

Empowering Aboriginal Voice in Aboriginal Education

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This article is a summary pertaining to the importance of teaching our children our history and ways as they relate to our respective territories. It is based on data collected from the Onyota'a:ka of the Thames community. The findings of this study show that language and ceremony are important aspects of enhancing voice to nurture confidence and creativity of the schoolchildren. The voices of Aboriginal peoples need to be encouraged and need to be heard in the school systems that the Aboriginal students attend.

For many years the voice of the Aboriginal People has been silenced due to the educational system that was thrust upon us by Euro-Western proponents in their zeal to assimilate the Indigenous people of North America. This article reiterates the importance of teaching our children our history and ways as they relate to our respective territories. Language, the mechanism that transmits the culture to each generation, has been suppressed to the extent that few fluent speakers are available for our young people to emulate. Because language is important, this article begins with the introduction of myself in the Oneida language of the Iroquois. Then I will bring the Thanksgiving Address as a teaching and ceremony from the Iroquois territory as this is a necessary tradition to promote the continuation of balance and harmony in our societies. The third part of this article deals with my study "Reclaiming Voice."

Shekoli. Ukwehonwe ne i. Onyota' a: ka tsi twa ka tuh ti. Tsyot s^ nit ne Hotinishonee ne yu kyats. Ka li wi suks ne kya tu he' yu kyats. Eileen Antone ne ah slo ni kek, ne yu kyats. A no wal ni wa ke ta lo t^.

Hello. I am one of the Original people of North America. I come from Onyota'a:ka. Tsyot s^ nit is my Longhouse name and "Ka li wi suks" is my research name, meaning "She Who Gathers Information." Eileen Antone is my English name. I belong to the Turtle clan of the Oneida Nation.

It has taken me a long time to be able to bring you greetings in my traditional language, the language that the Creator gave to my ancestors to pass down to all generations of Onyota'a:ka people.

It was because of racist and discriminatory government policies that I was not taught the language of my people. I was led to believe that only the language of the dominant culture was valid and acceptable. Many of our parents and grandparents experienced the oppression of these policies and believed it was better for them not to teach their children and grandchildren to speak the beautiful language that carries the culture, values, and beliefs.

Our Elders tell us that whenever we meet for any reason we offer the words that come before all else. In English these words are called the Thanksgiving

Address. Here we offer prayers of thanksgiving to the Creator and all of creation. And so it will be in our minds.

Before we do anything else we bring our minds together as one and give thanks for one another. Let it be so in our minds.

We give thanks to and for Mother Earth as she brings and sustains life for all of Creation. Let it be so in our minds.

We are thankful for all the fruits that grow on Mother Earth, and especially the strawberry the first fruit of the season referred to as the heart berry. For the medicines from all of plant life that are made from the smallest grasses to the tallest trees. We give thanks for the tobacco we use to send our prayers to the Creator. For all the different trees, and especially the maple that brings to us its sweet juice as the plant world comes to life again in the spring. Let it be so in our minds.

We give thanks to and for all the different kinds of animals that help sustain our lives. And in our area, especially the deer who supplied us with food, clothing and shelter. We are thankful for the smallest crawlers to the largest four legged that each has a place in the ecosystem. Let it be so in our minds.

We give thanks to and for all the different birds that bring us joy and music. Each has a different song they share with us. We are also thankful for the beauty they bring with their many different colours and for the responsibility they have for spreading seeds to the various areas of the earth. Let it be so in our minds.

We give thanks to and for the waters found in the lakes, rivers, and streams great and small. Without water there would be no life. We also give thanks for the fish that continue to keep the waters clean for us. Let it be so in our minds.

We give thanks that each one of these creations continues to carry out their duties and responsibilities that were given to them by the Creator.

We give thanks for the forces that work together with the earth, our grandfathers the thunders, who bring the rain to renew the earth. For our eldest brother the sun who gives us light and warmth. For our grandmother moon, who regulates the waters and all of the life cycles on the earth. For the stars that are our relatives, they beautify the sky and continue to guide us in our yearly cycles for hunting, planting, and harvesting. Let it be so in our minds.

We give thanks to and for the four messengers who give us guidance and continue to carry out their duties and responsibilities. Let it be so in our minds.

We give thanks for the prophet Handsome Lake, Skanyatalio who reminds us of the way to a wholesome life, by observing our traditions and our ceremonies.

We bring together our minds and give thanks to the Creator of all, for it is the Creator that has brought us together as one. So let it be in our minds. *Nya wa.*

My work concerns the reclaiming of voice and is based on personal experience and a case study of the Onyota'a:ka of the Thames (also known as the Oneida Nation of the Thames) and their experience in the formal Euro-western educational system. The primary data that I used for my work came from the perspectives of Onyota'a:ka people and their personal learning experiences.

