



**ABORIGINAL
POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION**

A THINK PIECE

FROM

THE CENTRE FOR NATIVE POLICY AND RESEARCH

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A Note from the Author

The purpose of this Discussion Paper is to provide some provocative, stimulating and innovative proposals on Aboriginal PSE that may serve as a starting point for discussions on new strategies and policies on Aboriginal PSE in British Columbia. Although three weeks to complete the Paper has been too brief to allow the development of detailed proposals and arguments, I believe that the Discussion Paper has met its purpose.

In any discussion on Aboriginal PSE, the elementary-secondary education of Aboriginal youth cannot be avoided. Although some readers may question including this topic in a Paper on PSE, the reality in British Columbia (and in other provinces and territories) is that Aboriginal PSE participation rates will continue to lag behind the non-Aboriginal population until major reforms are implemented in the elementary and secondary school education curriculum used in Aboriginal schools. Suggestions on what constitutes major reforms are addressed here. Several short-term proposals to accommodate the special circumstances of the Aboriginal PSE student population are identified but they are only First Aid solutions. Increasing Aboriginal participation rates in PSE will not be achieved with First Aid when major surgery is required.

I have used the term *Aboriginal* or *Aboriginal people* to include status and registered Indians, non-status Indians and Métis. Occasionally, I have used specific terms when dealing with conditions that affect specific groups only. The use of the term *Aboriginal*

can be occasionally awkward as there may be conflicts between its generic use and its use as a specific term for *Indians* or *First Nations*. However, I believe it is less awkward than using a plethora of terms. I apologize for any confusion or unease that my approach may cause.

I would like to thank Cheryl Matthew, Executive Director of the Centre for Native Policy and Research, for the opportunity to contribute to the development of Aboriginal PSE in British Columbia. It has been a pleasure working with her.

Harvey McCue
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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Part One: The Elementary-Secondary Education Curriculum	5
Part Two: Aboriginal PSE – Proposals and Recommendations	9
Part Three: Some Key Elements	20
Conclusion	25
Summary of Recommendations	27
Appendix One	30
Bibliography	38
Author’s Biography	39

INTRODUCTION

Post-secondary education (PSE) continues to be a symptom of the unequal relationship between Aboriginal peoples and mainstream society. Historically, the federal government regarded PSE as a means to reduce the number of registered Indians. Clauses that resulted in enfranchisement (the automatic loss of Indian status) were added to the *Indian Act* for treaty and status Indians who graduated from a university or college. In the government's view, a status Indian with a university education was assimilated or, in the term of the day, civilized. A hundred and one years after Confederation – 1968 – at the height of a robust, unparalleled expansion of mainstream PSE institutions across the nation, the total college and university enrolment of status Indians stood at 164.

Can the embarrassingly low PSE enrolment a mere three and half decades ago be attributed to a fear among status Indians for the loss of their legal status? Given that most of the enfranchisement clauses in the *Indian Act* were repealed in 1950, it is unlikely. It is more likely that the anemic statistics are the result of at least three factors: An unresponsive college and university community that was either unaware of or unsympathetic (or both) to the Aboriginal population; a lack of support, financial and otherwise, from the federal government; and last, but not least, the failure of the elementary-secondary education system to prepare Aboriginal students for post-secondary studies.

Unlike their American cousins where several important PSE institutions were founded¹ to provide education to Aboriginal students, Canadian institutions remained largely aloof from the Aboriginal population. Canadian institutions preferred to see Aboriginal people through the narrow focus of either their anthropology departments, whose members in the fields of ethnology, linguistics, and archeology avidly researched Aboriginal communities during the 19th and 20th centuries, or their history departments where Aboriginal populations were given critical albeit brief recognition in the competing

¹ For example, Harvard, Yale and Dartmouth universities began as schools for Native Americans. In 1970, the University of Montana at Missoula enrolled more than 300 Native American students.

scholarly interpretations of Canadian history and economic development. From the earliest establishment of Canadian PSE institutions until 1969², a period of almost two centuries, Canadian colleges and universities neither developed nor pursued policies that reached out to Aboriginal people.

Despite treaty obligations for education, federal authorities historically ignored the field of PSE for Aboriginal students. The federal government made few if any allowances for the social, economic and geographic gulf separating colleges and universities from the occasional Aboriginal student who gained admission to the PSE community. As far as the federal government was concerned, Aboriginal students were unlikely to attend PSE institutions, and those who succeeded in gaining admission were left to their own resourcefulness to make good on their academic ambitions. And, of course, those successful few were immediately enfranchised! But, in the mid 1970s the federal government altered its position and established programs and policies³ targeting the financial needs of status Indian PSE students.

Arguably the principal reason why all but a few Aboriginal students⁴ failed to acquire a PSE has been the inability of elementary-secondary education, a) to keep students in school long enough to graduate from secondary school and, b) to produce academically sound graduates among those few who do graduate. Commencing in the early 1950s, when the federal government embraced the provincial education system through its policy of integration, the provincial elementary-secondary education system gradually gained ascendancy in reserve schools as the dominant instrument by which society sought to educate Aboriginal youth. In doing so, it replaced the residential and mission day schools that had been delivering education services in Aboriginal communities since 1837 by staff whose professional qualifications were as bereft as their knowledge of their students.

² 1969 marked the founding of the department of Native Studies at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, the first such development in the history of Canada's post-secondary community.

³ The "E" Circulars defined the categories of financial support PSE students would receive from Indian Affairs.

⁴ In 1968 the PSE population of status Indian students should have stood at 2,000 instead of 164 had they been admitted at the same rate as the non-native population.

For Métis and other Aboriginal students residing in a non-reserve setting, there has been no choice whatsoever. Youth from these communities have always been enrolled in provincial schools.

The geographic distance separating many Aboriginal communities and mainstream communities has been widened by several generations of federal-provincial policies, outright neglect and baseless assumptions about the future of tribal cultures. Can Aboriginal PSE overcome the gulf and help Aboriginal people achieve their rightful place?

From 1950 to the present, all Aboriginal youth in BC have been strained through the sieve of the BC elementary-secondary education system. The results have severely impacted Aboriginal PSE⁵ participation rates. According to Michael Mendelson in his recent study of Aboriginal PSE, the failure of the elementary-secondary education program has meant fewer Aboriginal high school graduates which, in turn, has reduced the pool of potential PSE students⁶. The sieve is torn and it needs to be replaced, not repaired. If it isn't, Aboriginal PSE will continue to be a process of patchwork, temporary policies and institutional responses that, in the end, gloss over the fundamental problem. As long as this fundamental problem continues unchecked, Aboriginal PSE will never be in a position to make the kind of contribution to Aboriginal and mainstream society that one would expect or predict.

The discussion that follows provides some suggestions and recommendations that address the fundamental problem in Aboriginal PSE – the elementary-secondary education that Aboriginal students receive. In recognition that the solution to the problem will take some time, there are additional suggestions and recommendations that may be useful as short-term adjustments for the betterment of Aboriginal PSE.

⁵ In BC, 38% of Aboriginal students finish high school vs. 77% of non-aboriginal youth, “Best Practices in Increasing Aboriginal PSE Enrolment Rates”, p.56

⁶ Michael Mendelson, “Aboriginal Peoples and PSE in Canada”, p. 30

PART ONE: THE ELEMENTARY-SECONDARY EDUCATION CURRICULUM

It is impossible to discuss PSE as it relates to Aboriginal peoples without a commentary on the provincial elementary-secondary education system. Since 1950 it has been the primary means by which all Aboriginal students, regardless of their residence, acquire a formal education. Whatever shortcomings Aboriginal students bring to their PSE experiences can, in large measure, be laid at the feet of the provincial system. While some observers might argue that the low education achievements of status First Nation students is the responsibility of the federal government, and while it is true that the federal government bears the fiduciary (and treaty) responsibility for First Nations education, the federal government can only be blamed for opting to fulfill the bulk of its fiduciary responsibility on the backs of the provincial system rather than on one designed to educate First Nations and other Aboriginal students⁷.

