations must

reach into their cultural values to redefine what well being means and seek those time-tested practices that promote it.

While one might assume that learning about traditional culture is liberating, sometimes it might actually results in some students getting angry and resentful. First Nations need to understand that there is an emotional reaction to discarding past assumptions. What they learn may conflict with what they have heard at home.

The system often dumps too much information too quickly on its students. First Nations need to find ways to allow young people to reflect on what they are learning, ask more questions and begin the process of conceptualizing what this means. First Nations need to provide clear avenues to the full breadth of cultural values and perspectives.

## **Older Adult Learners**

First Nations people cannot be characterized as having only one style of learning. Some students excel in the arts, others in the sciences. Michael Johnny, in *Native Learning Styles*, Ningwake Learning Press, 2002, suggests that one consider a holistic learning process for adult learners in order to help them develop their “whole person.” That means one who will have the capacity to balance their spiritual, emotional, mental and physical energies and capabilities.

The underlying philosophy of learning style awareness is that there are four essential aspects of our lives that need to be engaged for real learning to take place. Those four aspects are the mind (intellect), heart (emotion), body (health) and spirit (connectedness). With this style of learning, an educational philosophy can be broken down into four main questions:

- 1) **What do you know?** - This defines the knowledge one possesses, what more one needs?
- 2) **What can you do?** - This defines the skills desired.

3) **How are you going to behave differently?** - This defines the attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and thoughts that are culturally appropriate.

4) **Are you able to see beyond the obvious and understand the reasons/meanings why things happen?** - This defines the insight and spiritual balance required to live a good life.

This leads to life-long learning - learning that supports further growth and development. In this scenario there are various stages of learning for adult learners:

A) **Awareness** of one's needs/problems and the various options to address those needs/problems.

B) **Internal struggle** to resolve contradictions and the impact of new information.

C) **Building a resolution** to the contradictions that provides a more positive view of life.

D) **Preserving** of that positive outlook by integrating new knowledge and belief into a new sense of self. This results in positive actions, better relationships and a better sense of self-worth.

The main theory behind the 'Johnny' definition of Native learning styles is that the four essential aspects of each life have a predominant way of receiving and assimilating knowledge; A) **Mental learners** – possess a strong value system that drives learning. They are usually objective; B) **Emotional (relational) learners** – possess a strong awareness of feelings and learn by relating to people or things. They are usually creative; C) **Physical learners** – possess a strong awareness of surroundings and learn by observing/doing. They are usually down to earth in personality; and D) **Spiritual (intuitive) learners** – possess a strong sense of purpose and learn by reflecting on what they already know and feel. They often feel connected to the world and connected to higher powers. A good educational philosophy will provide for all learning styles to be respected and employed to ensure that First Nation citizens develop at their own rate in the ways that are most advantageous to their style, beliefs and skills.

## **Conclusion**

A philosophy of education can be an avenue to that kind of future. It can set the standard of conduct for generations to come. It will define its own parameters. It will also take time to be created, developed and implemented.

First Nations need to take the initiative and begin community discussions that help them envision beyond poor test scores and high drop-out rates, to a place where First Nation citizens can take their rightful and respectful place within First Nations society.

Once First Nations achieve a consensus on what that kind of society requires, then they can begin the process of negotiation to build community infrastructure to support such a society. They can invest in the training of their people to acquire the variety of skills necessary for such a society to function fully.

Eventually, First Nations will begin to demonstrate the logic, cohesiveness and practicality of such an approach. If First Nations build it, others will come. If they wait too long, they will no longer remember what makes them distinctive. Then First Nations will be in a position to be absorbed by the mainstream system for they will have abandoned the vision put forth by their ancestors.