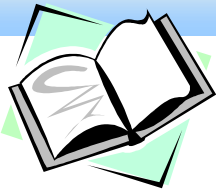


## Literature Synopsis:



# Aboriginal Education: A Research Brief for Practitioners University of Alberta

## Effective Practices For First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learner Programs Aboriginal Services Branch

### Introduction

Aboriginal students face a number of cultural differences and challenges that make it difficult for many of them to be successful in school. Attempts have been made to blend Aboriginal knowledge with the current learning systems and pedagogy that exist in schools in order to boost Aboriginal learner success. Charter (1996) suggests that fostering a self-directed learning environment is key to working with Aboriginal students. Traditional Aboriginal pedagogical activities such as sharing circles and interaction with Aboriginal role models have proven successful. Burns (1998) suggests that the western paradigm of education regards schools as the essential (and almost the only) institutionalized cultural setting in which formal learning can take place. Aboriginal people want their children to learn through the formal learning system yet retain their cultural and linguistic identity.

Burns critiques the dichotomization of education into formal and informal learning, saying that it cements unequal relations of power in education. The distinction also works to control, marginalize, and exploit minority groups in society. Aboriginal children and their culture, specifically, are moved to the margins. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, First Nations of Canada maintained highly successful systems of education. The implication for Alberta educators is to incorporate the wisdom of Elders into the practices of our formal educational system in ways that contribute to the needs of Aboriginal children.

George (2001) compared Aboriginal peoples of Canada on and off the reserve and demonstrated the challenges many Aboriginal learners encounter during their years of schooling. He notes the erosion of traditional Aboriginal cultures and the resulting loss of pride in Aboriginal identity. Antone (2000) outlined how the formal learning system and the curricula have further alienated Aboriginal learners. She suggests that bilingual, bicultural education is needed to restore a strong Aboriginal identity and argues that education must validate traditional knowledge, values, and skills if Aboriginal peoples are to survive as unique nations.

This literature synopsis presents key research findings and suggestions for classroom teachers compiled by the University of Alberta. Effective practices taken from the Alberta Education, Aboriginal Services Branch, First Nation, Métis and Inuit School-Community Learning Environment toolkit are also included.

### Key Findings

1. Traditional Aboriginal learning stresses self-directed learning and values of non-interference, non-competitiveness, sharing, and a sense of personal and community responsibility. Successful schooling for Aboriginal students should be built upon such foci.

2. Research conducted throughout the world suggests that Aboriginal peoples – perhaps because of their reliance on an oral culture and an oral literacy – tend to value “human systems” of curriculum delivery and relational pedagogical structures. Research has identified two guiding principles for educational delivery:
  - i) the recognition that education and learning is to increase awareness and appreciation of Aboriginal peoples’ cultures in the non-Aboriginal settings.
  - ii) educational curriculum reviews make space for Aboriginal culture within the traditional institution; involve Aboriginal communities in course delivery; create flexible content designs; negotiate appropriate teaching and learning; recognize necessary supports; make language and literacy part of the content; and evaluate the effectiveness from an Aboriginal perspective.
3. Aboriginal students are at a disadvantage in accessing educational programs. Aboriginal people often face language and literacy barriers in the delivery of curriculum and also how the curriculum and pedagogy relates culturally to their personal needs.
4. Educational programs that have incorporated the Aboriginal values and traditional knowledge (for example, from Aboriginal Elders) have been more successful than those that have not. These programs have shown success, as defined by traditionally “mainstream” values, in areas such as school retention rates and employment. By working within their Aboriginal community, it brought a revitalization of intergenerational relationships through parent participation, Elders’ involvement, enhanced community cohesion, and both reinforced and valued cultural concepts and practices.
5. Successful curricula for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners incorporate Aboriginal knowledge, languages, and traditions, including cross-cultural and anti-discrimination education for non-Aboriginal staff and students. Without such inclusive education, the learning system may not serve the needs of the Aboriginal learners in any meaningful manner.
6. Research suggests that Aboriginal youth and adults value formal schooling, mainstream economic activities, and entrepreneurial opportunities that allow individual growth, collective well-being, and community advancement. However, most educators suggest that Aboriginal peoples would benefit more if the educational system better integrated their skills and culture.
7. Struggling Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students share similar concerns: (i) inadequate preparation for school and (ii) difficulty in adapting to the school structure. These disadvantages rarely change throughout a child’s life. **Most strategies treat symptoms of the challenges rather than their causes.** Aboriginal postsecondary students similar to younger Aboriginal students- demonstrated a high need for achievement while pursuing goals, and believed post-secondary education would enhance career prospects and benefit their communities.
8. Aboriginal cultures and traditions influence Aboriginal student learning in Canada. There are five themes that impact pedagogy in a classroom, particularly in the social studies classroom. These themes are: traditional Aboriginal approaches to learning, patterns of oral interaction, self-concept, curriculum relevance, and teachers’ interpersonal style.
9. Education is a fundamental right for all. Some of the key barriers to equal educational opportunities for Aboriginal people are:
  - i) conventional control over education by the dominant culture
  - ii) curriculum as an instrument of enhancing socio-cultural inequalities
  - iii) poverty, unemployment, under-employment, malnutrition and such other challenges
  - iv) lack of organizational support and insensitivity to meet the needs of Aboriginal learners
  - v) perpetuation of negative perception and social taboos by the dominant culture
  - vi) lack of adequate resources and financial support