The federal government during the past six decades has built and maintained reserve schools, paid administrative and instructors' salaries, funded school transportation, acquired instructional materials, and funded tuition agreements for those students who attended provincial schools off reserve. While one can haggle over the adequacies of the annual federal education budget, the reality is that the federal government has been meeting most of their fiduciary obligations as they apply to status Indian elementary-secondary education since the residential school program came to an end. Yet for all of these expenses (and the debates regarding the adequacy of the budgets), in the very crucial areas of elementary-secondary pedagogy and curricula, the federal government erred fundamentally by choosing to use of the provincial education models in reserve schools with virtually no restrictions.

To a limited extent the federal government can be excused for this decision as ample evidence from many conferences, presentations, and interviews revealed the persistent demands of parents and leaders for a provincial curriculum and standards in their community schools, even in the face of chronic and mounting student failures, drop-outs

⁷ Other Aboriginal students include Métis and non-status First Nation youth.

and low completion rates. Be that as it may, the use of the provincial curriculum in Aboriginal schools has been, by any measure one chooses, a colossal failure. Oddly, the evident shortcomings of the provincial curriculum (and all that it entails) have not generally prompted huge outcries from parents and educators. Rather, the responses have tended towards blaming the victim, i.e., the student drop-outs. An unfortunate response that has all but obscured where the real blame should be placed.

It should be obvious to anyone that the provincial education system has failed Aboriginal students. Yet the federal government persists in requiring provincial curricula and standards apply in reserve schools in concert with a majority of parents and leaders who decry any serious alternative to the provincial system in their community schools. For Métis and non-status First Nation youth who attend urban or off reserve schools, as well as those children with status whose parents opt for schools off reserve⁸, the provincial curriculum is unavoidable. The assumption of the past sixty years that Aboriginal students are ‘educated’ only when they graduate from an elementary-secondary school provincial curriculum must come to an end, and soon. Not only has this assumption reduced the number of Aboriginal students eligible for PSE, it has led to two to three generations of chronically under-educated youth whose economic prospects and healthy contributions to their communities have been minimized.

What is needed is a curriculum and pedagogy for Aboriginal schools, including those urban and off reserve schools where a significant number of Aboriginal students attend, that are culturally appropriate, more applied in content than the status quo, and taught by instructors who are trained in the cultural dimensions of Aboriginal classrooms.

⁸ In 2002-2003 49,000 students in BC self-identified as Aboriginal – 8.2% of the total student count. 75% lived off reserve. The Aboriginal off reserve student population in BC has increased rapidly, 57% between 1995-1996 and 2002-2003. See Richards, John and Aidan Vining, “Aboriginal Off Reserve Education: A Time for Action”, p. 8

A Culturally Appropriate Curriculum and Pedagogy

Briefly, culturally appropriate curricula and pedagogy need to be far more inclusive and reflective of the traditional culture of students than what has been customarily accepted in the recent past, to wit, traditional arts and crafts, and native studies.

A comprehensive provincial study consisting of two parts is urgently required to begin the challenging task of defining and constructing a culturally appropriate curricula and pedagogy for Aboriginal schools. Part One would identify and define the appropriate core values of tribes and nations in the critical areas of: the family, languages, values, traditional leadership and governance, communication, decision-making, child-rearing, dispute resolution, to name a few. Part Two would integrate those values into the content of the elementary-secondary curriculum and the pedagogy.

Integration of the cultural values into curriculum constructs is critical⁹ and the process to accomplish that will not succeed if teaching students *about* their traditional cultures is all that is done. The greater challenge and one that will reap greater benefits pedagogically is creating an elementary-secondary curriculum that reflects those values, that includes subjects derived from those values, and that is taught by those values. The effects of such a study would be far reaching, dramatic and profound.

Despite the obvious presence of modernization in Aboriginal communities and families, each tribe and nation continues to retain distinctive values (and beliefs) that influence members' behaviour and responses daily and throughout their lives. The greatest mistake educators (and legislators) have made with regards to Aboriginal education is assuming that all Aboriginal youth begin their formal education as an empty vessel bereft of prior learning, core values, and codes of conduct.

⁹ Without efforts to integrate the appropriate cultural content into the curriculum, there is a serious risk that the 'culturally appropriate' curriculum would be used as an exercise in teaching Aboriginal students how to be an 'Aboriginal' – a futile exercise at best, and a pedagogically worthless one at worst.

Coincident with the emergence of a culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy is the need for a curriculum that is far more applied in subject matter than in the past. Applied in two senses. First, in keeping with the importance of a culturally appropriate curriculum, the elementary-secondary curriculum should feature subjects that examine Aboriginal content such as the small 'c' and large 'C' Aboriginal community, the unique cultural elements of Aboriginal families, i.e., child-rearing, gender differences, the role of Elders, the dynamics of intergenerational relationships, and contemporary political, economic and social developments. Each of these and related subjects can be easily organized into segments suitable for a variety of grades beginning with the primary-junior level and continuing to the senior secondary level.

Second, subjects are required, particularly at the senior elementary level, that provide students with applied, i.e., manual, skills that are geographically and environmentally consistent with their residence and territory along with academic courses. The availability of applied subjects will not only serve to make education more meaningful for many students, it will also provide them with a foundation of applied skill sets that will benefit them (and their communities) as adults.

Finally, all instructors of Aboriginal students require training that emphasizes the cultural characteristics of their students and will enable them to implement the new curriculum. Course content would include effective classroom communication, Aboriginal child development, dispute resolution, conflict avoidance, the use of storytelling as a pedagogical tool, cooperative learning techniques, the cultural dimensions of authority, and many others¹⁰. In addition to learning about the Aboriginal child and family, teachers in training would learn how to apply that knowledge pedagogically. As a result, not only would teachers in Aboriginal schools know their students, they would have an array of culturally appropriate instructional techniques and pedagogically sound skills with which to teach them.

¹⁰ Appendix 1 includes a detailed description of a curriculum for the effective training of teachers for Aboriginal schools and classrooms.

As invaluable as these changes would be, a realignment of the remainder of the elementary-secondary curriculum, i.e., the ‘academic’ parts, is also necessary. One example: For several decades, Aboriginal elementary schools have emphasized literacy in English as a key component of a successful education. Educators and Aboriginal parents alike shared the conviction that English language skills were essential to “success” in the modern world. Teachers have used a variety of pedagogical approaches such as phonetics, memorization, and whole language to teach Aboriginal students how to read. What has been ignored, despite the emphasis on literacy, is reading comprehension. Despite considerable time and effort to teach students *how* to read, little if any attention has been paid to teaching the same students to comprehend *what* they read. Consequently, several generations of Aboriginal students have learned to read, i.e., become literate in English, but their abilities for reading comprehension are seriously underdeveloped. The elementary curriculum, in particular, used in Aboriginal schools needs to address this deficiency parallel with the any additional reforms including those identified earlier. Other examples include incorporating Aboriginal science in the elementary science curriculum and traditional Aboriginal numeracy in the mathematics curriculum.

