

SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

J. R. Miller refers to the First Nations traditional education style as, "The Three Ls." That is¹:

LOOKING

LEARNING

LISTENING

She also says that young people were educated by positive examples in the home, games, stories and ceremonies.²

In 2004, Richard Powless did a report on First Nations educational processes. He claims that, "First Nations life provided the conditions for a solid foundation for childhood," and that, "traditional First Nations child-rearing practices permitted children to exert their will with little influence from their parents."³ In this way, children are able to learn to function autonomously and can socialize themselves apart from the opinions and prejudice of their rearers, a phenomenon which is deeply depressing in today's society.

Iram Khan describes traditional education as most essentially covering, "the belief of the

unity of all aspects of life, including the secular and the sacred; and the high value placed on the responsibilities of family life, especially for educating children holistically." 4

METHODS OF TRADITIONAL EDUCATION:



THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL TRADITION!

Oral tradition allows for important information about political, cultural, theological, ecological and geological issues to be passed on within a group itself and between generations. In this way, says Iram Khan, "the threat of extinction [is] not an issue; it [is] consistently an important part of a child's life."⁵

Oral tradition encompasses not only detailed historical information about any particular occurrence but also includes myths, legends and stories. They are, in essence, fictional depictions of lessons, norms and historical justifications that teach, "respect for all living things, sharing, self-reliance, individual responsibility and proper conduct."⁶

Oral tradition is also important because it is a vessel through which language is transmitted. Language is the sole most important key in communication and understanding particular language reveals a very significant asset.

Powless claims that for the First Nations, "language and culture [are] intertwined."⁷ That is many expressions and phrases in one language lack an equivalent in other languages.

Language has suffered trials throughout the years as epidemics can wipe out an entire population to which a specific language is known.

Oral tradition is key to the education of First Nations as they did not have a widely used significant writing system. To Westerners, this idea seems so completely radical that we have a hard time trying to grasp it. However, no historical information was written down or recorded in a way Westerners might deem conventional. For First Nations people, the only conventional method of teaching lessons or about the past was orally. Therefore, when milestones such as the Delgamuukw versus British Columbia case in 1997, where oral history was deemed acceptable evidence in court, we can see what a tremendous feat for Aboriginals it was. After all, it is all they had ever known.

A TYPICAL FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION:

Typically, a First Nations child enduring a traditional education, would spend their first years of life in direct care of not only their immediate family, but also their extended one. This included grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and even close family friends.

Everyone would share the responsibilities of caring for the child. In this way, a child is already exposed to a variety of age groups and rearing techniques and socializes accordingly.

As a child builds motor skills and begins to play, he is always encouraged to stay within close quarters of adult work. This is where learning by observation comes into play.

A child at this age would also become exposed to some stories, legends and myths. As Powless says, "children learned that dreams, visions and legends were just as important to learning as instruction in how to build a boat, tan a hide, collect medicine or plant a garden."⁸

As a child becomes a teenager, ceremonies according to tradition are held and this raises education about cultural norms. Someone of this age might also have learning time with specific elders who share specific information, be it medicine or politics. Some traditions include quests that allow for one to feel a deep connection to nature.

Essentially, a typical traditional education is founded upon individual freedom to learn and interpret and upon, "relation to the natural world."⁹

FIRST NATIONS PEDAGOGY BY JUNE KAMINSKY¹⁰

June Kaminsky outlines ten important points in traditional First Nations education:

1 THE IMPORTANCE OF ELDERS IN EDUCATION

Elders were the back bone of First Nations traditional pedagogy and are an important foundation of all contemporary pedagogical initiatives.

2 STORY-TELLING IN EDUCATION

Story-telling is a key practice in First Nations education and research - it is the foundation of all oral history transmission

3 RESPECT

Respect was taught from an early age, and is the premise for setting a respectful mood of all learning experiences. Respect includes an awareness of the personal space of self and others, and acknowledging the importance of the Code of Silence.

4 THE FOUR DIRECTIONS

An awareness of the four directions: East, South, West and North provides a holistic framework for both education and health planning

5 CIRCLE TALKS

This traditional practice provides

a milieu and a context for respectful relations, dialogue and equity in decision-making, problem-solving, learning and planning.

6 QUATERNITY This cyclically organized, repetitive, and centre-focused discursive pattern of writing and brainstorming is intrinsic to First Nations discourse.

7 POSITIONALITY An awareness and acknowledgement of each person's frame of mind is critical to First Nations education.

8 EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE Knowledge gained through the process of living is critical to First Nations educational and health planning, and should be tapped when planning initiatives.

9 MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES Learning should incorporate different ways of knowing, including linguistic, visual, kinesthetic, spacial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, musical and mathematical intelligences.

10 INTERCONNECTEDNESS An intense and deep connectedness with all that surrounds us is a foundational concept of First Nations education. This includes a connection to Mother Earth and all that the universe contains,

Q WESTERN IMPACT

Traditional way of life was completely transformed upon the arrival of Europeans in North America.

Eventually, the attempt to "assimilate" and "civilize" the First Nations people prompted residential schools and the tragedy that they were. Aside from the poor conditions and abuse that are associated with, they completely disabled the role of traditional education. Powless calls the residential school system, "the counterpiece of the assimilation strategy." "Children were forbidden to speak Native languages and lost contact with their family members. Traditional education became essentially obsolete for these children.

