

Learning from Promising Programs and Applications in Nourishing the Learning Spirit

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Aboriginal learners represent a growing demographic in Canada. Despite changes in diverse educational systems that support their learning, few scholars, practitioners, and administrators understand the worldviews and epistemologies governing learning. These foundations are held by the Elders and the traditional teachers. It is the purpose of this essay to distill the foundations of Aboriginal learning, programs where these principles operate, and instructive teachings for how the knowledge our Elders and traditional teachers hold may be applied in formal learning.

Introduction

The education of First Nations learners was the prime concern of their ancestors when they negotiated treaties with the Queen's representatives. It was also central to the shared vision for the next seven generations and to an enriched livelihood for First Nations (Henderson, 1995). These treaties created specific educational rights in First Nations families and a corresponding duty and obligation to the Crown to finance educational facilities and opportunities. However, Canadian educators have not been able to implement this vision. Federal residential schools and assimilative provincial schools have failed to fulfill the educational promises of the treaties. Despite the many changes that have been made to Canada's educational system over the years, the Office of the Auditor General of Canada has reported that it will take more than twenty years of accelerated and restorative education for First Nations schools to catch up to the national average for high school graduation (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2000). This presents a significant educational challenge and a crucial test of the resolve of many educators, policymakers, and First Nations people to improve learning and educational outcomes, not only when they are in formal structured learning, but also as adult learners.

Aboriginal people are the fastest growing demographic in Canada. Fifty-eight percent of Aboriginal people are under the age of twenty-five

compared to twenty-three percent of non-Aboriginal people. One-third of the Aboriginal population is under fourteen years of age, and the birthrate is growing at a rate that is approximately seventy percent more than that of non-Aboriginal Canadians (Avison, 2004). The population growth becomes compelling when the educational attainments of Aboriginal peoples are not on par with the non-Aboriginal population. This disparity inevitably affects their socio-economic capacities and their collective well-being. While First Nations graduation rates have been rising nationally—especially in British Columbia, where the graduation rate is higher for both First Nations at 48.4 percent and for their provincial average at 80.4 percent—the national average remains at 42 percent compared to the national average of 78 percent (Avison, 2004). Yet, despite having some demographics on student graduation, little is known about First Nations learners, their challenges and successes, the contexts that create those challenges or successes, or the communities' collective learning foundations.

The best information on Aboriginal peoples is still the five-volume report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1996), which conducted comprehensive, community-based research and extensive policy analysis using Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers and policy analysts. In their final report, RCAP noted that education was a high priority for Aboriginal people in Canada, despite the fact that formal structured schooling had been the primary source of their disaffection with formal learning from the residential schools and assimilative day schools. Most parents still believe that education holds the promise for their future well-being. Given the diverse historical, cultural, social, and economic circumstances of Aboriginal people in different parts of the country, educational reform will not be achieved by a singular sweeping policy (Chandler & Lalonde, 2004, 2005). Rather, there are many complex issues to be resolved in learning that structured education can only begin to address, if it can, these being the existence of racism and neocolonialism within the education system, the product of the privilege given to Euro-Canadian knowledge and values (RCAP, 1996, p. 4).

Relatively little is known of the principles of Aboriginal learning and the kind of programs, curriculum, pedagogy, environment, policies, and practices that contribute to that learning and to Aboriginal peoples' progress (Anuik, Battiste, & George, 2008). Promising policies, practices, and administrative and funding supports have helped First Nations educators to achieve the principles of Indian Control of Indian Education. However, the curriculum, teacher training, and administrative practices continue to operate from Eurocentric foundations, although local capacity building in First Nations schools has resulted in increases in graduation rates and in the number of Aboriginal teachers working in both First Nations and public schools. Overall, the lack of monitoring and reporting at the provincial and federal levels, with regard to Aboriginal learners, cre-

ates a resource challenge in terms of what is needed to enable schools serving First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners to fulfill their educational aspirations (Avison, 2004). The additional challenge is that the provinces and territories, and federal government and First Nations schools, do not collect the same information or share information across jurisdictions in order to understand the global issues regarding learning and education among Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

In this essay, former lead researchers for the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre's animation theme bundle, *Nourishing the Learning Spirit*, have combined knowledge, experience, and reviews of literature to offer lessons learned and promising practices from our search across Canada of diverse types of learning issues and programming, findings that may also contribute to the gaps in information across jurisdictions. In this essay, we offer an understanding of the nature of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learning and suggest needed transformations from the perspective of three authors: a Mi'kmaw woman educator, who has been a former education director and principal of a Mi'kmaw First Nations school and now professor of education and director of the Aboriginal Education Research Centre at the University of Saskatchewan; a First Nations adult literacy advocate and program developer who has worked with the National Indigenous Literacy Association and as a practitioner in adult literacy learning; and a non-Aboriginal scholar whose recently completed PhD dissertation emphasizes that for lifelong learning and social and economic development to be meaningful, long-term, and profitable, leadership must come from within communities and reflect the priorities that both leaders and families see as important to their well-being. We have brought together perspectives on literacy and learning that seek to support First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. We consider these changes to be vital to the future of education and to the future of all Canadians.