This is just a small sample of what can and should be done to make elementary-secondary education culturally appropriate, meaningful, and successful for Aboriginal youth. When implemented, positive learning environments will replace classrooms that are highlighted by chronic student absenteeism, minimal student-teacher interaction, frustrated teachers, and rote learning. Students will be able to connect with their education and parents will see value in it beyond the relatively benign purpose of learning to read and write. As students connect with their education, opportunities for increasing their academic and intellectual development will expand as will the potential for more and academically advanced graduates.

PART TWO: ABORIGINAL PSE – PROPOSALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A Senior Council on Aboriginal PSE

Until such time as the reforms of elementary-secondary education take shape, PSE for Aboriginal students will require its own short-term reforms to enable it to strengthen its response to the needs of Aboriginal students, the Aboriginal community, and society at large. It appears that PSE for Aboriginal students in BC, as in other provinces, has progressed without any clear mandate from either the PSE community or the Aboriginal community. PSE institutions have responded to either internal or external pressure, or in some cases, both, in its own measured way, to increase accessibility to Aboriginal students by offering either a program or department that addresses Aboriginal content. The emergence of several Aboriginal PSE institutions during the same period paralleled the mainstream institutional responses. The growth of both Aboriginal programs and institutions points to the need for a mechanism, a senior Council on Aboriginal PSE, for example, to enable the Aboriginal and PSE community to examine jointly the results of the past three decades and to influence future developments.

Ideally, the Council consisting of 12-14 members should operate at the most senior levels of the PSE community, either parallel to the Presidents Council on Universities and the BC College Presidents or as an adjunct. Its mandate should be comprehensive enabling its members to address a variety of Aboriginal PSE topics and issues at the undergraduate, graduate and professional school levels¹¹.

Its membership should include several presidents from the two fore-mentioned PSE bodies, several high profile members of the BC economic community, as well as representatives from the provincial Aboriginal community, i.e., the urban, Métis, off reserve and on reserve communities. Endowing a publicly funded council with representation from the university, college and economic sectors would send a clear

¹¹ Many of the suggestions for strengthening Aboriginal PSE in this Paper could be pursued or implemented by this Council.

signal that Aboriginal PSE is an issue vital to the health of Aboriginal communities, in particular, and BC, in general.

In addition to a senior provincial Council on Aboriginal PSE, another body that operates within the Aboriginal community is needed. An Aboriginal body that focuses solely on PSE topics and issues with representatives from the on and off reserve communities, and the Métis and urban Aboriginal communities. Its existence will serve as a forum for Aboriginal educators, leaders and youth to identify, address, and resolve PSE issues locally and regionally.

The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) has initiated an effort in this direction with its new sub-committee on PSE. It makes sense, if there is agreement among the representatives of the identified communities and if FNESC is willing, to impart additional representation to its sub-committee on PSE to expand its mandate to include all Aboriginal PSE in the province.

Aboriginal Representation

A major effort to increase (or in some cases, to introduce) Aboriginal representation on university and college Boards of Governors and other PSE-related governing bodies and committees is urgently required. Their continued presence will contribute to the identification and development of appropriate PSE-related policies and programs.

A Review of Native Studies and Existing Aboriginal PSE programs

The growth of programs and departments focusing on Aboriginal topics and issues has continued somewhat steadily since the mid 70s. Native Studies and related programs in education and other professional schools have made valuable contributions to PSE while providing Aboriginal students with courses of study linked to their academic and career interests. However, little effort has been made by either the PSE or Aboriginal communities to evaluate them. What purpose would be served by such a process?

Briefly, an evaluation of the existing departments and programs would enable the two communities to, among other things, address gaps in the curricula, identify new courses, and recommend additional professional programs. A body of scholars created for this purpose could also examine the state of Native Studies in BC PSE institutions. Native Studies emerged almost forty years ago for the expressed purpose of stimulating Aboriginal students to attend PSE institutions. Has that purpose been satisfied? In the absence of an examination, the answer is unclear. Are there other purposes, forty years later, that Native Studies should address? A substantive review could be instrumental in the identification and discussion of new alternative purposes.

Understandably, developments in Native Studies and related programs are constrained by departmental and faculty budgets. They are also the products of their faculty and instructional staff who offer programs of studies that either respond to the needs of their students or are the results of their academic interests. There is a risk that this framework in which the bulwark of Aboriginal PSE academic activities occur may be too insular to allow the relevant departments and programs to plan their academic expansion to meet the priorities of either the Aboriginal communities or the province. Obviously the faculty in these departments and the programs they implement will continue to expand, and they should, given the size of the Aboriginal youth population, but their academic growth should also be determined by the potential for new academic directions. A review of existing departments and programs will provide a foundation for this to occur.

A final reason for this recommendation is the unwillingness of some (perhaps, all) mainstream PSE institutions to maintain a ‘hands off’ policy for their Native Studies departments and programs. It’s unclear why this policy exists but it does and, as a consequence, it leaves the strategic development of these departments and programs in the hands of a small number of Native Studies faculty, many of whom are relatively new to the PSE environment, with few oversights or restraints other than the aforementioned budgets. A strategic review of Native Studies would, I believe, provide invaluable assistance to their faculty by offering a broader canvas on which they could plan their academic expansions and the strategic deployment of their limited budgets.

Increased data gathering, research, and an Aboriginal PSE Report Card

Currently, no mechanism exists that measures the effectiveness of provincial government policies and PSE institutions as they relate to the Aboriginal population. The creation of an annual provincial report card on Aboriginal PSE would a) introduce a measure of accountability to the Aboriginal population for both sectors and, b) enable the Aboriginal population to track progress on PSE developments. Data on Aboriginal PS graduates is currently only gathered on a voluntary basis making it imperative that a mandatory system be developed to gather this data. Without knowing how the system is currently operating it is difficult to measure any improvement or potential gains. This data should then be published in a report card on Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in BC.

The senior Council on Aboriginal PSE would be an ideal vehicle to create and implement it and to ensure its distribution. Until the Council is created, a committee of representatives from the Ministry, Aboriginal educators, and PSE institutions should be struck to begin the work to define the Report Card's ingredients and how it would be administered.

Training for Capacity

A major issue in many Aboriginal communities is the need to increase capacity. The lack of capacity is the direct result of the inadequate education program in Aboriginal schools. Low education achievement rates have produced a chronically undereducated Aboriginal workforce. This condition affects the majority of Aboriginal communities and it has severely eroded the ability of the community infrastructure to meet all but the basic requirements to keep the infrastructure functioning. The emergence of a more effective Aboriginal elementary-secondary education system will redress the imbalance in this area but until then the PSE system will be required to address the problem.

Several colleges are attempting to respond to this need. However, meeting the challenge will require the participation of a majority of PSE institutions. In this regard, PSE institutions, particularly but not exclusively, community colleges, should consider the

introduction of a broad range of programs for Aboriginal students that focus on the needs of community infrastructure, i.e., a range of administrative staff and managers. A key feature would be an emphasis on cooperative work learning experiences.

The University of Waterloo has pioneered and championed the use of cooperative work learning experiences in a variety of academic and professional departments. A similar approach patterned on the U of W's program should be available for Aboriginal students in a variety of programs but particularly in a program designed specifically to address the human capacity needs of Aboriginal communities. BC community colleges have several advantages over universities and colleges: They are well situated geographically to respond to a broad selection of Aboriginal communities, they have considerable experience in hands on, applied education programs, and their flexible programming requirements will enable them to focus on the specific courses and programs needed for this particular offering.