As a First Nations¹ teacher educated in the conventional Euro-western educational system, I wanted to know more about the Native ways of learning and teaching. My experience from this system did not feel complete. I knew what was required according to the Western perspective from whence my training derived,

but felt that the Aboriginal perspective was missing. Euro-western education has been superimposed on Aboriginal communities for a long time even though there was a traditional way of education in each Aboriginal nation. In the course of my research, I came across a poem entitled "Education." Arthur Solomon, an Anishnawbe spiritual teacher, wrote this song of hope. It goes like this:

The traditional way of education
was by example and experience
and by storytelling.
The first principle involved was total respect
and acceptance of the one to be taught.
And that learning was a continuous process
from birth to death.
It was a total continuity without interruption.
Its nature was like a fountain
that gives many colours and flavours of water
and that whoever chose could drink as much or as little
as they wanted to and whenever they wished.
The teaching strictly adhered
to the sacredness of life whether of human
or animals or plants.
But in the course of history there came a disruption.
And then education became "compulsory miseducation"
for another purpose, and the circle of life was broken
and the continuity ended.
It is that continuity which is now taken
up again in the spiritual rebirth
of the people.
(Solomon 1991, p. 79)²

The message in this poem written by the Anishnawbe spiritual Elder broke the spell of the Euro-western concepts that had led me to believe that the Native ways of learning and teaching were insignificant. His assertion that education became "compulsory miseducation" for the Native people has challenged and empowered me to search for ways to restore the circle of life and the continuity of learning at the Onyota'a:ka of the Thames Nation. Although the message in this poem has allowed me to relate to the Native concept of the sacredness of life that has sustained my people for thousands of years, it has been a difficult journey to realign my cognitive processes and relate to a bigger picture: one that does not negate the Aboriginal world view, but lifts it to a primary position of inclusion and equality.

Aboriginal-Western Relationship

Before I began a concerted effort to find out how the Onyota'a:ka child could best be served in the educational process, I did not understand anything about the underlying Euro-western principles that Native schools were built on. I only knew that I was made to feel inferior; and that if I "worked" hard enough maybe some day I would be just like the white people who were running the schools and every other system I was affiliated with. I did not understand that the objective of the school system was to assimilate the Native people so we would no longer know who we were and would take on only the values of the dominant society.

The findings of my study reflect the work of previous research pertaining to the education of the Native people. That is, the system has failed in its attempt to get rid of the "Indian Problem." It has also failed to meet the needs of the Native people.

The initial task of this research journey was to examine my own learning experience as a participant in the formal educational school system at Onyota'a:ka. In retrospect I realized how silenced and muted my voice had become. I was literally unable to talk to people. How did this happen? It may have resulted from an accumulation of contributing factors such as when you see other children getting the strap in school for speaking their own Native language and when you get scolded by the teacher for sounding as if you have a hot potato in your mouth when you talk. It is easier to remain quiet than to suffer the punishment for speaking. I learned to keep quiet.

When I asked the participants to relate their learning experiences, I did not know what kind of information they would be willing to share, but as I reviewed their stories I found there were a number of times when their voices had also been silenced as a result of their schooling. From my literature review, the interviews, and personal observations I came to see that this silence was the result of many factors such as government policies and Indian agents; residential schools and missionaries; community reserve schools and non-Native teachers; and Native teachers educated in the Euro-western system with a specific mandate for education.

The educational journey that I embarked on to complete a doctoral degree was an excellent opportunity for me to explore the schooling system of the Native people of Canada. It has allowed me to examine my own path through the system. I can see where some of my experiences in the school system have caused me to be silent, but I can also see where some of the experiences in the school system have been positive and allowed me to regain my voice. For example, when I worked with the Native students in alternative schools in custody facilities, I was able to exercise my voice in the Native way to enable them to experience success in their studies. Another positive experience was meeting Dr. Hunt, a visionary and creative professor who encouraged me to examine my learning experience so that I would have a better understanding and awareness of the education experienced by the Native people. With this new awareness of the Euro-western educational process I have come to realize the importance of having a positive self-identity in my own traditions to be able to exercise my voice in the concerns of my people.

Although my study examined a number of issues relating to the learning experiences of the Onyota'a:ka people, I focus on the results of the formal-education and the traditional-education aspects of my findings.