Overview

Aboriginal Elders, cultural resource people, and Indigenous scholars believe that to identify, comprehend, and nourish the learning spirit requires educators to recognize that all learners are "spirit, heart, mind, and body" (Anuik, Battiste, & George, 2008, p. 3), a part of creation, and have a purpose that is, most importantly, driven by their spirit (Anuik, Battiste, & George, 2008). Dedicated practitioners have erected the scaffolds necessary to support learners on their journey to the discovery or reclamation of their learning spirits. Firstly, this paper discusses the foundations of Aboriginal lifelong learning. Secondly, this paper travels through the lifelong learning journey with stopovers at the following sites: Kapachee Training Centre in Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan; Seven Generations Education Institute at Fort Frances, Ontario; and *Toqwa'tu'kl Kjjitaqnn*/Integrative Science Program at Cape Breton University in Syd-

ney, Nova Scotia. In addition to providing nourishment for the spirit, the practitioners and scholars who work at these aforementioned learning centres have responded to educational needs articulated by community members and have addressed gaps in programs and facilities. Thirdly, Anishinaabe literacy practitioner (George) provides examples of her practices in literacy classes that she teaches. We conclude with some policy recommendations for Aboriginal education in Canada that support Aboriginal students' learning.

Understanding the Nature of the Learning Spirit

The quest for the learning spirit is part of a lifelong learning journey that Aboriginal peoples have long sought to accomplish. Elder Danny Musqua says, "Our spirit is said to be an internalized vehicle which we use to acquire knowledge around us through our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits, in a balanced way" (Elder Danny Musqua, in Knight, 2007, p. 41). Our learning, then, is a journey to discover and understand what our spirit is here to accomplish. This learning journey differs from a secular journey that individualism in modern society has attempted to achieve. Ermine (1995) asserts that, at contact, European explorers had set out on an external physical journey, an uncharted destination in outer space, the physical. For some of these explorers, their purpose was adventure in search of lands and resources for their monarchies and for others it was to flee from oppressive conditions and poverty imposed by those same monarchies. Regardless of their purpose, these European adventurers met First Nations peoples who had already accomplished the physical knowing and were on a delicate path into inner space, the metaphysical. The explorers, in their journals, often remarked of First Nations peoples who knew extensively of the physical realm, so much so that they had names for every feature of their physical environment: the rivers, the land, the mountains, and every species, flora, and fauna (Battiste, 1986). They also have held a strong spiritual foundation that is still evident and strongly felt in their cultural traditions (RCAP, 1996; CMEC, 2009).

First Nations' search for their inner knowledge came from the connections they had made with those physical and metaphysical elements in their territories and has become the source of knowing that remains the core of Indigenous knowledge and the foundations of personal development and of Aboriginal epistemology. In many of the programs that we examined in our literature reviews and program scans, Aboriginal practitioners have held, as their guiding principle, that the learner is the most important person in the program (NADC, 2002, p. 5). An Aboriginal scholar, who attended our *Nourishing the Learning Spirit* dialogue at Banff, Alberta in May 2007, aptly noted that "when a baby is born, the relatives validate the infant, and a natural process unfolds. The Creator provides, and the caretakers take over" (Atleo, in Anuik & Battiste, 2008, p. 13).

Accordingly, the first and most important level of accountability is to all of our learners. However, learners are part of social and physical ecologies that condition their learning (Cajete, 1994). Therefore, practitioners believe that using an holistic approach is an effective means of meeting that individual accountability through engaging their learning spirit, that state of being in which individuals are highly motivated to reach a goal and to seek whatever learning assists in attaining that goal (George, in press). Hill (1999), an Aboriginal educator, defines holistic this way:

Holistic ... embraces the qualities and characteristics necessary 'to become a whole person.' A whole person denotes a human being who is capable of balancing his/her mental, emotional, physical and spiritual human capabilities both internally within oneself and externally in societal interaction with all life forms present throughout Creation. (p. 18)

Thus, practitioners are creatively finding ways and means to recognize and nurture all aspects of the learner in the learning environment—spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical—within a network of social relations where all are connected by mutual respect.