Urban Aboriginal Youth

In addition to meeting the capacity requirements of Aboriginal communities, community colleges have a role in meeting the needs of urban aboriginals. Approximately one half of the Aboriginal population resides in an urban setting. Despite large segments that move¹² frequently between ancestral and urban communities, the urban Aboriginal population continues to reflect two conditions – it is young and it is expanding.

Although some statistics indicate that urban Aboriginal youths achieve higher rates of education than their rural, on reserve counterparts, the fact is they still lag¹³ behind the general population. In other words, the provincial elementary-secondary education curricula and programs are a stumbling block for urban Aboriginal youth, also, albeit to a slightly lesser degree than rural, on reserve Aboriginal youth. How community colleges can increase the educational opportunities for Aboriginal youth beyond what is currently offered, particularly by the two provincial Aboriginal colleges, should be the focus of a

¹² Norris, Mary Jane and Stewart Clatworthy, "Aboriginal Mobility and Migration Within Urban Canada: Outcomes, Factors and Implications", p. 55

¹³ Richards, John & Aidan Vining, op cit, Pp. 5-7

coordinated study by representatives of the BC community colleges. The presence of two Aboriginal colleges may have led some sister institutions to regard the Aboriginal college student population as their domain. That is understandable but also regrettable. Given the unique distribution of the Aboriginal population, the responsibility to contribute to its PSE is a responsibility that should be shared amongst all of the provincial community colleges.

Efforts should also be undertaken to increase the exposure of urban Aboriginal youth to urban PSE institutions. Transition programs, i.e., UCEPs, were created by universities and colleges as one way of easing Aboriginal students who lacked the academic credits to enroll as full-time students into a PSE environment. UCEP proponents anticipated that once students were familiar with the PSE routine they would settle into the PSE environment and pursue their studies. Rather than wait until urban Aboriginal students become eligible for UCEP, introducing urban secondary students to the PSE environment through a variety of mechanisms such as circles, meetings, and forums may reduce any mystique or misinformation regarding PSE and encourage more to see PSE as an option.

PSE Student Funding

Funding continues to be a major issue. Federal assistance through the PSE support program (PSSSP) has been unable to match the demands of an expanding PSE student population for several years. Some Aboriginal students eligible for support do not receive it and many do not receive as much as they require. As long as shortfalls in the federal assistance program persist, efforts to maximize the existing federal program will need to be implemented. Many communities continue to exercise a variety of strategies to ensure that both new and continuing PSE students receive support.

In some ways the creation of special programs for Aboriginal students imperils the federal PSE support program. University and college entrance programs (UCEP) add at least one year, occasionally two or three, depending on the location of the program and the student completion rates. UCEP was seen as a vital bridge enabling Aboriginal students who lacked high school graduation to make the successful transition to

university. Because of UCEP, some Aboriginal communities are often required to fund several students up to three years at financial rates equivalent to an undergraduate student without those students having gained admission to an undergraduate program.

A similar challenge exists in the completion rates for Aboriginal undergraduates. Again, many Aboriginal communities may fund several students up to six or seven years to complete a three-year undergraduate degree. In fact, an increasing number of undergraduates, not just Aboriginal students, require an additional year to complete three-year degrees. Be that as it may, in light of the shrinking resources in the PSSSP, most Aboriginal communities struggle to meet the funding needs of their PSE students. Different funding strategies have already been developed in some communities to maximize the student support dollars. Nevertheless, many communities would benefit from directions or guidelines that are developed by an accepted Aboriginal source working in partnership with several Aboriginal communities to, a) determine an appropriate length of time to support students pursuing an undergraduate degree and, b) how much support should be provided to UCEP students.

The fact that UCEP students often require as much financial assistance as full-time undergraduate students should be a cause for concern in the tight financial times of the PSSSP. The costs in British Columbia have been exacerbated by the end of policy for tuition-free Adult Basic Education at post-secondary institutions in 2002. Despite the validity of the arguments that UCEP students benefit from doing their university preparations as full time students on campus, the existing financial dimensions argue for examining alternatives that are less expensive.

In the absence of any major reforms at the PSE institutional level, the principal academic requirements for a successful PSE include: strong skills in reading comprehension, analysis, reading, and writing. Other equally important but less academic requirements include an array of skills such as time management, research, meeting deadlines, and so on. All of these requirements could be met through a variety of distance education programs at considerably less expense than funding UCEP students to attend a PSE

institution full time. A successful reduction in the costs of UCEP students will free up additional money to support more undergraduates. A major initiative to investigate alternative, less expensive, and effective ways to prepare Aboriginal youth for academic success in PSE should be implemented by an Aboriginal body/organization. The initiative should be funded, whole or in part, by the federal government and it should have the support of the provincial Aboriginal community.

In the area of student funding, recognition of the special needs of Métis and non-status Aboriginal youth for PSE is long overdue. The provincial government, in consultation with the Métis and non-status Aboriginal communities in BC, should undertake a review of the funding needs of Métis and non-status Aboriginal youth. The review should include an investigation of the Aboriginal student PSE funding program administered by the government of the NWT.

Prerequisites for Admission or Graduation

There is a strong albeit unpopular argument to be made for a requirement that every Aboriginal student without a high school graduation who applies for entrance to a PSE institution must satisfy a literacy test that measures comprehension, reading and writing skills. Many observers assumed that UCEP would adequately address literacy competency. However, the fact that only one quarter of the Aboriginal students who begin university studies actually graduate¹⁴ strongly points to the inadequacy of UCEPs to prepare students for their undergraduate work.

This is not to say that UCEPs are solely to blame; many other reasons including funding, a lack of academic resources, personal circumstances, disenchantment, etc., account for the high drop out rates among Aboriginal students. Yet, it is not unreasonable to assume that if stronger literacy skills existed among a majority of Aboriginal high school students, more of them would graduate from university. The presence of a literacy test, developed and tested by Aboriginal researchers and approved by the appropriate

¹⁴ Only a quarter of the Aboriginal students who begin university graduate vs. about half of the non-Aboriginal students, "Survey of the PSE Programs in Canada for Aboriginal Peoples", p. 47.

Aboriginal authorities, would accomplish several objectives: One, it would direct UCEP administrators and instructors to emphasize the development of the key skills among their students; Two, Aboriginal secondary school students would know that admission to a university (and access to PSSSP) depends on either literacy skills or high school graduation; Three, students without a high school graduation would have a stronger academic foundation with which to complete their PSE programs.

Private PSE Institutions

The presence of a relatively large number of private PSE institutions in the province offers an additional option for Aboriginal PSE that has been ignored, for the most part, by policy makers and the Aboriginal community. Representatives of the private institutions and the appropriate representatives of the Aboriginal community should convene a series of meetings to: Explore the PSE opportunities for Aboriginal youth; identify what would be required to realize any opportunities; and establish a process for continuing dialogue.