I found that the formal education of the Onyota'a:ka people was a way of silencing them by the dominant society. The Onyota'a:ka were exposed to education under the auspices of the Indian Act where the federal government assumed complete control of Aboriginal children and their schooling. Battiste (1995), a Micmac educator, describes the objectives and outcome of formal education for the Aboriginal peoples:

For a century or more, the DIAND [Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development] attempted to destroy the diversity of Aboriginal world-views, cultures, and languages. It defined education as transforming the mind of Aboriginal youth rather than educating it. Through ill-conceived government policies and plans, Aboriginal youths were subjected to a combination of powerful but profoundly distracting forces of cognitive imperialism and colonization. Various boarding schools, industrial schools, day schools, and Eurocentric educational practices ignored or rejected the world-views, languages and values of Aboriginal parents in the education of their children. The outcome was the gradual loss of these world-views, languages, and cultures and the creation of widespread social and psychological upheaval in Aboriginal communities. (p. viii)

The consequence of the formal education and mind transformation had a crushing effect on Native communities.

Hampton (1995), an Aboriginal scholar, used the medicine wheel typology as an organizing principle for the redefinition of Indian education. He postulates that the six directions (above or the spiritual realm, east, south, west, north, and the earth) are a way of thinking about existing in the universe. He says, "It directs us to think of Indian education as dynamic" with "movement" and "historical development." He tells us that:

The west is the direction of autumn, the end of summer, and the precursor of winter. On the great plains, thunderstorms roll in from the west. In Lakota cosmology, the good red road of life runs north and south and the road of death runs east and west. (p. 31)

In his analogy he equates the west direction to autumn, which is likened to death. He says:

The coming of Western civilization (meaning western Europe), with its Western forms of education, to this continent was the autumn of traditional Indian education. In the fall, the wild grass dies. The Europeans took our land, our lives, and our children like the winter snow takes the grass. The loss is painful but the seed lives in spite of the snow. In the fall of the year, the grass dies and drops its seed to lie hidden under the snow. Perhaps the snow thinks the seed has vanished but it lives on hidden, or blowing in the wind, or clinging to the plant's leg of progress. (p. 31)

Once again in relation to this study the direction of west on the medicine wheel can be used to indicate the death of education that was originally brought to the Onyota'a:ka people by the Euro-western educators. The seeds that lay hidden beneath the winter snow of the Euro-western educational system experienced a spring of regrowth with roots deeper into the earth allowing for another journey through the summer sun.

Following the analogy of the medicine wheel and the seed, the education of the Onyota'a:ka people has been journeying through the summer cycle of growth. Just as plants are cross-pollinated to produce stronger seeds the Onyota'a:ka people experienced various teaching situations to help them weather the harshness of winter. Hampton (1995) states, "The north demands that we understand survival; it teaches endurance and wisdom. Its lessons can be hard and it is not enough to be good, or smart. The north demands knowledge" (p. 33).

With the advancement of alternative models of education advocated by Aboriginal theorists the voice for Aboriginal education is increasing.

Traditional Education

The literature pertaining to traditional education indicates the importance of the learning and teaching that takes place in Aboriginal communities. When this does not occur the voice of the people is silenced. The participants of this study reveal that traditional education continues to be an important way of learning. Cajete (1994), an Aboriginal educator from the southwest, states:

By watching, listening, experiencing, and participating everyone learned what it was to be one of the People, and how to survive in community with others. Learning how to care for one's self and others, learning relationship between people and other things, learning the customs, traditions, and values of a community: all of these understandings and more were the daily course of Indigenous education. (p. 176)

There is much learning that takes place outside of the classroom that in the past was not considered to be of value. In the Onyota'a:ka community the parents now realize the need to pass on the traditions that are important to them. A piece of art (Figure 1) called "Passing on the Traditions" by my daughter Rosalind depicts the suppressed traditions that are being revived and passed on to the next generation. The Elders tell us that these traditions are contained in the blood memory of our people, and now they are coming out of the shadows to be revived for use in our present-day cultures.

Recent developments concerning Indigenous education indicate that more and more educators are validating the traditional education that children learn from the home environment.

As Cajete (1994) explored the tribal foundations of Indian education he asserts that:

We are tracking the earliest sources of human teaching and learning. These foundations teach us that learning is a subjective experience tied to a place environmentally, socially, and spiritually. Tribal teaching and learning was intertwined with the daily lives of both teacher and learner. Tribal education was a natural outcome of living in close communion with each other and the natural environment. (p. 33)

Listening to the life histories of Aboriginal speakers helps educators become more aware of culturally appropriate education. Leavitt (1994), a non-Aboriginal scholar, states, "Life history, whether spoken or written, is helpful because it contains not only reflections on education but also indications of the cultural context in which learning and teaching take place" (p. 183). With the advent of culturally appropriate ways of learning and teaching the Aboriginal voice will be illuminated.