Success for Aboriginal peoples is based on self-mastery and learning about one's special gifts and competencies. This is a level of achievement that is not a victory over others but a "role model or goal to emulate" (Brendtro & Brokenleg, 2001, pp. 43-44). The learning spirit, then, is the entity within each of us that guides our search for purpose and vision. The learning spirit knows its journey and finds itself attracted to certain learning experiences that will build those gifts. These gifts require a learning environment that will sustain and challenge learners. Cajete (2000) believes that such a setting enables learners to find their heart, face, and foundation. The heart is the passion that engages their life purpose, the face is their identity, and the foundation is the skills needed to put their passion to work. But that source is connected to a spiritual source and this is the essential foundation of Aboriginal learning, as Ermine notes: "Learning and spirit are foundational to the ethos of Aboriginal culture and pedagogy" (Ermine, 1998, p. 26).

The foundation for Aboriginal teachings on learning is built on a notion of a life as learning and learning as lifelong. As Elder Musqua aptly notes, learning is the purpose of the life journey that begins at birth when the spirit(s) that has(ve) travelled with us enter the body (after it has travelled through six other stages of development before arriving in the body). The embodied spirits then travel with the person throughout life, providing inspiration, guidance, and nourishment to fulfill the purpose of the life journey. He notes that the life spirit knows the life journey of each person and travels with each person to offer guidance to keep us on course. This does not happen deterministically, however, as each person's free will and desire take them in diverse paths and in each there is learning. This cosmology or theory of being is one that is repeated in ancient stories and narratives and in many diverse characters and events (Elder Danny Musqua, in Knight,

2001). The learning spirit, then, knows its path, and becomes attracted to certain learning experiences, gravitating toward those elements that it needs to complete its learning journey. Some of those elements may stimulate it, nourish it, and challenge it, but, ultimately, the spirit keeps going until it achieves its final vocation and life purposes (Cajete, 2000). So, how do we, as teachers and also as lifelong learners, provide the sustenance and the stimulation the Spirit requires to travel the learning journey?

Learning is a holistic, lifelong process (Battiste, 2005). As such, learners will invest all of their being into learning and, as teachers, we should consider holistic approaches that emphasize students' personal, spiritual, physical, and social transformation as much as the development of their minds in the classroom (Laferrière, Murphy, Wideman, & Payette, 2003; Doige, 2003; Riecken, Tanaka, & Scott, 2006; Brendtro & Brokenleg, 2001). Emotions empower the spirits of learners and teachers and drive our work (George, 2010). Furthermore, our relations, including our families and communities, are important agents in our learning as they sustain and support us. Thus, we need our Elders, Old People, and our parents to participate as teachers and to impart their lessons across the curriculum and outside of the classroom. Then, not only is the Spirit stronger, reinforced, and nourished, but "curriculum and delivery processes...draw from the community, are sensitive to cultural context, and reinforce a sense of community" (Saunders, 2007, p. 10).

Our Elders tell us that we do not travel our learning path alone, but with our ancestors and teaching guides who help us in diverse ways to travel our path. In some cases, they assist us with reconnecting us with our gifts to find our faces or our vocations (Cajete, 2000). But they are not the only helpers. Community members work as Elders, traditional healers, resource persons, teachers, social workers, nurses, doctors, and judges, and together their energies represent the power of communities operating as a collective. Both the traditional community leaders collaborate and professionals trained in universities and technical colleges share an attraction to helping the spirits of young learners or the students with whom they work.

Programs that Nourish the Learning Spirit

Successes have abounded in programs of learning that support the learning spirit. Our scans of the literature find several principles and approaches that (re)awaken, nurture, and sustain the learning spirit. Practitioners who work with learners approach them as individuals with their own special gifts, are accountable to theirs and their communities' learning needs, assist with transitions into formal learning or back into formal learning, and afford the chances for learners to see their epistemologies and world-views reflected in pedagogy and curriculum.

*Kapachee Training Centre's Little Tots:
Guided and Nourished by Community Hands*

Kapachee was incorporated as a non-profit and community-based educational organization in 1977. In its early years, the facility had residence spaces for its adult trainees and the training centre concentrated on Adult Basic Education and post-secondary skills training. These areas of specialization were in response to needs articulated by the Métis of southeastern Saskatchewan for elementary and secondary schooling, as well as job skills training in a culturally safe space. Throughout the history of Kapachee, its Métis stakeholders developed programs and services that responded to perceived and documented disparities in access to employment and training.