Professional Schools

Measures to encourage Aboriginal students to enroll in PSE faculties other than Arts and Science. Several faculties of Law, Medicine and Engineering in different universities across Canada, including the University of BC in Law, have successfully established entrance and support programs for Aboriginal students who gain admission that recognize the unique needs and special interests of Aboriginal PSE students. The Faculty of Law at the University of Saskatchewan pioneered the use of these programs in 1973 as a response to the obvious lack of Aboriginal lawyers in Canada. Several faculties of Medicine and Engineering¹⁵ have responded with their own unique efforts to reach out to the Aboriginal community. These initiatives should be followed by similar efforts in faculties such as Business Administration, Science and Applied Science, and other professional schools such as Dentistry, Pharmacy and Architecture where few if any Aboriginal students apply. Thirty years ago, few Aboriginal youth contemplated a career in law; today, more than 400 Aboriginal lawyers practice throughout Canada. A similar

¹⁵ The faculties of Medicine and Engineering at the University of Manitoba and Engineering at Concordia, Queen's and University of Alberta are examples of universities with special entrance and support programs for Aboriginal PSE students.

development in these additional faculties would not only stimulate Aboriginal youth to consider careers in fields that are bereft of Aboriginal members they would also benefit Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal Faculty

The presence of Aboriginal faculty in PSE institutions is a vital link in the successful development of Aboriginal PSE. Aboriginal faculty offer students and colleagues alike a direct, enriched connection to many of the contemporary and historical Aboriginal issues that are studied today. Their insights born of scholarship, personal experiences and membership in the Aboriginal community stimulate fresh, innovative perspectives on traditional academic analyses. Yet, retaining Aboriginal faculty is a challenge in many PSE institutions. Some depart because the standards by which all faculty are evaluated¹⁶ fail to accord any value to criteria that Aboriginal faculty believe are equally important as the “industry” standards for measuring their performance. For many Aboriginal faculty, involvement with the Aboriginal community, an activity that can take many forms, is seldom recognized by Deans, department heads or promotion and tenure committees as a measure of their worth yet it is an activity that Aboriginal faculty take pride in, work to sustain and value. It is also an activity that Aboriginal communities respect, value and often expect from Aboriginal faculty.

Senior administrators in universities and college working with representatives of the Aboriginal faculty and Aboriginal communities should begin a process to identify appropriate evaluative criteria by which Aboriginal faculty are evaluated in addition to the normal departmental or faculty standards. This is not to suggest that the normal evaluative standards for faculty performance should not apply to Aboriginal faculty; rather, this is an effort to persuade PSE administrators that additional evaluative criteria exist that should be identified and quantified in order to achieve a fair and effective evaluation system for Aboriginal faculty. By doing so, the retention of Aboriginal faculty may become less of an issue.

¹⁶ Most academic faculty are evaluated by criteria that includes scholarship (research and publications), university service (committee and administrative activity), and student evaluations.

Assimilation or Survival?

In a discussion on Aboriginal PSE it would remiss not to consider what a PSE represents for Aboriginal youth. Several studies indicate that a PSE is the key to Aboriginal economic success and employment as it is for the other youth¹⁷. Yet for all of the benefits that accrue to a PSE graduate, for Aboriginal graduates there may be a hidden cost that outweighs all the benefits. Professor Eber Hampton, the former president of First Nations University of Canada, claims that,

Most, but not all, university education in
Canada today is education for assimilation.¹⁸

According to Hampton, PSE for Aboriginal youth will continue as an assimilationist experience until a fully funded, accredited, Aboriginal-controlled PSE institution emerges and creates programs and courses of study that reflect and integrate Aboriginal defined values, learning objectives and content. By Aboriginal defined, Hampton means as defined by tribal and ancestral values, not just a process that features Aboriginal participants.

Hampton's solution echoes the analysis of Professor Menno Boldt who argues that if Indians are to survive as Indians they must undergo a process of adaptation and development of their traditional cultures.¹⁹ This process is essential if the dependency that pervades Aboriginal families and communities is to be eliminated and replaced with

¹⁷ See Michael Mendelson, "Aboriginal Peoples and PSE in Canada", Pp. 8-9

¹⁸ Eber Hampton, "First Nations-Controlled University Education" in Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise, p.210

¹⁹ Prof. Boldt's analyses on the Culture of Dependence and Cultural Revitalization is extremely provocative. He correctly argues that cultural revivalism, a process that began with Pan Indianism in the early 70s, and continues today with smudging, sweat lodges, and similar rituals, is inadequate to displace the culture of dependence that successive government policies and programs have nurtured in Aboriginal communities. Cultural survival will require the restoration of traditional values and beliefs that results from a process of adaptation and development. In other words, core values and beliefs need to be identified and affirmed and then adapted and developed to enable their carriers, i.e., the tribal members, to survive in an ever-changing environment and economy, Surviving as Indians: The Challenge of Self-Government. Pp. 167-221.

tribal cultures adapted and developed to enable its members to survive in the 21st century and beyond.

Both observers point to the revitalization of Aboriginal values and beliefs as the antidote to assimilation and the cure for cultural survival. But the process will not be an easy one, for at least three reasons. As Boldt points out, too many Aboriginal people have equated cultural revitalization with cultural revivalism and in his opinion reviving traditions and ceremonies have limited benefits. Furthermore, basing cultural survival solely on ceremonies, regardless of how traditional they may be, will ultimately fail. Second, the culture of dependence has robbed Aboriginal people of their confidence in their own cultural, i.e., tribal, values and beliefs. If tribal cultures are to survive and assimilation curtailed, Aboriginal people will need to reform the elementary-education of their children in ways that strengthen their tribal values first, and their tribal customs and traditions, second. Lastly, Aboriginal people, confined to a substandard quality of life and blinded by an education system with minimal relevance to their tribal cultures, have engaged in a relentless process of devaluing their own tribal, ancestral values and beliefs. This process of devaluation has seriously displaced ancestral values with those of mainstream society.

The challenge to overcome these factors will be immense, but if Aboriginal people want to reverse assimilation and survive as people with their tribal cultures intact the challenge must be met and won. The critical step in meeting the challenge is recognizing that Aboriginal education reforms at all levels – elementary, secondary and PSE – are unavoidable and indispensable. Not just to raise the participation and completion rates of Aboriginal youth in PSE but to insure the healthy survival of tribal cultures.

PART THREE: SOME KEY ELEMENTS

Improved Student/Learning Outcomes

Because the inadequacies of the elementary-secondary education system, most Aboriginal PSE students, perhaps as many as two-thirds of the annual cohort, begin their programs weak in the areas that are essential for academic success, i.e., reading

comprehension, writing, and analysis. Until the elementary-secondary system undergoes the reforms that will enable Aboriginal students to strengthen their intellectual and academic skills before they enroll in PSE programs, adjustments such as special support programs in PSE institutions will be necessary. Many institutions and departments have featured UCEP and Aboriginal student counselors as their response to the issue.

Notwithstanding the earlier remarks about UCEP, these special programs should continue but in more cost-effective ways. At the same time, additional measures should be considered. These include the use of student mentors, i.e., senior students, assigned to work with first-year students. The mentors could be selected from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students on a voluntary basis. In addition to student mentors, establishing an on-line Aboriginal students association that features, among other things, an academic help desk, would encourage Aboriginal students to seek academic help on their own.

As useful as some of these accommodations may be for some Aboriginal students, the biggest adjustment that PSE institutions could make to improve Aboriginal outcomes is the addition of a course or courses that emphasize skills acquisition in writing and reading comprehension for Aboriginal students who enter a PSE program without high school graduation. They should be offered for Aboriginal students in addition to the academic skills centres/programs many institutions currently offer for all students who need help. In fact there is a strong argument to be made that all Native Studies departments or programs include these courses as a prerequisite for either admission or completing first year.

If Aboriginal students begin their academic careers one to three years behind their provincial cohort, particularly in the area of academic skills, their chances for graduating are almost negligible even with the addition of supports such as counselors, mentors, and others. UCEPs were introduced to address the academic skills issue but the fact that so many Aboriginal students fail to complete their PSE programs strongly suggests that UCEPs are not addressing or solving the key issue of academic skills development. Insisting that Aboriginal students without high school graduation successfully complete a

course or courses that focus completely on the academic skills that are essential for meeting university and college requirements will not eliminate drop-outs but it will reduce them.