Figure 1. *Passing on the traditions.*

As indicated by this study and the literature review, the traditional knowledge and values of the Native people have not been valued by mainstream approaches to education; consequently, their voice has been silenced. Cajete (1994) states:

Alienation from mainstream approaches to education have been one of the consistent criticisms leveled against modern education by

Indian students. Beyond compensatory programs, remediation, and programs that attempt to bridge the social orientations of students with those of the school, they have been given few choices of school curricula that truly address their alienation. Most attempts at addressing these issues have revolved around refitting the problematic Indian student to the system that caused their alienation. Too often, the Indian student is viewed as the problem, rather than the unquestioned approaches, attitudes, and curricula of the educational system. The knowledge, values, skills, and interests that Indian students possess are largely ignored in favor of strategies aimed at enticing them to conform to mainstream education. (p. 188)

Although the Onyota'a:ka students did try to fit into the mainstream process of education, they continued to maintain their traditional knowledge, values, skills, and interests. The Onyota'a:ka people must continue to validate the traditional knowledge, values, and skills they have in order for them to survive as a unique Aboriginal nation. In the document *Tradition and Education* (Charleston, 1988) it states:

Children are the most precious resource of the First Nations. They are the link to the past generations, the enjoyment of present generations, and the hope for the future. First Nations intend to prepare their children to carry on their cultures and governments. (p. 1)

As the literature and interviews reveal, Onyota'a:ka along with other Aboriginal people continue to strive for cultural wholeness as they seek to prepare their children to carry on their nations with traditional knowledge and values.

Archibald (1995) states:

First Nations people traditionally adopted a holistic approach to education. Principles of spiritual, physical, and emotional growth, as well as economic and physical survival skills, were developed in each individual to ensure eventual family and village survival. Certain learning specialities in these areas were emphasized, including independence, self-reliance, observation, discovery, empirical practicality, and respect for nature. (p. 289)

Hampton (1995) developed 12 standards for Indian education. He says that these standards should be addressed by any theory of Indian education. His fifth standard of Indian education is tradition. This standard states that:

Indian education maintains a continuity with tradition. Our traditions define and preserve us. It is important to understand that this continuity with tradition is neither a rejection of the artifacts of other cultures nor an attempt to "turn back the clock." (p. 29)

Miriam-Rose (Stairs, 1994) states, "We must always remember that culture is something that does not stop still; it develops through challenges and interaction of people and events or it becomes distorted and dies" (p. 63). Hampton (1995) reiterates this concept when he states:

Asking Natives to eschew automobiles, television, and bank accounts in the name of preserving their culture makes as much sense as asking whites to give up gunpowder because it was invented by the Chinese or the zero because it was invented by Arabs. It is the continuity of living culture that is important to Indian education. (p. 29)

Stairs (1994) in her study "Indigenous Ways to Go to School" suggests that the ongoing negotiations between traditional and formal models of learning in Indigenous schools needs to expand to the level of cultural meaning and values. She states:

Both indigenous teachers and cultural studies beyond the school are contributing to educational negotiations at this level of meaning and value. In the Mohawk schools described ... the Iroquoian Thanksgiving Address is used as a foundation for all curriculum. The address offers thanks for all aspects of the universe and all levels of creation in a cycle from the earth through the forms of life to the stars. (p. 69)

The Aboriginal voice is lifted up when traditional knowledge and values are incorporated into the education of the Native students in the school system. To be in balance one must have a positive self-identity. The past school system did not promote a positive identity for the students. This study indicates that a positive self-identity is imperative for academic success.

From the results of this research it appears that the Onyota'a:ka recognize the need for a strong Native identity in order to maintain a balance between their society and mainstream society. Because education is a primary socializing agent in the community one of the main goals needs to be the development of programs that promote a positive identity for the Native student.

The data from this study indicate that Onyota'a:ka require a bilingual-bicultural type of education to make the circle complete. To date they have been operating in only one half of the circle. This must change because the Onyota'a:ka are a distinct nation and need to validate and promote their half of the circle in order to journey through life with balanced eyes.

As stated above, my voice had become muted and silenced during my journey through the elementary and secondary school system. Only in recent years have I been able to develop and reestablish my voice as an Onyota'a:ka. It gives me great pleasure to manifest my identity and heritage through my art. When I was a young child our class was studying the explorations by the Euro-western settlers. One of the classroom projects was to construct a large mural that would be hung across the front wall to depict the adventures of the new people on Turtle Island. I wanted to participate in the drawing activities that were taking place, but the classroom teacher decided that I could not draw to her standards, so I would not be able contribute to the large picture. I learned to devalue my creative ability. Although during my intermediate years I received more encouragement to pursue my art, I still believed that I could not do an adequate job.