In the early 1990s, the focus of Kapachee changed as the needs of its community members had. In response to increased Métis participation in the mainstream public school system, higher graduation rates from secondary school and post-secondary programs, and alternative venues for training in the Qu'Appelle Valley, Kapachee started programs concerned with family health and wellness and anti-racist and anti-bullying education in the public and separate schools in the surrounding area. These new initiatives inspired the formation of the Little Tots program.

The Little Tots program began in the fall of 1996; it is funded by a Canadian Action Plan for Children grant under the Public Safety Agency of Canada. It is governed by a local Board of Directors and complies with the expectations of the aforementioned federal funding agency. Its target group is Aboriginal and, occasionally, non-Aboriginal children and youth aged three to six years.¹ Two instructors and a teaching assistant facilitate the program (Anuik & Williamson, 2009). They provide the following overview of the mandate and activities of the program:

Little Tot's [sic] provides a loving, safe, stimulating and welcoming atmosphere and environment focusing on learning to interact positively with others, safety, and healthy growth and development...Through play at Little Tot's [sic] each child will:

- Increase his/her sense of confidence and uniqueness
- Share his/her interest and curiosity
- Develop cultural understandings
- Develop the confidence to try new things
- Learn to share, cooperate, negotiate, compromise, make and revise rules
- Learn to express his/her thoughts and feelings
- Learn to communicate his/her needs in acceptable ways
- Develop his/her sense of family, security, identity, and pride
- Learn to take the perspective of others
- Learn about the joy of sharing and service
- Make decisions and set goals
- Meet and solve problems. (Kapachee Training Centre, in Anuik & Williamson, 2009, p. 1)

The use of holistic approaches to early Aboriginal childhood learning helps children and youth to identify, comprehend, and gravitate towards the learning situations that appeal to them. The program facilitators work on

the development of social, emotional, physical, and mental intelligences as it is believed by the staff that all four criteria are necessary for children and youth to be successful students in the mainstream public school system. Children spend two years in Kapachee's program, and parents believe that the skills gained by their children enable them to succeed at school and in life.

For over thirty years, Kapachee has remained successful by adapting to the Qu'Appelle Valley's changing needs. Kapachee Training Centre continues to help families in the region through their focus on early childhood intervention, youth programs, and parent effectiveness training. With its emphasis on the needs of the whole child and concern for children's interactions with their family, friends, and adults, the Little Tots program helps children to grow up into healthy and confident citizens. Thus, these graduates not only have respect for themselves, but their enthusiasm for lifelong learning gives communities a new generation of learners with strong leadership skills (Anuik & Williamson, 2009).

Seven Generations Education Institute: Culture Camps

The Seven Generations Education Institute of Fort Frances, Ontario was formed in 1985. Its goal is to promote research on Anishinaabe education. One of the notable activities of the organization is its culture camps, designed for elementary and secondary school students. These camps were founded on traditional teachings that stress connection to one's environment and to Indigenous principles of hunting and trapping game. Culture camps occur several times in a year, complementing the formal schooling provided to children and youth in this northwestern Ontario town. The camps, run through the Institute, contribute to meeting the needs identified by community members as being necessary for the next generation of Aboriginal children and youth (Horton, 2008).

Too often, administrators employed by provincial ministries of education rely on statistical depictions of Aboriginal communities as the evidence upon which to make policy decisions, such as: under-representation; under-completion; under-employment; poor health; and over-representation in the justice and social services system (Kapasalis, 2006; Fayden, 2005; Rogers & Rowell, 2007; Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; National Council on Welfare, 2007). What follows is what Chandler and Lalonde (2004, 2005) call *knowledge transfer of programs conceived by federal and provincial governments and post-secondary institutions to Aboriginal communities* (see also Ball & Pence, 2006). These solutions imply that everyone's learning operates on a linear path toward a single destination, such as graduation from structured learning. However, the approaches of the Seven Generations Education Institute demonstrate that successful learning outcomes may not always be found through statistical calculations of learner progress.

Culture camps for students provide one of the best environments in which to learn one's indigenous language and the Anishinaabe ways of hunting, gathering, and preparing medicine—needs articulated by families for their children and youth. The Anishinaabe camps attract both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and provide enhanced awareness of Aboriginal culture and heritage. Stakeholders in the Seven Generations Education Institute recognize that “many [youth are still] in pain, suffering with their parents whose spirit has been beaten. Many youth struggle and their spirit is also dimming” (Horton, 2008, p. 5). Culture camps affirm these students' worldview and serve as consciousness-raising sessions on matters related to the environment in an era of globalization and privatization. Students become aware of the necessity to conserve resources and of the ways that Indigenous knowledge may inform healthier and ethical practices.