Consultation

The Ministry requires a vehicle by which it can conduct effective consultations with the Aboriginal community. Creating a permanent body, a 12- 14 member senior Council on Aboriginal PSE, of select senior PSE administrators, Aboriginal leaders, community members, and faculty that parallels the University Presidents' Council and the College Presidents with an appropriate mandate is that vehicle. The Council's mandate would include consultation and an arms length working relationship with the Ministry, and the two senior university and college presidents' bodies. Details regarding membership, selection, and duration of appointments would emphasize the need for both continuity and timely change among members.

Respective roles re: Curriculum and program development

The successful development of programs and curriculum will require a coordinated effort amongst all participants in the process: The ministry, the Council on Aboriginal PSE, institutions, communities and Aboriginal organizations. First and foremost, the Council's role will assist any discussion on what new curriculum and programs may be needed for growth in Aboriginal PSE. The Ministry's role will feature funding and coordinating the development. The institutions' role includes identifying potential new programs and curriculum through research and consultation. Community and Aboriginal organization participation should be facilitated in the process by recruiting representatives to sit on the Ministry committee(s) coordinating and funding the development. Success will depend on many factors but insuring that participants are encouraged to bring their perspective to the process will be key.

How should the Ministry consult?

Consultation can be effectively committed through the creation of the Council on Aboriginal PSE and an Aboriginal PSE body. Ensuring the ongoing representation of

Aboriginal faculty, organizations, and communities will strengthen the ability of the Ministry to access the input of the appropriate representatives of the provincial Aboriginal community on all matters relating to Aboriginal PSE.

As a consultative body the Council will require an annual budget. This will enable it to convene meetings, either by videoconference or face-to-face, of its members on a regular basis. Its budget should also include money to, a) commission research, and b) produce discussion papers on Aboriginal PSE on a timely basis. Ideally, the Council should include a small administrative staff of three to four.

The Council should be mandated to convene periodic meetings with representatives of Aboriginal organizations, faculty and communities for feedback and input on Aboriginal PSE to ensure they are being accountable and transparent to communities.

Collaborative Models

The possibilities of collaborative models for Aboriginal PSE among public PSE institutions and Aboriginal public and private institutions are endless. The evidence of successful collaboration among several Aboriginal colleges, universities and community colleges to meet Aboriginal PSE objectives is a foundation on which additional collaborative models can be structured. The participants in each area should be encouraged to view any new Aboriginal PSE program through the lens of collaboration. To facilitate this approach, the Ministry would be well advised to consult with representatives of the public PSE institutions and Aboriginal private and public institutions on the creation of fiscal incentives that rewards additional collaborative efforts in Aboriginal PSE.

Distance Learning

Many potential Aboriginal PSE students, particularly those from rural, isolated communities are prevented from seeking admission because of the lack of funding or a lack of mobility. Both obstacles could be removed by developing PSE programs that are delivered by distance learning techniques such as electronic or virtual classrooms.

Currently, as a result of federal policies, the potential for delivering PSE electronically to a majority of Aboriginal communities in BC exists. Virtual classrooms are no longer around the corner; they are here now. The Ministry should create and mandate a committee of representatives of the Ministry, Aboriginal educators, and PSE institutions to investigate the creation of a provincial Aboriginal PSE distance learning program.

Vision

An ideal vision for Aboriginal PSE in British Columbia for at least the next two decades would be a PSE environment where as a result of the work of the Council on Aboriginal PSE public PSE institutions and Aboriginal public and private institutions offer programs of study in one or several of four principal categories: Scholarship and Research; Capacity building; Professional; and Traditional Culture and Knowledge.

Each category is vital to the healthy development of Aboriginal communities and peoples in BC. Aboriginal scholars will advance new and innovative perspectives on Aboriginal topics and issues; the beneficiaries of programs of study in capacity building will strengthen Aboriginal organizations and community and political infrastructures; graduates of professional schools will offer much-needed services to communities; and students of traditional culture and knowledge will facilitate the transition and survival of tribal cultures into the 21st century and beyond.

The vision includes Aboriginal PSE graduates who by their very existence will enable Aboriginal cultures, communities and people to regain their rightful place in the province. provide BC with voices, experiences and perspectives that once determined the relationship between Aboriginal people and newcomers but has been diminishing steadily since then. A fertile PSE environment for Aboriginal youth will enable Aboriginal peoples to contribute equally to the province's development and future and their cultural survival.

Long-Term PSE Action Plan

Aboriginal PSE in BC as elsewhere has been the product of tireless efforts by a host of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators, administrators, and leaders. Beginning in the early 60s, key individuals recognized that the PSE system as it was defined then ignored the needs of Aboriginal youth and their communities. However, efforts to amend the system to respond to those needs have occurred randomly, driven largely by circumstance, availability of funding, and the persistence of dedicated Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators and leaders. It is now time to consider the development of a thoughtful, carefully considered, long-term Action Plan on Aboriginal PSE. An Action Plan that emerges from consultations with Aboriginal communities and leaders, in particular the signatories of the MOU, PSE institutions, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators, replete with timelines, milestones, measures of indicators and success, targets, and also be tied to how programs are resourced. The Action Plan on Aboriginal PSE should have a commitment from the provincial government to ensure its implementation. The Ministry should take the appropriate steps soon to identify the resources and the appropriate representatives to begin to lay the groundwork for its development.

CONCLUSION

BC, unlike other provinces and territories, supports two accredited Aboriginal PSE institutions, several innovative Aboriginal PSE programs in its universities, and numerous cutting edge initiatives in its community colleges. It possesses the tools to build an aggressive, forward-looking Aboriginal PSE environment that reflects both Aboriginal and provincial priorities. There may be some observers who believe that it will be impossible to satisfy both sets of priorities but the fact is that a healthy Aboriginal provincial community will add immeasurably to the overall health and well being of the province.

Unfortunately, the tools alone will not be enough to create that environment. The addition of a Council on Aboriginal PSE, a body operating at the most senior level of the provincial PSE community, should provide the strategic direction for the PSE institutions

to apply and develop their academic resources to maximize the benefits for Aboriginal PSE.

Until the Council or something like it is created, a number of short-term adjustments in Aboriginal PSE will need to be implemented or reinforced to strengthen the opportunities for Aboriginal youth in PSE. Aboriginal PSE students, unfortunately, will require special support to help them overcome the disadvantages that are the result of their elementary-secondary education. The support, however, should not delay the consideration and implementation of prerequisites in academic skills, i.e., reading comprehension, writing, and analysis, that Aboriginal PSE students with less than high school graduation must satisfy either before full time admission or graduation from a PSE institution.

As useful as these short-term adjustments may be, the elephant in the Aboriginal PSE room is the elementary-secondary education system. Numerous commentators, some of whom are identified here, underline the inability of the provincial education system to educate Aboriginal youth adequately. Steps to reform the provincial education system are desperately needed if Aboriginal PSE in BC is to improve. Major reforms that not only realign elementary-secondary education for Aboriginal communities, but also result in an elementary-secondary curriculum (and pedagogy) where the pedagogical and instructive constructs are based on traditional tribal and nation values are a must.

Ignoring these reforms will reduce further the vitality of tribal values and beliefs in contemporary Aboriginal life and hasten the demise of all tribes and nations. Some observers may scoff at this threat by pointing to the emergence of Aboriginal traditions that are taking hold today. Reviving cultural practices and ceremonies have limited usefulness; however, they do not equal cultural revitalization nor will they ensure cultural survival.

