Our Peoples' Education: Cut the Shackles; Cut the Crap; Cut the Mustard

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Introduction

From the scant knowledge that survived the many years of colonialism, we do know that our ancestors had evolved their own form of education. It was an education in which the community and the natural environment were the classroom, and the land was regarded as the mother of the people. Members of the community were the teachers, and each adult was responsible for ensuring that each child learned how to live a good life. Central to the teaching was the belief in the sacred, the Great Spirit.

The development of the whole person was emphasized through teachings often shared in storytelling. Legendary heroes such as the Raven, Wesakachak, Nanabush, and others were used to transmit learning. They were regarded as transformers or "tricksters of learning" through which children learned traditional values such as humility, honesty, courage, kindness, and respect.

Traditional education was strongly linked to the survival of the family and the community. Learning was geared to knowledge necessary for daily living. Boys and girls were taught at an early age to observe and utilize, to cope with and respect their environment. Independence and self-reliance were valued concepts handed down to the young. Through observation and practice, children learned the arts of hunting, trapping, fishing, farming, gathering food, childrearing, building shelters. They learned whatever their particular environment offered through experiential learning.

The rites of passage from childhood to adulthood were practiced. In most cultures, puberty rites were recognized through formal and often complex ceremonies. This was a critical time for girls and boys who were making the transition to the responsibilities of being an adult.

Traditional education was largely an informal process that provided the young people with specific skills, attitudes, and knowledge they needed to function in everyday life in the context of a spiritual world view. Our ancestors' mode of life, thought, and every act was given spiritual significance (Seton, 1966). Teaching and learning were a "natural process occurring during everyday activities ... ensuring cultural continuity" and a sense of well-being (Armstrong, 1987).

Formal education imposed on our people by the colonizers drastically changed all that! We are all aware of the consequences that continue to plague us today. Although the education of our people has not been entirely one of gloom and doom, at least over the last 25 years, we are still faced with the monumental challenge of creating a meaningful education that will not only give hope, but a promise of a better life for our future generations. I believe that this means that we must "cut the shackles, cut the crap, and cut the mustard."

Cut the Shackles

In schools and other educational institutions under our authority, we have the right and the opportunity to put in place what we believe to be quality education for our people. We are in charge. We owe it to our people, after decades of oppressive church and government control, to release them from this bondage by creating the kind of education that will truly liberate us so we can have the independence once enjoyed by our ancestors. Our new "independence" education must begin with us, our people, our communities. It must celebrate our cultures, our history, the true account of the way it was, and the way it is. From there we can build on how it should be and how it will be.

We must seize the opportunity to frame our education in our context. If we fail to do this, we run the risk of doing the greatest disservice to our people by simply mirroring the kind of education provided to us by federal and public schools, a kind of education that has had dismal results for us over many years. We must take a strong stance in shaping our education. To do this we need radical change.

We must begin by disestablishing many of our existing practices based on theories of the society that has dominated us for so many years. Then we must look within ourselves, within our communities and our nations to determine which values are important to us, the content of what should be learned, and how it should be learned. This new direction must relate to theories firmly based on the traditions of our people.

This means that we must cut the shackles and make a new start. It is time for us to forget Band-Aiding; it is time for us to forget adapting; it is time for us to forget supplementing; it is time for us to forget the so-called standards, all of which have restricted our creativity in determining our own master plan. The authorities would have us believe that we are doing a great injustice to our people by abandoning these practices even though they have been nothing more than compromising approaches that have not worked for us. We must no longer listen to these senseless arguments.

Back in 1972 we believed that we could do a better job of educating our people. Through our policy statement *Indian Control of Indian Education,* we outlined a national position on education that stated clearly our principles and our goals in education (Kirkness, 1986, 1987; Kirkness & Selkirk Bowman, 1992; Charters-Voght, 1991). The two main principles of the policy were parental responsibility and local control. After years of the church and government making decisions for our people, it was a time for us to reclaim our right to speak for our children, to participate actively in determining what they should learn, how they should learn, and who should teach them.

Sadly, the policy of *Indian Control of Indian Education* has not unfolded as was expected. Two factors have been at play that have negatively affected the process. One was the manipulation of Indian Affairs to have us simply administer the schools as they had in the past. The second was our own peoples' insecurity in taking control and failing to design an education that would be based on our culture, our way of life, and most important our world view.

For many of our communities that have taken over their own schools and other educational institutions, much time has been lost either emulating the federal or public school systems or merely Band-Aiding, adapting, supplementing when

they should have been creating a unique and meaningful education. At the base of this attitude is the difficulty of overcoming colonial domination.