One of the most noticeable changes resulting from participation at culture camps is in attitude. Observers find that students who struggle in academic subjects (predominantly informed by Eurocentric “ways of knowing”) respond well to the presence of Elders and traditional teachers, and participate actively in the activities taught in the camps. These same students return with a drive and a desire to participate in learning in the formal classroom. Participants keep reflective journals that allow them to assess how participation affects their learning, spirituality, and overall wellness. Seven Generations Education Institute encourages intergenerational learning that not only nurtures relationships but also cultivates youth's respect for Creation:

Elders and youth come together at *Dagwaagini Ozhiitaawag*—Fall Harvest; *Bimoonjigan*—Bustle Making; *Anishinaabe Wigwas Makokoke*—Birch bark basket making, and *Aadizokaanan*—story telling sessions. The exchange is good for all ... elders and youth sharing teachings, breathing spirit, giving life forward. (Horton, 2008, p. 5)

*Toqwa'tu'kl Kijijitaqnn / Integrative Science Program and
Mi'kmaq Studies at Cape Breton University²*

Toqwa'tu'kl Kijijitaqnn / Integrative Science Program reconciles Mi'kmaq knowledge frameworks with modern science in a four-year Bachelor of Science in Community Studies degree. The translation of “*Toqwa'tu'kl Kijijitaqnn*” is “bringing knowledges together” (Bartlett, in Battiste, George, & Anuik, 2009). In order to bring the knowledges together, Dr. Cheryl Bartlett shares a number of promising practices that enable students to fuse two worldviews into one practice of science:

1. Create numerous and diverse out-of-doors learning experiences.
2. Involve community Elders, resource people, organizations, and workshops or other events, as appropriate, [and] as much as possible.
3. Employ project-based learning using issues of interest to students, either personally or to their communities.

4. Use the ever-growing literature on traditional ecological knowledge and other published information on the Indigenous sciences.
5. Use Aboriginal learning concepts and pedagogy, as appropriate (e.g., Circle of Learning and Journey of Life).
6. Teach in an integrated manner the major disciplines of Western natural science, namely cosmology, physics, chemistry, geology, and biology plus, as possible and appropriate, understandings from neuroscience and consciousness studies.
7. Employ an overall 'integrative framework'.
8. Prepare for co-learning with students and community.
9. Employ "Two-Eyed Seeing" as a guiding principle.
10. Acknowledge and employ a conceptual framework involving pattern recognition, transformation, and expression as a means for coming to understand how different cultures may shape and share their science stories in different ways. (Bartlett, in Battiste, George, & Anuik, 2009, p. 16)

The program's success, in addition to the facilitation of rich links with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia, may also be found in the student numbers. Bartlett says, "The numbers of Aboriginal students in science at Cape Breton University have changed dramatically, going from near 0 to about 115 Mi'kmaq students who have experienced a 1st year of post-secondary science. About half of these one hundred and fifteen students have continued at the university beyond first year, some choosing to remain within the Integrative Science program, some transferring into other science and science-related programs, and some transferring into arts or business programs" (cited in Battiste, George, & Anuik, 2009, p. 17).

Integrative Science speaks to the desire, articulated most eloquently by Cajete (2000), to see oneself in the mirror and to other practitioners who say that the cultural pasts of learners need to be honoured in formal learning environments (NWT Literacy Council, NWT Education, Culture, and Employment, & HRSDC, National Literacy Secretariat, 2004). In addition, Bartlett hopes that the program will increase, over time, the number of Mi'kmaq and non-Mi'kmaq post-secondary students with interests in science (cited in Battiste, George, & Anuik, 2009, p. 17). Students find their faces (Cajete, 2000) in an atmosphere that supports and promotes their worldviews in the classrooms of the post-secondary system. Bartlett adds, "Integrative Science is complemented by Mi'kmaq Studies at Cape Breton University, wherein Mi'kmaw and non-Mi'kmaw students are provided with holistic learning of history and society from a Mi'kmaw point of view, covering courses in language, anthropology, and race relations history" (cited in Battiste, George, & Anuik, 2009, p. 17). Mi'kmaw communities have been stakeholders in the program's evolution and, therefore, curriculum, pedagogy, and training have been under the leadership of university academics as well as Elders, families, and youth. Entire communities have

influenced the evolution and development of courses, criteria, and standards. Together, these two programs—Integrative Science and Mi'kmaq Studies and their courses— have situated Aboriginal culture and heritage at the centre of the mainstream university.