There is another risk – Professor Hampton’s assessment of PSE as a largely assimilative experience should be a red flag for anyone concerned with Aboriginal PSE. Reversing the assimilative effects of PSE is an exercise that should rightly begin the first day of

every Aboriginal youth's exposure to formal education. Otherwise, Aboriginal PSE in the 21st century will not have moved beyond the 19th and 20th centuries when society considered a PSE as sufficient reason to pronounce Aboriginal graduates as "civilized".

Aboriginal PSE need not and should not be an exercise in assimilation. A vision of Aboriginal PSE where students choose to study programs in scholarship and research, capacity building, professional studies, and traditional culture and knowledge will not only reverse the assimilation of Aboriginal PSE students, it will also reflect the desire of the Aboriginal and provincial communities to end it.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Commence a comprehensive provincial two-part study to define and construct a culturally appropriate elementary-secondary school curriculum and pedagogy for Aboriginal schools.
2. Develop a more applied content for the elementary-secondary curriculum for Aboriginal schools.
3. Develop culturally appropriate curriculum for the training and preparation of teachers for Aboriginal schools.
4. Expand the literacy skills of Aboriginal elementary students to include reading comprehension.
5. Create a provincially-mandated Senior Council on Aboriginal PSE.
6. Establish the Council at a level parallel to the Presidents Council of Universities and the BC College Presidents with a mandate to function broadly in the PSE environment.
7. Create an Aboriginal PSE body that focuses solely on Aboriginal PSE topics locally and regionally.
8. Ensure Aboriginal representation on PSE governing Boards, Councils, Agencies and Committees.
9. Undertake an evaluation and review of Native Studies and other Aboriginal PSE programs in BC PSE institutions.
10. Increased data gathering, research, and implementation of an Aboriginal PSE Report Card.
11. Expand the opportunities for training for community capacity building.
12. Expand the use of cooperative work learning components for Aboriginal capacity building and other Aboriginal programs.
13. Representatives of community colleges and Aboriginal communities should undertake a study of the role of community colleges in Aboriginal PSE, including the needs of urban Aboriginal students.
14. Develop funding guidelines for the time required to complete an undergraduate degree and the length of support for UCEP students.

15. Undertake a review of alternative, cost-effective and productive approaches to mounting UCEP.
16. Increase the exposure of urban Aboriginal youth to PSE institutions.
17. Create PSE funding support for Métis and non-status Aboriginal youth.
18. Implement reading comprehension and writing skills as prerequisites for Aboriginal PSE students who lack high school graduation.
19. Explore the opportunities for Aboriginal PSE at private institutions.
20. Encourage more Professional Schools to follow the examples of Law, Engineering and Medicine to consider innovative measures to increase the presence of Aboriginal students.
21. Increase the number of doctoral credentialed Aboriginal people to increase the numbers of Aboriginal faculty at universities.
22. Review for the purpose of expanding the criteria by which Aboriginal PSE faculty are evaluated.
23. Support Aboriginal PSE students with student mentors, on-line academic help desks, and an on-line PSE student's association.
24. PSE curriculum and program development should reflect a coordinated effort of the relevant stakeholders.
25. Consultation can be effectively managed by the Council on Aboriginal PSE and the provincial Aboriginal PSE body.
26. To ensure that a collaborative approach to Aboriginal PSE is encouraged, a system of fiscal incentives for institutional participants should be considered.
27. Investigate the implementation of Distance Education for PSE for Aboriginal students in rural and remote communities.
28. Develop and implement a Long-Term Action Plan on Aboriginal PSE.

APPENDIX ONE

Teachers who wish to teach in Aboriginal schools require far more specific cultural content in their training programs than Indian Teacher Education Programs (ITEP) and faculties of education have provided in the past. Most Aboriginal schools are populated by students who come to school with a set of values, tribal in origin, that influence, for example, their relations with adults, including teachers, and their peers; how they respond to authority; how they communicate; and most important, how they perceive themselves in relation to their family and others.

The values extend far beyond these examples. They affect students' every aspect of behaviour that parallel the ways in which every culture's values affect and influence to one degree or another, the behaviour of the children of that particular culture.

These values do not change simply because there is a new teacher or because they are attending school. As in every other culture, they persist until such time as the culture/tribe integrates new ones to replace the 'old' ones.

Unfortunately, many educators (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) have routinely assumed one of two things: That Aboriginal values have eroded to the point where they no longer influence behaviour and therefore there is no need to try to identify or understand their role in the education of Aboriginal youth, or that the values Aboriginal people have retained need to be replaced by western examples as quickly as possible to ensure their economic survival in a world that is constantly changing.

Either of these two assumptions has dominated the approach taken by Euro-Canadian, i.e., white, educators and policy-makers to the challenge of the formal education of Aboriginal children for almost three centuries. Sadly, very little has changed today.

Sadder still, is that many Aboriginal educators, consciously or unconsciously, have accepted these assumptions.

What follows is an outline of the type of courses that should be developed and offered to teachers who wish to teach in Aboriginal schools. They represent an attempt to identify the basic knowledge any teacher in an Aboriginal classroom should acquire before they begin their teaching careers. The outline is by no means complete; others may wish to identify and develop additional courses that complement particular tribal values and beliefs.

The Courses

Effective Communication

Anyone familiar with Aboriginal cultures knows that effective communication depends on a variety of methods and techniques. The constituents of effective communication in an Aboriginal environment include:

- Non-verbal communication
- Reticence
- Humour
- Replacing direct questions with non-interrogative examples

Non-verbal communication is often just as effective (occasionally more effective) as verbal communication in many situations. The range of non-verbal communication techniques includes:

- Body language
- Visual cues such as movements of eyes, lips, and mouth
- Gestures

In addition to knowing what techniques are used in non-verbal communication, it is vital to know when and why non-verbal communication is important.

Reticence, often misinterpreted by people from non-Aboriginal cultures as shyness, is an effective communication tool among many First Nations. Every teacher in an Aboriginal classroom should learn the many functions of reticence in Aboriginal cultures and, at the same time, learn how to use and interpret reticence to communicate effectively with their students.

Effective verbal communication in most tribal cultures extends well beyond speech. The speaker's tone of voice and the non-verbal cues that accompany the verbal communication impart content and meaning to the verbal transaction.

Humour in its many forms is a vital element in effective Aboriginal communication. As in other cultures, humour is a complex and multi-layered value in all tribal cultures. Knowledge of what kind of humour is appropriate, when to use it and with whom it is appropriate to use humour is essential for effective communication.

Effective communication also includes avoiding direct questions. In many Aboriginal cultures they may be perceived as threats or they may create a sense of being put on the spot, i.e., singled out, a situation that many Aboriginal people often take pains to avoid. In a classroom, they seldom produce the required response, even if the student questioned knows the answer. The question "Where are you going?" will rarely produce an answer, whereas "Tell me where you are going" will. Similarly, "What happened in chapter 3?" is far less likely to elicit a positive response in an Indian classroom than "Share with us what you think happened in chapter 3" or "I wonder what took place in chapter 3?" or, "Who knows what happened in chapter 3?"

Beginning teachers need to be aware of the subtleties involved in Aboriginal communication, especially when it comes to using, or more correctly, not using the interrogative, if they are to achieve any degree of meaningful communication with their students. For example, consider the following hypothetical conversation between two people. Speaker A says, "I think I will go to town". The message to the listener, Speaker B, is, are you going to town and if you are can I get a ride with you? Speaker B replies,

“I’m going to town in half an hour.” The message to Speaker A is, you can come with me if you want.