Awareness of the historical process used in the Euro-western education system of the Native peoples of Canada has allowed me to regain my voice. This in turn allowed me to value and respect every aspect of my Onyota'a:ka ancestry. One way I learned to assert my voice was in the world of visual art. This allowed me to pursue my creative ability to depict my heritage and be proud of whom I am. My work (Figure 2) entitled "Onyota'a:ka" is a manifestation of the belief of who I am as an Onkwehonwe. This is an acrylic painting completed on stretched deerhide. Many circles of understanding are presented in this painting. Onyota'a:ka is represented as part of the circle of life. In the circle each part of creation has a place and all parts are equal. The lacing of the deerhide represents the web of life and how all parts of creation relate and connect to each other. The use of the deer hide demonstrates the respect and significance the deer had in the Onkwehonwe traditional society.

The large stone in the center represents the name of the Onyota'a:ka people, which translates to People of the Standing Stone. There is a wonderful history

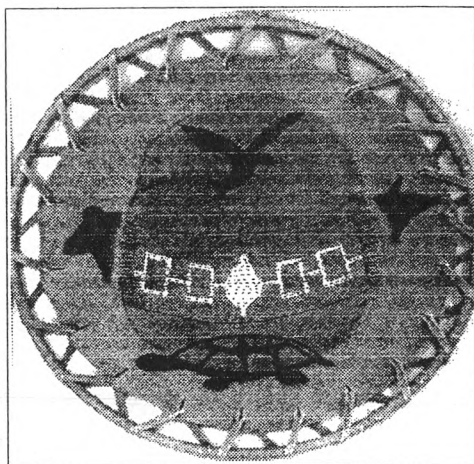


Figure 2. *Onyota'a:ka*.

about this stone that many of the young people do not know or hear and so are unable to value and respect it. The three animals alongside the stone represent the three clans of the Onyota'a:ka. The bear clan are the medicine people; the turtle clan are the leaders; and the wolf clan are the warriors and protectors of the people. The clan system was used to help regulate Onkwehonwe society. These teachings are also necessary for our people to know so they can identify with the meaning and richness of the culture. I remember hearing about a youth asking why other cultures had such beautiful

crests and symbols to identify with when all we had were animals. The clan system held no historical significance for this child. It is important to relate the teachings of the animal clans, which are many and varied and beautiful.

The Hiawatha Belt, another history teaching tool, is a wampum belt that represents the forming of the Five Nations. It was designed to show the Iroquois Confederacy: Mohawk, Onyota'a:ka, Onondaga, Seneca, and Cayuga. The end paths were left open, so anyone wishing to join the confederacy was welcome. In the early 1700s the Tuscarora joined the confederacy. The middle symbol of the belt is where the weapons of war were buried under the Tree of Peace. This is also where the sacred fire of peace was lit, hence the Onondaga nation became the Firekeepers. The eagle was a large, strong bird with the gift of long vision, so the Creator placed the eagle above the Tree of Peace to give warning of any danger that approached the people of the confederacy. Many teachings are associated with the great eagle. The turtle also represents the creation story of the Iroquois people. The turtle gave its large strong back so that Turtle Island, also known as North America, could be created for the Aboriginal people. The four elements of life are also represented in this painting. Without air, water, fire, and earth there would be no life; it is important to keep these elements safe so that seven generations into the future are protected in the circle of life.

Many more teachings are to be found in this painting, too many to relate now. These are the kinds of stories that our youth need to hear to give voice and balance to the learning of a positive identity.

This kind of work of art could be used to design a curriculum of the history of the Onyota'a:ka. So as we come to the conclusion of this article, "Never forget that our teachings must promote self-worth, dignity and empowerment to our children, in all of our communities wherever our territories are."

Tho nah yaw^h (Let it be so).

Note

¹Throughout this article the expression *First Nations* refers to the Indigenous people of North America. *First Nations* is used interchangeably with *Aboriginal*, *Native*, and *Indigenous*. The term *Indian* is legal terminology used in legislation such as the Indian Act, which governs the First Nations people of Canada. The word *Indian* is used in direct quotes.

²I would like to take this opportunity to thank Anne and Sister Eva Solomon for permission to use this poem called "Education." Contributions to assist Aboriginal students can be made to Eva and Art Solomon Bursary Fund, c/o Mark Hazlett, Laurentian University, Ramsey Lake Road, Sudbury ON.

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