These three programs—Kapachee Training Centre's Little Tots, Seven Generations Education Institute's culture camps, and Integrative Science and M'ikmaq Studies—cover notable parts of the lifelong learning journey. Not only have they aided learners in their quest to identify their gifts given to them by the Creator, but these programs have validated Indigenous epistemologies and worldviews while helping learners to be responsible and self-sustaining citizens of modern Canada (Tolley, 2007). Practitioners respond to community needs and, finally, they address gaps in programs and facilities noted by the community members that they serve. The third and final section of this paper enumerates one literacy teacher's practice of the nourishment of adult literacy learners' spirits.

Adult Literacy: Nourishing the Learning Spirit

A common theme that runs through the literature on Aboriginal literacy and education, through professional development events, and through dialogue with practitioners, is a recognition that, all of us as individuals—including our learners—have a purpose for being here in this life. We have been endowed with gifts from the Creator for fulfilling that purpose. Sometimes, those gifts have been buried underneath several layers of negative feelings associated with experiences that have been less than life-affirming.

For example, the learners who come to literacy programs are those for whom their institutional educational experience has been characterized by some as a "failure." As a result, learners have internalized the messages that imply to them they have personally failed. This then results in other outcomes: low self-confidence, less-than-positive cultural identity, and low self-esteem. For the most part, successful adult literacy practitioners hold that learners do not fail; rather, they convey to learners that the institutional educational system has failed them in many ways by not recognizing any of the factors that may have affected their ability to learn in the institutional environment. There are many barriers to Aboriginal learners' success in the contemporary systems of learning. For example, the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC, 2005, pp. 7-9) and R. A. Malatest & Associates (2004) identify barriers to learning, which they categorize as follows:

- historical/assimilationist policies, such as the church- and state-operated residential schools enacting trauma on learners
- social/family responsibilities (see also Mercier, 2007)
- lack of role models
- unemployment and poverty

- lack of academic preparation and prerequisites; rural and remote schools generally do not have the academic rigour and preparation offered in other schools
- lack of support systems for those who want to pursue higher education and training but have to relocate to larger towns and urban centres, leaving their support systems behind
- financial barriers
- cultural/vast differences between Aboriginal culture and the culture of the educational institutions
- sense of powerlessness experienced by Aboriginal students because of a system that does not positively affirm their epistemologies and knowledge. (R. A. Malatest & Associates, 2004, pp. 11-16; see also Battiste, 2005; Muis, 2007)

It is no wonder that the self-esteem of learners has been adversely affected. Many practitioners have identified that facilitating a positive cultural identity in learners is their first, and maybe even most important, goal.

It is for this reason that practitioners do not want to replicate the system that did not work for Aboriginal learners in the first place. With the aforementioned barriers in mind, practitioners make every effort to establish a learning environment that is welcoming in every way. From the time learners first walk through the door of a literacy program, they are treated like a whole person—spirit, heart, mind, and body—often for the first time. In addition, the physical environment of the program itself is less institutional—closer to that of a home—with the only difference being that there are offices in the learning centre. There is positive messaging throughout the building in the way of Aboriginal posters, including those of Aboriginal role models, to instill in learners a sense that they, too, may become whatever they want to be. Learners' work is displayed prominently throughout the centre, messaging that what they do is important, is worthy of showing to visitors, and can draw others to inquire about the work and perhaps even enroll in the program.

Intake and assessment procedures are informal in that the instructor or coordinator has a "chat" with the learner, easing any tensions. The instructor or coordinator then records this exchange in the learner's file at a later time (George, in press). In this way, the learner feels the freedom to share information that, at first glance, may not appear relevant to the learning path. When the instructor or coordinator listens to the learner with ears, eyes, and heart, the learner shares a wealth of information that sheds light on life experiences in the learner's past, other than the aforementioned barriers to education that may have created blocks to learning. In addition, practitioners are able to discern what has nudged the learner back onto the learning path, what is trying to re-awaken the learning spirit. More importantly, the instructor or coordinator is able to ascertain key peo-

ple or events in a learner's life that may be integrated into the learning path as a support. Such information may contribute to the learner identifying their gift(s) from the Creator that will facilitate the fulfilling of the purpose for being there.

The instructor or coordinator notes what is affecting the learner spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically, as this affects the learner's attitudes, feelings, knowledge, and skills or actions, towards the body and towards learning and formal education or towards others (FNTI, in George, 2007, p. 2). Much of a learner's past experiences, as evidenced through the socio-economic indicators of Aboriginal people (including but not limited to various types of abuse—systemic, chemical, individual), play themselves out in the classroom through a process that has been referred to as "emotional hi-jacking" (Goleman, 1994, chapter 2). Emotionally-charged events, including traumatic experiences in the learner's past, are encoded in the amygdala. When the amygdala recognizes one or two factors similar to that experience, it effects a neuro-chemical reaction throughout the body to help the person deal with the perceived danger. In effect, it takes energy away from the learning process at hand, and a learner's reaction could be to dissociate or freeze.

