

Q'epethet ye Mestiyexw, **A Gathering of the People**

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The Halq'emeylem term *Q'epethet ye Mestiyexw*¹ comes from the language of the Sto:lo Nation of Southwestern British Columbia. It means The Gathering of the People. During the 1980s the Coqualeetza Cultural Centre provided cultural and educational learning opportunities to teachers and students attending elementary and secondary schools (public and band) in the Sto:lo Nation territory. These gatherings were called *Q'epethet ye Mestiyexw*. Elders and cultural teachers came together to teach others through stories, talks, and interactive learning activities.

The Elders and staff of the cultural centre had been developing a social studies curriculum, called the Sto:lo Sitel, for the elementary school level, from grades 1 to 7. At the time few teaching resources existed about Sto:lo history, culture, and language. Parents and community leaders were concerned about the inability of the public school system to address the learning needs of Sto:lo children adequately. They also believed that non-Sto:lo children would benefit from learning about Sto:lo culture and that cultural curriculum could bridge the gap that existed between First Nations and non-First Nations children. The Elders and the Coqualeetza Cultural Centre staff followed the principles of the Indian control of Indian education policy (NIB, 1972), which focused on parental involvement and local community control regarding curriculum.

The Elders and Sto:lo educators believed that it was important for all children to witness and experience the vitality of Sto:lo culture and knowledge through the *Q'epethet ye Mestiyexw*. These gatherings were primarily for the teachers and students who used the Sto:lo Sitel curriculum. Our culture experienced revitalization starting in the late 1960s that has continued to the present. The Elders continue to emphasize the importance of sharing our cultural knowledge and teachings. We continue to do this through educational curriculum, books, and new information technology. However, the importance of sitting together face to face, sharing stories, discussing issues, and engaging in collective planning and problem-solving remain invaluable.

In the contemporary world the concept of *Q'epethet ye Mestiyexw* takes on new meanings. Today in the academic context of the university, we live

in a time of challenges, controversy, and complexity. As more and more Aboriginal people take their places in the academy, discourses emerge to encourage positive changes in every aspect of our lives in the modern world. The influences of colonization continue. Our ancestors may have dreamed of our dilemmas and complexities, but now we are living these challenges in the modern world, day by day. If we make a commitment to the acquisition of new knowledge and respectful dialogue with each other, we will understand more. The sharing of this knowledge, acquired through our gatherings at academic events, can create new and exciting possibilities for positive changes in our communities.

This edition of the *Canadian Journal of Native Education (CJNE)* is a collection of scholarly work shared during one of our gatherings. We spent four weeks together sharing stories, finding new ways of relating to each other through both traditional and academic knowledge, celebrating our connections through the arts, and taking risks in many conversations that form our Aboriginal discourse. This journal is a vehicle that helps us to share our growing, changing, and healing with others who were unable to attend *Q'epethet ye Mestiyexw* 1999.

The goal of the July 1999 gathering was to create a bridge across the city of Vancouver between Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia, bridges between Aboriginal communities throughout British Columbia, and a bridge between British Columbia and the Maori of New Zealand in order to gather our friends, students, and faculty from the four directions. Jo-ann Archibald of the Sto:lo Nation and Director of the First Nations House of Learning and Carolyn Kenny of the Choctaw Nation and First Nations Education professor at Simon Fraser University led the initiative and helped to organize the various events. Many people contributed to the success of the summer events.

Q'epethet ye Mestiyexw Events

Graduate course: The sense of art: A First Nations perspective. Carolyn Kenny taught this course for Aboriginal graduate students from UBC and SFU. The students were challenged to conceptualize and then share their "sense of art." They read literature and participated in meaningful discussions, sharing their ideas about how song, dance, weaving, carving, and storytelling represent some of the deepest aspects of the histories, spiritual beliefs, and humor of their Aboriginal communities. They discussed the preventive and healing aspects of the arts and participated in experiential learning in order to feel the benefits of arts expression.

Graduate course: The politics of transforming education: Indigenous struggle for knowledge. Graham Hingangaroa Smith, Pro Vice Chancellor Maori, University of Auckland, was a UBC Noted Scholar during the 1999 university summer session and taught this course. The students examined the resistance and transformative educational strategies of the Maori of New Zealand, interrogated critical theory and colonization of Indigenous

peoples, and engaged in comparative analysis of the education of Indigenous people of Australia, Hawaii, and Canada. Students developed theoretical understandings about Indigenous education and shared practical applications for curriculum, pedagogy, policy, administration, and governance.

Conference held at SFU's Harbour Centre: The revitalization of Aboriginal societies: Land, language, philosophy, and arts. This conference offered presentations, performances, and workshops that reflected the important relationships between land, language, philosophy, and arts in the revitalization efforts of our people. Presenters from Cree, Sto:lo, Maori, Squamish, Choctaw, and Tseil-Watuth Nations offered their words, their stories, and their arts. They also facilitated discussions and experiential activities. Sharing food, singing, dancing, and much humor were important aspects of the gathering.