vii) unwarranted labeling of a significant section of Aboriginal learners as high needs students who do not fall into our definition of successful mastery of learning materials through memory and its reproduction in exams.

10. Knowledge in Aboriginal culture and tradition, cross-cultural and global education including a commitment to uphold and practice reason, justice and fairness may be a good start in opening up greater avenues of success for Aboriginal learners.

### **Suggestions for Teachers**

- Understand Aboriginal content, learning processes, and/or teaching methods. Incorporate these into the classroom.
- Have bilingual/ bicultural education.
- Show the importance of other cultures by incorporating their knowledge, languages, and traditions into classroom lessons.
- Increase awareness and appreciation of Aboriginal peoples' cultures in the non-Aboriginal settings.
- Use holidays as a chance to discuss the origins and meanings of Aboriginal traditions.
- Provide students with opportunities for self-directed learning.
- Allow student choice on assignment topics.
- Ask for voluntary participation during class activities.
- Keep the classroom decorated with lots of visual aids and incorporate visual materials into daily lessons with charts, pictures, maps, and diagrams.
- Use small group learning experiences.
- Provide interaction with Aboriginal role models such as Elders as they are regarded as the most knowledgeable people in Aboriginal societies.
- Encourage parents to be involved in the learning process.
- Provide clear rules and regular routines, keep lessons organized and provide smooth transitions.
- Reinforce valued cultural concepts and practices.
- Utilize dialog, storytelling, the sharing circle and other modes that do not require written materials.
- Have role-playing and dramatic arts lessons.
- Use real-life simulations.
- Provide tapes for listening and viewing.
- Try study buddies and pals.
- Build trust within your classroom.
- Discuss important issues such as bias, prejudice, discrimination, and acceptance. Include cross-cultural and anti-discrimination education in the classroom that focuses on changing institutions rather than individuals.
- Use examples of cultural conflict in class for students to discuss.
- Incorporate student lived experience and culture as a curriculum concern and emphasize dialogue about knowledge students already possess.
- Repeat key concepts or ideas.
- Allow students to learn material by doing it themselves.
- Have community fairs and festivals in the classroom or school.
- Provide curriculum relevance. Relate material to the lives of the Aboriginal students.
- Familiarize self with Aboriginal legislation (both federal and provincial) and policies and educational programs.

## Effective Practices for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Learner Programs

The strategies and practices highlighted below are selected from the professional development binder in the First Nation, Métis and Inuit School-Community Learning Environment toolkit. The practices are research-based and have been effective in improving First Nation, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) learner programs. The list is not exhaustive; however these strategies are representative of a wide range of effective practices.