The greatest challenge is to be radical, to ask the right questions in the community, to ask the families what they want for their children. Only then will we be practicing what we set out to do in 1972, to have the parents set the agenda for education in our communities and then getting on with the plan. We cannot afford to lose any more time because we have let the opportunity for radical and effective change elude us for far too long. Cut the shackles! Freedom is our only recourse.

Cut the Crap

To move on, we must cut the crap and stop fooling ourselves. From the beginning of our experience with formal education, we have had it drummed into us that education was about mastering the "3 Rs." We are told that if we cannot read, 'rite, or do 'rithmetic, we are doomed to failure. We do not argue with this posture, but we do take exception to the use of their prescribed methods and their usual authorized textbooks. How, then, should we teach the 3 Rs to our children?

The Children of the Earth School in Winnipeg has the right idea. They have changed the 3 Rs to rediscovering (research), respect, and recovering the culture and traditions of our people. We must follow this lead and research our Aboriginal/tribal pedagogies so that the curriculum will accurately incorporate our traditions and cultures into what and how we teach. In other words, we must overhaul the existing system and seek more appropriate materials and strategies for teaching.

Our progress has also been hampered by the interpretation of *Indian Control of Indian Education*. For people in some of our communities who are making changes to the curriculum, they have taken "local control" literally to mean doing everything themselves for their respective schools. They develop programs, methods, and materials, but do not willingly share these with other schools, nor are they prepared to use materials designed by other First Nations schools. This results in duplication, and the value of sharing is lost.

I believe this is a mistake. In fact, a mechanism must be made available that will facilitate sharing of information related to education. For those who are computer-literate this may already be a possibility through the Internet. Almost 10 years ago I suggested that a "moccasin disk-line" be created for the sharing of educational materials. This would facilitate communication and enable schools or communities to maintain ownership of their materials, yet share them through sale or barter.

Although it is over 25 years since the policy of *Indian Control of Indian Education* was adopted, there is little evidence of real curriculum change. We must use all our resources to realize quality education not only for the children, but for all our people regardless of their level of study. Education into culture, not culture into education must be our practice, and we must believe that the answers are within us.

This leads me to why I say we must cut the crap. To illustrate a point, I would like to suggest that we consider a 4th "R", namely, rhetoric. It is common to hear our political leaders and educators speak eloquently about the importance of education and what we must do to improve it not only for today, but for future generations. We know all the right words; we sound like experts, but we fall short when it comes to putting our rhetoric into action.

We have heard, read, and even said many times over the last 25 years that quality education for Our people must be based on our culture and on our history, yet we continue to base education on white, urban culture and history.

We say that culture is language and language is culture and that to be Micmac, Ojibwe, Sto:lo, Cree, Haida we must speak our respective languages, yet we continue to teach our languages for only a few minutes a day in our schools, knowing that this approach is ineffective.

We say that our education must respect our values and customs, yet we encourage competition rather than cooperation, the individual over the group, saving instead of sharing. We are uncomfortable when too much time is spent outdoors learning from the land, because we have been conditioned to believe that education occurs in the classroom. We continue to adhere to the established school year even when it doesn't suit the life of the community.

The rhetoric goes on and on. We expound on the importance of our Elders. We say they are our teachers, our libraries, our archives, yet we rarely include them in a meaningful way. We rarely ask them anything. We are great at having our Elders come to say a prayer or tell a story, but surely this is not what we mean when we say we must learn from the Elders. Elders possess the wisdom and knowledge that must be the focus of all our learning. It is through them that we can understand our unique relationship to the Creator, our connection with nature, the order of things, and the values that enhance the identity of our people.

Not properly acknowledging the Elders is probably the most serious mistake we make as we attempt to create a quality education for our people. Let's face it; we can't do it without them. How can we learn about our traditions on which to base our education if we don't ask the Elders? Little is written by our people that we can turn to for this information.

If we sincerely believe that our traditions are important to us, we have no other recourse but to go to the Elders. I firmly believe that we must know the past in order to understand the present so that we can plan, wisely, for the future. It is up to this generation of educational leaders to tap that valuable resource, because each day, fewer and fewer Elders whose knowledge goes back at least two generations are left to teach us what we need to know. When they are gone, their valuable knowledge goes with them. It's like losing a whole library and its archives.

There is more rhetoric. We say that parents must play a major role in the education of their children, yet in many communities parents have no idea what is going on in the school. They are rarely invited to meetings to decide on directions to be taken. They are rarely asked for their original thoughts on how or what should be done in certain situations. School board meetings are often closed meetings. Of course, they are expected to attend on Report Card Day and if they don't, they are often simply ignored.