Symposium. Let's talk about Aboriginal languages, oral traditions, curricula, and research methodologies. The one-day symposium was held at the First Nations House of Learning at UBC. Panelists from Sto:lo, Tsimshian, Arapaho, and Maori Nations shared stories and papers about the topics mentioned above. The speakers gave us much to think about regarding the beauty and power of Aboriginal languages, the struggles that communities experience trying to offer culturally relevant programs and curriculum, and the ethical challenges of doing quality research. The symposium participants also participated in talking circles to discuss the topics and share their perspectives on culturally appropriate research methodology.

Short courses. Principals of First Nations Schools and Managing First Nations Schools. Two four-day noncredit courses were held at the First Nations House of Learning at UBC. Chief Nathan Matthew of the North Thompson First Nation facilitated the courses. Participants from across Canada discussed and shared information about First Nations curriculum, language immersions programs, First Nations arts, special education issues, policies, finance, and planning. A beneficial aspect of these professional development courses is that the principals and school board members can talk with one another about their struggles and successes and create a collegial network among First Nations schools across Canada.

We begin this theme edition of CJNE with two articles that acknowledge the importance of the oral tradition. Traditional and life experience stories are at the core of First Nations oral tradition. Most important, one speaks *from the heart* and brings together the heart and mind (knowledge) for good learning.

In "Where There Are Always Wild Strawberries," Ethel Gardner creates a sophisticated example of the use of metaphor and story. It is offered in the oral tradition style and was one of the presentations at the

summer conference. Her talk integrated the four aspects of our revitalization process in the context of a story: land, language, philosophy, and arts. Gardner also offers a beautiful feeling tone, one that yearns for the thriving of Aboriginal cultures and languages. This yearning is a sign of healthy development and can be a symbol of strength and renewal among our people.

Te Tuhi Robust tells us a story that shows the strength of Maori culture and community to take over the administration of a school in the Motatau community in the Bay of Islands area of New Zealand. His article, "Backing Into the Future: Motatau Bilingual School," was presented at the symposium. His oral presentation integrated all aspects of the topics: language, oral traditions, curricula, and methodologies. The struggles and triumphs of this Maori community and their school are similar to those of many First Nations schools and local community education authorities across Canada. Robust also shows us the importance of sharing these stories through a qualitative research methodology that is critical, reflective, and culturally responsive.

Michael Marker's article "Economics and Local Self-Determination: Describing the Clash Zone in First Nations Education" critically examines how First Nations educational self-determination is shaped by economic pressures, political forces, and tensions between local community needs and institutional control. He told his personal experience story of developing a teacher education program at a tribal college at the symposium. His research narrative is an important beginning and departure point for further critical qualitative research. Marker shows how we can cross various kinds of borders in order to affirm and assert Indigenous education. Most important, he reminds us of the importance of maintaining our cultural connections to the land and of sharing our stories that are experienced in our territories.

Mae Kirkpatrick proposes that everything is art in her article "The Nature of Art and the Stele7esht Community." A reflection of her studies in the summer graduate courses, her article explores concepts of art and transformation, giving examples from her own Stele7esht peoples of the Nlaka'pamux Nation. Kirkpatrick shares traditional knowledge of her people through poetry, story, and song. She provides an example of how the Maori have been able to make progress in their own revitalization process.

In "Maori Education: Revolution and Transformative Action" Graham Smith tells us more about this revitalization process by describing the highly successful efforts of the Maori people to save their language and culture through the educational system, beginning with the youngest children. This revolution reflects a philosophy, *Kaupapa Maori*, which now permeates all Maori initiatives and helps to inspire and inform the continuing regeneration of Maori language and culture throughout New

Zealand. Smith explains the scholarly influences on Maori practice that have become a part of the discourse among Aboriginal peoples in New Zealand and summarizes the lessons in transformative praxis from the Maori perspective.

We hope this special edition of the *Canadian Journal of Native Education* will give you a sense of the spirit of our gathering, a feeling for the important relationships we developed, and an awareness of the knowledge we acquired in our gatherings over the month. It was a time of learning, changing, and healing. When we honor the spirit of *Q'epethet ye Mestiyexw* we experience a deep and meaningful feeling of respect for our connections with each other and an appreciation for the importance of new knowledge. This new knowledge will help to shape the lives of our children and many generations into the future. Our children will continue to hear the call of the drum, which signals us to gather and to learn. Lee Crowchild of the Tsuu T'ina Nation digitally designed our drum logo. The drum also reminds us of our shared heartbeat as Aboriginal peoples and our connection to Mother Earth. The eagle, trees, mountains, and sun symbolize the special relationship we have to Mother Earth and Sky Father and all their resources.

Our Elders teach us to "bring our hearts and minds together for the benefit of the younger and future generations." *Q'epethet ye Mestiyexw* enables us to create a place, a space, for good thinking, reflection, problem-solving, and planning at university campuses such as UBC and SFU. In the days ahead we look forward to hearing the drum calling us to gather once more to share and create Indigenous knowledge.

Note

¹*Q'epethet ye Mestiyexw*: A Gathering of the People is also the title of a three-year research project funded by the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia. Some of the 1999 Summer Gathering activities were part of the larger research project. See the First Nations House of Learning web site for more information on the research project: www.longhouse.ubc.ca.

References

National Indian Brotherhood. (1972). *Indian control of Indian education*. Ottawa: Author.