### Teaching Practices Reflect Knowledge of FNMI Awareness and World View

- Use a holistic approach to education that addresses students' mental, emotional, physical and spiritual aspects. This will help to address various learning styles. Use culturally relevant examples.
- Pay close attention to the learning styles of Aboriginal students and design programs and lessons to capitalize on their strengths, e.g., use more visual and oral learning styles.
- Use concise verbal communication to relay instructions rather than too much explanation given too quickly. Give plenty of examples, and demonstrate the steps to allow for learning through observation and imitation.
- Use flexible teaching methods such as group work, balance lectures with class discussion, and culture-fair evaluation methods.
- Adopt a more culturally-appropriate teaching style by learning about First Nations culture, showing humility and openness while teaching, using humour, and creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere.
- Use traditional Aboriginal approaches to learning such as learning through stories and oral storytelling rather than an emphasis on written information. Stories provide a safe context for students to discuss and share their thoughts and ideas.
- Use culturally relevant materials when possible.
- Encourage peer tutoring and cooperative group learning approaches to emphasize cooperation and sharing. Encourage groups made up of many cultures to enrich the discussions.
- Provide more opportunities for collaborative and cooperative group work, ensuring there is equal distribution of work and accountability. Smaller groups that are effective and cooperative may encourage Aboriginal students to speak and go over the material.
- Practice inter-group competition rather than individual competition in the classroom.
- Stress short-term goals oriented more to the present with traditional First Nations students.
- Model behaviors and skills, with an emphasis on personal choice, to help First Nations students distinguish which behaviours are appropriate for which situation.
- Build relationships - Connect with students – show warmth, caring, sensitivity, humour, trust and high expectations for students. Show them you believe they can succeed. Hold high expectation for all students. Provide 'learning scaffolds' to support students who are still developing independent learning skills. Provide scaffolds such as detailed explanations, using a number of concrete examples of concepts, listing explicit steps to follow. Teachers should provide clarity to Aboriginal students about instructions and tasks (be direct rather than indirect about the anticipated product).
- Teachers need to structure learning experiences yet show personal warmth and respect for FNMI students and their own knowledge and experiences.
- Establish clear expectations for behavior but also be sensitive to behaviors influenced by culture.
- Communicate with students using culturally consistent examples, acceptable to the community in which you teach.
- Work with FNMI parents to find appropriate interventions to assist students with behavior problems and avoid biases.
- Provide support to Aboriginal students to believe in their ability to achieve. This involves early recognition of academic problems and culturally appropriate interventions to address problems before they become overwhelming. Involve the parents in helping to follow through at home with the interventions begun at school.

## **Learning Environments Must be Inviting to the FNMI Learners Parents and Community**

- Create a supportive classroom environment to increase opportunity for oral participation of Aboriginal students by using FNMI examples.
- Create a physical setting in the classroom that supports academic and social goals by communicating respect for diversity, connectedness and community (e.g., world map or welcome sign in various languages, book center with diversity themes).
- Develop a caring classroom environment by sharing stories of your own life, connecting with students and allowing FNMI input and choices in the classroom activities.

## **Cultural Awareness Builds Trusting Relationships**

- Gain an understanding of the unique life of a FNMI student (extended family obligations, involvement in culture, poverty-related barriers to education, and the reality of racism).
- Offer cultural awareness programs for all teachers to help them become acquainted with culturally appropriate methodologies and resource materials.
- Aboriginal students can learn about their identity by listening to the experiences and the life stories of their Elders and peers. Teachers and others can learn about how Aboriginal people experience the education system in two cultures by listening to stories.
- Become familiar with protocols (cultural considerations, how to initiate contact, approaching an Elder), for intercultural communication with Aboriginal people, Elders and communities in Alberta.
- Explore students' home and cultural background. This includes areas such as social orientation, parents' expectations of school, parents' educational background, and the student's affective orientations toward home and community.
- Explore students' expressions of core values, which can provide insights into their cultural worldviews. The goal is to identify those values that can be focused upon in the development of curricula and that students perceive as relevant to their cultural identity. Become aware of the differences between storytelling in Western and Aboriginal cultures. Invite Elders to assist in storytelling.
- Acknowledge validity of other forms of knowledge such as Aboriginal knowledge transmitted through an oral tradition.
- Understand the linguistic aspects of students' cultural backgrounds in order to build trust and teach students effectively.
- Welcome students' diverse home cultures into the classroom to help students feel supported and valued.
- Become aware of different communication and interaction styles to avoid biases against minority students in classroom activities and evaluation.

## **Gaining Trust Requires Involvement of FNMI Parents in the Education of Their Children**

- Make programs flexible to allow for family obligations, but encourage participation and attendance by arranging childcare where possible. Adapt learning schedules to accommodate traditions practiced.
- Work with families in their communities to increase mutual understanding. Learn about the culture before going to the communities by inviting Elders to staff meetings.
- Build schools as centres of community.
  - Create a special room/place of nurturing and welcome that is open to Aboriginal students, parents as well as other interested community members.
  - Offer courses in culturally based literacy, language and culture for parents and community members at the school.