Practitioners recognize that these feelings need to be healed and they have a repertoire of skills and activities that can address these feelings, while at the same time starting to build and enhance a cultural identity. One way is to establish a relationship with the learners that some have described as walking alongside the learners, recognizing that they are beings with gifts, albeit gifts that they may have not yet recognized or, if they do, are reluctant to articulate. As well, practitioners recognize that learners are beings of tremendous potential that can be achieved after the layers of feelings are peeled away so that the Learning Spirit may come through. One practitioner has said it like this: "It's important that I do not come across as the sage on the stage; we walk side-by-side" (Eady, Shawane Dagoiwin workshop, May 2007).

Once the practitioner and learner have thus determined the learner's goal(s), they set a learning plan. The goal(s) cover a wide range, from learning to read so as to assist their children in preparing for the workforce, to being able to make more informed decisions in their lives. Whatever the individual goal may be, the overarching theme is to improve the quality of the learner's life.

After ascertaining the learners' aspirations and strengths, the instructor or coordinator then considers how these may be best used to address the learner's needs or goals. Practitioners consistently point out to learners the strengths they have exhibited in their daily lives, in juggling their various responsibilities, in their interactions with other students or staff in the program, and even the act of coming to the program in spite of what is going on in their lives outside of the program. A tutor in the Native

Women's Resource Centre literacy program said that she uses her own take on Noam Chomsky's work by explaining grammar principles to the learners, along with a comment such as, "I know you know this, because I've heard you putting it into practice." The tutor follows that comment with a specific example so that the learner knows that these are not only words but that the tutor actually pays attention to what the learner is saying. In this way, the learner is affirmed as a person who is important in the program, a person who already has some skills, and that participation in the literacy program helps to recognize those skills and build on them. Such an interaction can only positively impact the learner's spirit (attitude towards self/others), heart (feelings towards self/others), mind (knowledge), and body (skills/action).

Many Aboriginal literacy or educational programming directors take the approach of incorporating literacy into culture, rather than culture into literacy. In addition to providing learners with the print-based activities from workbooks, many programs have regular arts and crafts sessions with the learners. Whatever the objective of the activity—to make a drum, a medicine pouch, and, in one program, cradleboards—literacy and culture are braided throughout. Learners will get a teaching on the item being made—this involves speaking and listening skills, as well as reading and sometimes writing, as participants in literacy programs are inspired to document their experiences.

Practitioners and learners then collect evidence to put in the learner's file or portfolio, to show that the learner has demonstrated success and satisfied the requirements to advance, either within the levels used to track progress, or to the next level. Therefore, the learner has proof of movement toward the meeting of individual goals.

While there are certain criteria that have to be met in order to satisfy the funders, practitioners are mindful that programming needs to be accountable to the learners and their communities as well. Hill (1999) explains that "the Aboriginal concept of accountability in education is much broader than simply meeting the needs of the adult learner, the institution, and society as a whole. It includes learning to be accountable for the impact that our human activity has on the earth and beyond" (p. 123). That is, knowledge is more than secular; it "has a sacred purpose" (Battiste, 2002, p. 14).

Practitioners and learners work together to design activities that will develop or enhance the skills required for that sacred purpose. Through these activities, many learners take on leadership roles in the community. For example, several programs plan trips, such as going to see petroglyphs and participating in Elders' Conferences or pow-wows. Often, there is not the money to cover the expenses for these trips, so the practitioners and learners plan fundraising activities. They either hold a crafts sale, where they sell the crafts they have taught each other to make in the program, or host a special luncheon. A variety of skills are involved in such events:

planning the day to have it coincide with when people are available to come and when they are most likely to have money; promoting the event by posting or distributing flyers that they have made; determining what to charge so that the price is reasonable, yet enough to recoup the expenses involved in the event and to make a profit that goes towards their planned trip; and hosting of the event. Such events put learners into roles where they are interacting with community members, often for the first time. The learners feel better about themselves in all that they have done. They then determine together how to allocate the proceeds, go on their trip, and learn even more. The cultural learning throughout such activities results in a positive cultural identity for the learner.