Parental responsibility, as stated in *Indian Control of Indian Education*, recognizes that parents must enjoy the same fundamental decision-making rights about their children's education as other parents across Canada. Today band councils and their designated authorities run our schools. Although membership on the band councils and school authorities undoubtedly includes parents, the intention of the policy was to include the parents of all schoolchildren in the shaping and running of the schools.

We talk also about the need for balance in our learning. We say that we must address not only the mind, but we must also address spiritual, emotional, and physical growth as well. Is there evidence of this balance in your school? Are children still deprived of recess or physical education classes as a punishment for a misdemeanor? How is spiritual and emotional growth addressed?

Finally, let's remind ourselves of our ancestors' relationship to the land. The land is our mother, Mother Earth. Are we teaching our children to respect the earth, to be environmentally aware? Are we in our communities practicing the kind of behavior that is appropriate to a child toward a mother?

There is no doubt that we have mastered the art of expressing what education for our people should be. The rhetoric is there, but where is the substance? I believe that what we are saying is inarguable. The problem comes with turning that rhetoric into action and doing those things we say are conducive to learning for our children rather than continuing to do the same old thing in the same old way. That is why I am advocating that we must first cut the shackles and free ourselves from mirroring a system that has not worked. Then we must cut the crap by less talk and more action, and finally we must cut the mustard, which is to practice what we preach.

Cut the Mustard

How do we cut the mustard? How do we get the job done? We must take a good, hard look at the education we are providing in our communities. I don't mean that we should have a formal evaluation with some high-powered, high-priced consultants who know nothing about our communities come in and do the job. Many communities have experienced this pitfall and found that what was recommended did not resemble anything that was said by them in the data collection. It was evident that the evaluators had a blueprint solution for Aboriginal education that was not necessarily valid for all communities.

What has to happen is that people of the community must come together (mothers, fathers, grandparents, high school, and postsecondary students, members of band councils or school boards, etc.) to address five simple questions about the education in their community. These questions, framed several years ago by my colleague, Clive Linklater, have been effective for those who have used them to evaluate and to design an innovative education plan for their school or community.

The first two questions are "Where are we now? How did we get to where we are?" By addressing these questions you will have done your own evaluation. You will have considered the history of education in your community. This might include having no formal school, having children taught informally through traditional teachings, having your children leave the family for a number of years, or having your children attend public schools in a nearby town or city. Why were these good or bad? If you have always had a school in your community, under which jurisdiction has education been most effective?

Questions three, four, and five deal with the formulation of your own model of education. "Where do we want to go? How will we get to where we want to go? How will we know when we are there?" Deciding on the kind of education you want for your children does not preclude the inclusion of certain programs and courses currently offered to them. It means that the focus of teaching and learning

is based on your community's philosophy, goals, and objectives that become central to everything that follows. Therefore, what you initiate and what you want to keep must correspond to that framework.

Considering the kind of education required provides the members of your community with an opportunity to share ideas on what would constitute an ideal education for your people as we approach the 21st century. It would typically include traditional values, a holistic approach, and technological and scientific advances of the modern age.

How do we get to where you want to go? This question refers to implementing your concept of an ideal education. It will be necessary to discuss the factors that will assist in the process and those that might hinder the process. In the case of the latter, thought will have to be given to how these obstacles can be addressed.

Finally, how will you know when you are there? You will know when you have achieved your goal of quality education when your children are enjoying the challenge of school/learning, when their self-esteem and self-confidence are evident, when your children are proud of who they are, when their links with the older generations are made.

You will know you have achieved your goal when most children who enter your system graduate and go on to further education or get a job, when they are living happy and fulfilled lives of their own making. This list could go on and on. What is clear is that it could take several years before you see the results of today's efforts much as it has taken many years to realize the devastation caused by residential schools and other forms of schooling.

There is, therefore, an urgency to cut the shackles, cut the crap, and cut the mustard. Our independence education will be based on a marriage of the past and the present. It will honor our cultures, which include our values, our languages, and our peoples' contributions to the development and progress of this vast country. Most importantly, you will have found in your quest for a meaningful education for your school or community that the answers you have been seeking can be found within yourselves, within your own communities.

Note

[1]Verna J. Kirkness gave this keynote address for the Treaty 7/Mokakit Education Research Conference: *Establishing Pathways to Excellence. Lifelong Learning: Together We Aspire, Together We Achieve,* held October 6-8, 1994, in Calgary, Alberta.

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