- Encourage and recruit community involvement in the classrooms/schools, e.g., start an Elder's program to assist Aboriginal students to understand, appreciate and internalize the practice of their culture, traditions and spirituality. Utilize the home-school liaison officer to identify Elders from the community.
- Develop and promote a vision for improving student learning that incorporates the critical role of families and communities, as well as schools.
- Include parents and community members in school research projects, allowing them to experience what is going on in the school and inspire them to want to stay involved.
- Invite parents to the school or go into the community to engage parents in discussions on teaching, learning and supportive learning environments.
- Encourage leadership skills among parents by explaining the governance systems of the school and preparing them for involvement in roles such as a school council representative or a board member.
- Explore new avenues of communication to deepen home-school communication (e.g., a bilingual newsletter that parents and students write parts together).
- Hold parent information centers or workshops at the school. Provide places where parents feel welcome and meet regularly. Decorate the room with culturally relevant posters and artifacts.
- Produce brochures of strategies for Aboriginal parents to help their children succeed.

Strategies for Parents might include the following:

- Be aware that teachers are usually not familiar with your culture and will make mistakes because it takes time to be acculturated.
- Volunteer to help in class.
- Communicate with teachers and administrators about your child's education. Provide questions parents may wish to ask teachers to ensure they understand the progress the child is making and any issues related to the child's learning.
- Find out what your child is learning and reinforce this at home.
- Talk to your children about the value of education.
  - Instill the positive Aboriginal values in your children.
  - Be careful about expressing dissatisfaction with the school or staff in front of your children. Parents need to model behaviours they want the children tend to emulate.

### **Teacher Training and Development Program Reflects FNMI Education Goals**

- Set up an immersion FNMI experience to assist teachers in becoming knowledgeable about FNMI culture. Work with the community and Aboriginal Services Branch from Alberta Education to create meaningful in-service opportunities for staff.
- Train teachers to teach in a way that encourages "active learning" by students, e.g., cooperative learning environment, hands-on inquiry-based instruction, enhance intrinsic motivation in students. Strategies such as increased 'wait-time' encourage more participation from minority students.
- Teachers should have pedagogical content knowledge in the subjects being taught.
- Implement a sustained program of planned FNMI professional development for each new teacher that lasts over a period of several years.
- Use humour to build confidence, self-esteem and participation among FNMI students.
- Counsellors can play a role in increasing Aboriginal achievement in school by educating teachers about cultural norms and strategies, and by supporting Aboriginal students as they encounter barriers in the education system.
- Model using data-driven decisions to encourage teachers to base their classroom decisions on data.
- Celebrate risk taking and avoid punitive actions that inhibit risk taking. Celebrate successes and new ideas and do it often, e.g., use FNMI prayer to begin celebrations.
- Build in a time for staff to collaborate on FNMI practices within the school structure.
- Set clear expectations for teachers and committees and communicate it in writing.



## Additional Readings for AISI Coordinators and Teachers

**Bold** indicates Best/Most Useful Resources

### Websites

**Alberta Learning. (2002). First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework. Retrieved October 15, 2004 from**  
<<http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/nativeed/nativepolicy/Framework.asp>>

This online policy document reviews findings and policy recommendations from Alberta's 1987 Native Education Policy in Alberta, and critiques/updates the province's progress in Aboriginal education. It contains little helpful for classroom practitioners, but may be helpful for policy makers and practitioners reviewing the goals and directions of their own local initiatives to improve Aboriginal education.

**Ibid. (2003, May). First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework: A Progress Report. Retrieved October 19, 2004 from**  
<<http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/nativeed/nativepolicy/pdfs/FNMIProgRep.pdf>>

**Ibid. (2002). Turning vision into reality: Improve education outcomes for Aboriginal children - Recommendations. Retrieved October 20, 2004 from**  
<[http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/commissions/5\\_20.asp](http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/commissions/5_20.asp)>

**Glaister, B. & Rodermond, M. (2004). Curriculum Laboratory: Aboriginal Teaching Resources. Lethbridge: University of Lethbridge. Retrieved October 20, 2004 from**  
<<http://www.uleth.ca/edu/currlab/handouts/Aboriginal.html>>

**Lofthouse, N. (1999). Effective Schools Research: A review of the literature. Vancouver, BC: Aboriginal Education, BC Ministry of Education. Retrieved October 19, 2004 from**  
<<http://www.bced.bc.ca/abed/research/esr/>>

### Books and Articles

Antone, E. M. (2000). Empowering Aboriginal voice in Aboriginal education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*. 24 (2) 92-101.