It has been the learners' experience that when they start to interact in the aforementioned way with the community, they are then more willing to try new ways of being. Practitioners report that learners are more willing and able to do such things as: go to the school to speak with their child's teacher; write a letter to Band Council to ask for more information so that they can better understand something that has happened in the community that requires action; or participate on a board or committee. One of the most common ways in which learners become more involved in the community is through membership on the boards or advisory committees of the very programs that they participate in, or on provincial and even national literacy organizations. This accomplishes two goals: (1) the learners have a voice in all aspects of literacy programming (advocating for better and more stable funding); and (2) the learners promote the benefits of participation in a literacy program. Many literacy practitioners report that "word-of-mouth" is still their best recruitment method.

Many practitioners invite learners to provide advice for special projects. One Native literacy publisher has a learner on its board who advises on content in many of their materials. Other programs are taking similar actions. A friendship centre in British Columbia has a learner sit on the committee overseeing the development of easy-to-read yet challenging materials for use in their literacy programs.

Tracking success in literacy or educational programming uncovers many inspirational experiences. One learner who came through a literacy program at the Carnegie Centre in east-side Vancouver is now an award-winning author who conducts writing workshops with literacy learners. Others have become coordinators of the very programs that they worked through. They have not only improved the quality of their own individual lives, but they are contributing to the community. Still others are providing examples to their children and grandchildren. They demonstrate that learning is a lifelong journey and that learning can take many forms, be it in the classroom, in the community, or in life experiences. Many more have been able to go on to jobs or better jobs and earn an income that helps them to make a better life for themselves and their families. Still others are pro-

viding better assistance to their children or grandchildren as they go through school, or they are passing on what they have learned about their culture and contributing towards a generation that has a more positive cultural identity. Consequently, learners are becoming the role models for future generations that they wish they had had when they attended institutions of formal learning.

The ultimate accountability, however, is to Creator. In a culture that understands that we have a purpose for being in this life and that Creator has given us gifts for fulfilling that purpose, we then need to consider how we are recognizing, developing, and using those gifts and how we are fulfilling that purpose. For learners to succeed on their journeys to find their academic, emotional, and spiritual gifts, teachers need to: facilitate collective community action; provide holistic approaches that emphasize the learners' bodies, emotions, and spirits in addition to matters related to their minds (i.e., literacy and numeracy, school processes, and knowledge acquisition and transfer); and respect community ownership over learning. Learners are on a lifelong journey. At times, they get stuck, roll off the road, or suffer a breakdown. But there are people, both community leaders and professionals, who are there to help the learners "get back on the road" and continue on the learning travel plans that they create and re-create. And it is our responsibility as teachers to provide, using community resources, the conditions needed to stimulate and continually nourish the learning spirit, the energy residing inside of everyone that defines and shapes the learning journey.

Last Thoughts

This essay attempts to stimulate discussion, reflection, and research on Aboriginal epistemologies of learning. This call is timely for two important reasons: (1) Aboriginal learners represent a growing demographic of learners; and (2) the learning spirit is alive in all of us. The ability of the learning spirit to re-awaken after suffering the traumas of abuse, ignorance, racism, poverty, incarceration, and addictions is testament to the potential of Aboriginal learners to be strong participants in the futures of their families, communities, and schools, and as professionals, business leaders, and politicians. However, the learning spirit must be appreciated by teachers and instructors as well as policymakers who make decisions on funding, infrastructure, and curriculum.

Future policy considerations related to formal learning for Aboriginal learners need to consider the following promising practices:

- naturalize Indigenous epistemologies in the pedagogy and in all parts of curricula and practical requirements
- assist learners with transitioning back into formal learning and into the workplace
- instill a sense of pride in learners' heritage, language, kinship ties, and nation

- help learners to unlearn the legacy of colonialism and the negative messages that accompany it
- aid learners in coping with and healing from traumas suffered from their life experiences at home, in the community, and as a result of the formal educational system
- engage Elders, Traditional Teachers, cultural resource persons, Aboriginal professionals, and Aboriginal communities to help in the learning communities
- assist learners transitioning through conventional systems of learning (i.e., public schools, publicly-funded post-secondary education systems)
- enable learners to engage with the traditional teachings at an advanced level in order to deepen their understanding and appreciation of the epistemologies unique to their community and nation
- create the opportunity for learners to see history, English, science, math, and other conventional school subjects from their point of view and from their interpretations.

Holistic approaches that enable Aboriginal learners to see and critique knowledge from their point of view, and under the guidance of communities, will enable these learners to graduate as self-sustaining and productive members of postcolonial Canada. This essay thus represents a beginning quest to research further spirituality in Aboriginal lifelong learning.

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Notes

¹A few years ago, the Board of Directors decided to become “status-blind” and to accept children and youth of non-Aboriginal heritage. However, the majority of the children in Little Tots and their families are of Métis ancestry.

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