James C. Macpherson states that the federal government had adopted an integration policy of First Nations student by 1950 after abandoning its segregation-based one. By 1979, he says, provincial schools were educating every two out of three students.¹²

These provincial schools, the curriculum of which are all aware, is not based on the same foundations or ideals as traditional First Nations education is. That is, it focuses mainly on the art of the record and writing and facts and does not encompass the altruistic elements of First Nations education.

SUMMARY OF STRUGGLE

After the White Paper mishap of 1969, the National Indian Brotherhood was formed and together they advocated for education rights along with many other important political rights.

In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood developed the "Indian Control of Indian Education" paper which outlined, "the First Nations desire to have education in a setting in which the fundamental First Nations attitudes and values would be reinforced." ¹³

In 1973, the government responded with a policy based on two goals: to reinforce First Nations identity and to provide training for good livings to First Nations individuals. ¹⁴

However, the federal government still insists that First Nations schools "conform to provincial regulation with respect to curriculum, teacher credentials, school-year and so on." ¹⁵

I don't know about you, but to me this is complete ignorance of First Nations traditional education and the relevance and importance it carries - not only to First Nations societies but also to today's issues and policies.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHELS EA.¹⁶

Where are you from, Chelsea?

1. I'm from the Miqmaq Nation. They originate from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, basically Eastern Canada. They're probably only respectively known from the Beothuk vs. Miqmaq fight, which resulted in extermination of the Beothuk Nation. It was a fight to the death over territory between two mildly violent bands.

Have you any information about traditional education?

2. Since I haven't grown up in my native territory I'm uneducated directly about the specifics of my group. The only knowledge I have is learning from school courses and the Aboriginal Incentive Program offered to children and young adults beginning in Elementary School until Graduation.

However in the A.I.P. I've learned about the Creator, the Four Directions, the Animals of the Directions, phrases of some bands that live in B.C; hand motions that mean words in the Aboriginal Culture, and of course plenty of stories during the meetings. There's so much to go on! Haha.

Do you have any experiences with First Nations education?

3. I've had plenty of experiences, not just schooling either. Through A.I.P. I've been recommended to join other programs that allow teenagers with aboriginal ancestry to travel abroad and learn about each area's history. I myself have gone to Simon Fraser University during the summer and have stayed there for two - three weeks to meet other students from all over B.C. There, we've learned how to canoe, visit different universities, explore our native languages, and focus on using our ancestry to make a better future for Aboriginal Students.

What do you think is good about traditional First Nations education versus the education that most Canadians receive today?

4. Today, as it is, people have changed really. Nobody really wants to listen. Nostalgia is just a feeling now and isn't something everyone wants. Because Aboriginal people's pasts can be so horrific it's understandable. Traditional Education traces back to those routes and roads nobody wants to wander down, because the truth is such a thing to learn. It's really real.

I think the education people receive today can help them out with the 'NOW'. Which overall is helpful. You need the education today to find a job tomorrow. I think overall the government's education system is helpful. It's much more different than it was 100 years ago. Traditional Education though, if people are willing to endure it and seek out the information, won't just help with remembering the past, but also helping to shape the future.

Overall if we were able to, I would seek out both equals of the learning system. Through the Government and Traditionally. If Aboriginal people could learn through both, then Aboriginal people would... basically overall benefit; in North American Society and the Aboriginal Society.

CONCLUSION

First Nations traditional education encompasses a vast variety of aspects that allow people who endure it individuality, a relationship with nature and a credible way of life. The Western impact has transformed this education to the point of assimilationist education becoming essential to the wellbeing of all members of society. Chelsea is right - we need to find the best of both worlds!

NOTES

¹ J. R. Miller, Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools (Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 16.

² Ibid., 116.

³ Richard Powless, "The New Agenda: Building Upon the History of First Nations Education in Ontario," First Nations Traditional Education Practices (2004): par. 2, <http://www.chiefs-of-ontario.org/education/manifesto/A%20History%20of%20First%20Nations%20Education.doc>.

⁴ Iram Khan, "A Brief History of the Education of First Nations children: What should they learn and How should They learn it?": par. 1, <http://www.canadiancontent.ca/issues/0499/firsted.html>

⁵ Ibid., par. 1.

⁶ Ibid., par. 1.

⁷ Powless, "The New Agenda," par. 5.

⁸ Ibid., par. 4.

⁹ Ibid., par. 5.

¹⁰ June Kaminsky, "First Nations Pedagogy,"
<http://firstnationspedagogy.com/theory.html>

¹¹ Powless, "The New Agenda," History of Federal Education Policy, para. 3.

¹² James C. MacPherson, "Report on Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of the Future, Published Report, 1991.

¹³ Powless, "The New Agenda," The 1969 White Paper - The Links of the Covenant Chain are Broken, par. 6.

¹⁴ Ibid., par. 7.

¹⁵ Powless, "The New Agenda," Failure of the Federal Education Policy, para. 2.

¹⁶ Chelsea Fullard, conversation electronically, March 22nd, 2008.