Ball, J. and Pence, A. (2001). Constructing *knowledge and training curricula about early childhood care and development in Canadian Aboriginal communities*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Seattle, WA. ERIC Document No. ED451995.

**Binda, K. and Nicol, D. (1999). Administering schools in a culturally diverse environment: New developments in administering First Nations schools in Canada. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Montreal, PQ. ERIC Document No. ED434794.**

Discusses progress in the decentralization of education in Aboriginal communities. This collaborative approach involves more stakeholders/community members, employs more local decision-making, and more successfully meets community needs and incorporates Aboriginal culture into content and pedagogy.

Buchanan, M. and Egg, M. (1996). *Culture matters. Community report reporting on a research project to explore factors affecting the outcomes of vocational education and training for Aboriginal and*

*Torres Straits Islander People*. Brisbane: Australian National Training Authority. ERIC Document No. ED419984.

Burns, G. E. (1998). *Toward a redefinition of formal and informal learning: Education and the Aboriginal people*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (17<sup>th</sup>). Ottawa, ON. ERIC Document No. ED460804.

**Charter, A. (1996). Integrating traditional Aboriginal teaching and learning approaches in post-secondary settings. ERIC Document No. ED403091.**

**Danyluk, R. C. and da Costa, J. L. (1999). Identifying and addressing challenges encountered by educators of Aboriginal children in an urban setting. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Montreal, PQ. ERIC Document No. ED429958.**

George, P. (2003). The holistic/rainbow approach to Aboriginal literacy. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*. 27 (1) 29-40. ERIC Document No. ED467323.

**Harris, S. (1979). Aboriginal learning styles and the Three Rs. Paper presented at the national conference of New Directions in Rural Education. Perth, Australia. ERIC Document No. ED216825.**

**Harslett, M. et al. (1999). "We learn a lot from Mr. Hart": A qualitative study of an effective teacher of Aboriginal Students. Paper presented at the Joint Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education and the New Zealand Association for Research in Education. Melbourne, Australia. ERIC Document No. ED442597.**

This case study of an urban teacher of Aboriginal students discusses the attitudes and pedagogical strategies that helped one teacher to work successfully with his Grades 6/7 Australian Aboriginal students. His approaches included a strong knowledge of his students' culture, a cooperative classroom atmosphere, and a more egalitarian relationship with students.

Hesch, R. (1990). *Aboriginal teachers as organic intellectuals*. Paper presented at the Mokakit's Biennial Conference (4<sup>th</sup>). Quebec, PQ. ERIC Document No. ED334041.

Hoy, A. W. and Hoy, W. K. (2003). *Instructional Leadership A Learning-Centered Guide*. Toronto: Allyn & Bacon.

Kanu, Y. (2002). In their own voices: First Nations students identify some cultural mediators of their learning in the formal school system. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*. 48 (2) 98-121.

**Mattson, L. and Caffrey, L. (2001). Barriers to equal education for Aboriginal learners: A review of the literature. A BC Human Rights Commission Report. Vancouver: British Columbia Human Rights Commission. ERIC Document No. ED459020.**



**Pitawanakwat, J. (2001). *Informal learning culture through the life course: Initiatives in Native organizations and communities*. NALL Working Paper #08. OISE: University of Toronto. ERIC Document No. ED460805.**

A study of 8 First Nations communities in Ontario examines how traditional and informal education interact in community schools. Catalogues issues and concerns with incorporating less formal and more culturally aligned learning opportunities into more structured, traditional Western educational models, none the least of which is the radical difference between these two educational paradigms.

Rubenstein, H. and R. Clifton. (2004, June). *The Challenge of Aboriginal Education*. Fraser Forum. 24-25.

Sloane-Seale, A., Wallace, L., and Levin, B. (2001). Life paths and educational and employment outcomes of disadvantaged Aboriginal learners. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*. 27 (2) 15-31. ERIC Journal No. EJ636633.

Stiffarm, L. A., Ed. (1998). *As we see...Aboriginal pedagogy*. Saskatchewan: University of Saskatchewan. ERIC Document No. ED441645.

Wotherspoon, T. and Butler, J. (1999). *Informal learning: cultural experiences and entrepreneurship among Aboriginal people*. NALL Working Paper #04. OISE: University of Toronto. ERIC Document No. ED452398.