Speaker A achieves what is sought without using any direct questions, i.e., Will you give me a ride to town or are you going to town. Speaker B replies to the “question” non-directly, but in essence, affirming the “question” and providing a positive response. The non-interrogative and non-direct patterns of speech are common techniques of oral communication in most Aboriginal communities and successful teachers in Aboriginal schools should be well versed in their usage and able to apply them in a classroom.

In any exchanges like these, the speakers individually are required to process a great deal of critical information that will inform them about the underlying message content of the verbal exchange. Speaker A in this example will have processed relevant information about Speaker B, including possibly the likelihood of Speaker B going into town soon, whether or not Speaker B is known to offer rides, the relationship between the two. Speaker B will also process relevant knowledge about Speaker A including whether or not Speaker A has transportation, their relationship, and what, if any consequences might emerge if a ride is not offered.

Teachers who wish to become effective teachers of Aboriginal children should be required to take a course that enables them to learn and to practice the ways and means to achieve effective communication in an Indian classroom.

Story Telling as a Teaching Tool

In all tribal cultures, stories serve as a principal technique for teaching children. The variety of teaching stories is quite broad including stories often described as myths, legends, parables and fables. Every culture has a storehouse that adults and older siblings utilize to educate children to the important societal values, norms and beliefs.

Although story telling among Aboriginal people has lost some of its status as a teaching technique, the practice has been retained within many families and in many traditional

structures such as longhouses and clans. But because western-style education has neither understood nor appreciated the utility of story telling as a pedagogical tool in Aboriginal communities, the technique has not been adapted satisfactorily for classroom use.

However, this should not deter the development of a course that enables teachers to learn how to use stories in Aboriginal classrooms. The course would include when story telling is appropriate pedagogically, how to construct stories for pedagogical objectives, and learning Aboriginal stories.

A Foundations Course in Aboriginal Child Development

An essential course for teachers in training is a Foundations course that examines child development and child-rearing techniques in tribal cultures. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that Aboriginal cultural values, i.e., traditional values, have been displaced by Euro-Canadian ones, tribal values still play critical roles in child-rearing. The fact that many Aboriginal communities display obvious and subtle differences in their behaviour, communication, and attitudes to those of the neighbouring communities is testimony to the strength of traditional values in contemporary child rearing.

Knowledge of traditional child-rearing techniques will enable teachers to explore how they can be adapted and applied in the classroom. For example, disciplining children in any tribal culture relies on a variety of techniques. Many Aboriginal cultures use teasing as an effective method. Teasing takes many forms, from mockery to ridicule to satire, and the appropriate form of teasing as a disciplinary measure is determined by the circumstances.

Humour in its many forms is another time-honoured and useful technique in child-rearing. In its various forms humour is used to discipline and motivate children in a variety of situations. Humour, especially joking, is an effective method for communicating with children. Teachers would be well advised to learn the kind of humour and joking that different tribal cultures use in communicating with children and apply them in the classroom.

How children in tribal cultures develop, i.e., mature, is the second component of a Foundations course. Teachers should be aware of the critical stages of child development in tribal cultures as well as the role of children in the family and community at the various critical stages. Teachers need to know, for example, what (beyond their chronological age) separates a 10 year girl from a 6 year old in terms of their behaviour, place, expectations of others, and relations to others. Knowledge of the details in the differences of how they communicate and with whom, their self-perceptions and how family and the community perceive them is critical if teachers are to teach them successfully.

A Foundations course would enable teachers to a) learn about Aboriginal children, and b) explore how to apply that knowledge pedagogically.

Measuring Learning

A variety of tests are traditionally used in North American classrooms to measure learning. The application of tests to measure learning in children of tribal cultures is at variance often with traditional forms of measurement, many of which are more subjective and less formal. Teachers of Aboriginal children should be exposed to the alternative forms of traditional measurements and learn how to apply them along with the “conventional” tests to arrive at an understanding of the learning development of their students.

In many traditional tribal cultures, children learned by observation (imitation), trial and error, and stories. Tests to measure learning relied less on formal mechanisms and more on children demonstrating successfully that something, a skill, a moral, or an understanding, for example, had been learned. Someone, an older sibling, a parent or extended family member such as an aunt or uncle, or a tutor, made a judgement that a “lesson” had been learned based on the ability of the “student” to show mastery of the particular task at hand.

In this way, “students” seldom encountered the concept of failure. Even if a child or youth was unable to perform conventional skills or display a requisite knowledge base as other peers, the traditional response of the family and possibly the community was not that the child or youth had failed but rather that they were not ready. Thus, a young woman who was expected to know the specific skills associated with the preparation of a skin for tanning by a certain age but had not learned them sufficiently to complete the task successfully would be given additional time and instruction, if need be, because she was not ready.

The measurement of learning in this example determined whether or not a specific skill set and knowledge had been absorbed adequately to enable the pupil to accomplish the task, and thereby illustrate readiness. An inability for whatever reason to accomplish the task did not mean failure but only a lack of readiness. In this learning environment, failure is irrelevant.

Many contemporary tribal cultures continue to reflect this concept of “not failing” in their traditional education of their children and youth. Learning depends on mastering whatever is sought, either skills or knowledge, or both. “Students” progress on the basis of mastering the appropriate building blocks. They are seldom put into situations where adults, even older siblings, know they will not succeed because they have not mastered what is required to succeed.

Mastery learning with its emphasis on the use of formative and summative evaluations of student learning parallels in many ways the tribal notion of “not failing”. Effective teachers of Aboriginal children should be required to learn the elements of mastery learning and how to apply them in the classroom. Reducing the use of formal tests where students routinely fail because of their inability to perform and replacing them with the traditional tribal forms of student measurements and mastery learning evaluations may increase student success.

Tests where outcomes include student failures create conflict in Aboriginal students. If the concept of failure rarely applies in the contemporary traditional form of teaching by the family and community, its presence, even its potential presence, will lead to student alienation. Most Aboriginal children are simply not familiar with the concept of failure. Many do not know how to handle failure. Failure in tribal cultures is not an incentive; in many ways, it is a disincentive.

Measuring student learning is an essential element in the pedagogical environment. Teachers, parents and administrators need to know whether or not students are acquiring the knowledge and skills that will enable them to progress. A strong argument can be made that the current and historical measurements of learning are ineffective tools in Aboriginal classrooms. In fact, it is open to debate what is being measured. The statistical data re: Aboriginal student dropouts after one or two years of secondary school, strongly suggests that too many students are passing through their elementary education without any effective and accurate means of measuring their academic skills and knowledge.

Teachers who wish to succeed in Aboriginal classrooms should explore more effective measurements of learning than tests and at the same time learn the cultural aspects of failure.

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Author's Biography

In 1968 Mr. McCue co-founded the Department of Native Studies (originally, the Indian Eskimo Studies Program) with Professor Tom Symons, President of Trent University. He taught at Trent for 14 years attaining the rank of Associate Professor. He served as the Director of Education Services for the Cree School Board, the first Indian-controlled provincial school board in Canada, in northern Quebec between 1983 and 1988. His responsibilities included the management of four departments and 65 staff in: Cree Culture and Language, Cree Teacher Training, Student Services, and Instructional Services and eight Principals and four Vice-Principals. In 1988 he served as the Director of Policy and Research, Education Branch, at Indian and Northern Affairs in Ottawa, and eventually the Director General, in 1991. In 1993 he accepted the position of Executive Director and Director of Education of the Mi'kmaq Education Authority in Nova Scotia, a position he held until 1995. Since 1995 he has worked in Ottawa as a consultant on Aboriginal issues. He is a member of the Georgina Island First Nation in Ontario.