

## Views on Aboriginal Education: Creating Teachers and Learners Through Community.

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It's difficult to create a statement that fully encompasses what one's educational philosophy entails. Impossible, some would say, in part because of the diversity of the students that teachers must teach. One philosophy does not suit all students, and teachers want to do what is best for all of their students, even if students do not see it as fair. Often, it seems, students have a difficult time seeing the difference between equality and equity. Students seem to think that equality should be the ruling factor: that everybody should be treated exactly the same. However, teachers know that students cannot be treated the same because students are not the same. Students vary in educational levels, abilities, gender, race, and ethnicity. Race and ethnicity seem to be forgotten often, possibly because not all minorities are visible, and possibly because it is easier to teach all students as if they are the same, as if they have the same abilities, and as if they all have the same background. This is not the case in classrooms. According to a census done in 2006, 3.8 percent of the population in Canada is status holding First Nations.<sup>1</sup> However, much more of the Canadian population is part Aboriginal, has some sort of Aboriginal ancestry, or does not qualify for status in some other way. It is of utmost importance that teachers know how they view learners, teachers of learners, curriculum for learners, and the involvement of family and community in the learning process, especially in an Aboriginal context because at some point in a teacher's career, there will be an Aboriginal child in the classroom, and that child deserves to be treated as an individual, and also as an Aboriginal person. Therefore, a teacher

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada, *Percentage of Aboriginal People in Canada*. Retrieved November 5, 2011, from <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-558/figures/c1-eng.cfm>

must have a working concept of educational practices in order to encompass not only the Aboriginal students in the classroom, but students of all races and ethnicities.

It is difficult to divide concepts between learners and teachers. Teachers and learners are so closely intertwined that the definitions cannot be divided easily. Sometimes students teach without realizing that they are teaching the teacher more than the teacher is teaching the student. Sometimes the teacher teaches invaluable lessons to students. But ultimately, there is no definite line between teacher and learner. However, there are some points about learners that are accurate, whether that learner is a child or an adult. Jeanette Armstrong argues “it’s about education; it’s about knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Everything is about knowledge and education. Learners need to know that they are learning something or they fail to be learners. Learners also need to be taught to be powerful. Knowledge is power. Students need to know that they have the ability to be powerful. This is true of all students, but especially of Aboriginal students. Often, Aboriginal students behave as though they are inferior to their Caucasian classmates. It is unfortunate, but it seems that the way government has historically treated Aboriginal people is still affecting the way that Aboriginal learners, both adult and child, are viewing themselves. Because of this sense of inferiority, whether it is psychologically or merely perceived, it does not matter what the student is capable in reality, but rather how the student views oneself. This view of self can be absolutely detrimental. Therefore, when Armstrong states that “it’s about knowledge,” she is absolutely right, but it is also about knowledge of self, beliefs in self, and the ability for the learner to have a positive self image.

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<sup>2</sup> Jeanette Armstrong, “Our Role as Humans: perspectives on Sustainability,” Retrieved September 19, 2011 from <http://nativeperspectives.com/loadvid.php?watch=da4RNMHN-Pw>

Learners need to be connected to their past and their future. In many child-centered models, it is “student-learner who connects us to both our past and our future.”<sup>3</sup> Several theorists have come up with models centering on the student, and believe that it is “very important that in the center of the educational model there is a child, a student, and a learner.”<sup>4</sup> Learners are not necessarily the same as the child and the student identifiers. The child can be simply a child: the child does not have to learn, but the teacher must provide for the child. On the same token, the student can be defined as merely the child that comes to the school, is registered as a student at a particular age/grade level. That student does not have to learn. That student can merely be a child. But the learner, separate and yet in the same physical body as the child and student, needs to be nurtured. Learners cannot be left to squander their time alone, learners must be nurtured, brought out, and taught to grow so the learner can create change, can become powerful, and can create a model that is centered on learning.

It is sometimes difficult to not have a negative view of Aboriginal learners. It is difficult for teachers to not clump or stereotype all students. When looking at the statistics, especially that “Aboriginal [high school students] are six times as likely as non-Aboriginal people to have less than a grade 9 education,”<sup>5</sup> it is difficult to view learners in a positive light. However, it is not fair to students to be looking at statistics and predisposing them to failure. Instead, it is essential that teachers look at learners and see the potential they have, assist them in finding and nurturing that potential. It is important that teachers view their learners in a positive light so that learners

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<sup>3</sup> Maenette Kape’ahoikalani Padenken Ah Nee-Benham & Joanne Elizabeth Cooper, “Gathering Together to Travel to the Source”, *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 16.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Cherrington, “Building a Child-Centered Model,” *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 31.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Silver et al., “Aboriginal Education in Winnipeg Inner City High Schools,” *Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance*. Winnipeg: Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives (2002): 7.

can view themselves in a positive light. To do so, one must look at the causes of the reality that the statistics show. One possible cause of such negative statistics is the “failure to make necessary expenditures on Aboriginal education.”<sup>6</sup> If there is not money to fund the creation and nurturing of learners, there is no way that teachers can meet every individual need and create an atmosphere and space that is conducive to learning. Another possible cause is that Aboriginal learners have not learned to communicate with each other and with the teachers or the educational system, and, as Sarah Keahi states, “learning to communicate with one another is important.”<sup>7</sup> Between these two causes, teachers are failing to create learners, and are therefore failing to “take the steps that are necessary to secure [a good] economic future.”<sup>8</sup>

The role of a teacher is multifaceted. A teacher has to have a strong knowledge base, including of various Aboriginal cultures. It is not necessary that teachers have knowledge of Aboriginal languages, but is important that teachers have knowledge of where students can access the language, and to have knowledge of people that students, particularly Aboriginal students, can relate to. I have seen first-hand how encouraging it can be to Aboriginal students to have a teacher that uses even minimal Aboriginal content in the classroom. By including some First Nations content in the classroom, it shows that a teacher is thinking “deeply about how both Native and Western worldviews might coexist in dynamic educational settings.”<sup>9</sup> In having a strong knowledge base, teachers need to “realize the importance of the stories that elders have shared.”<sup>10</sup> It is very difficult, however, for Caucasian teachers to teach Aboriginal culture,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.: 8.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Keahi, “Advocating for a Stimulating and Language-Based Education,” *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 58.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Silver et al., “Aboriginal Education in Winnipeg Inner City High Schools,” *Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance*. Winnipeg: Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives (2002): 8.

<sup>9</sup> Maenette Kape’ahoikalani Padenken Ah Nee-Benham & Joanne Elizabeth Cooper, “Gathering Together to Travel to the Source”, *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000):2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

especially to a diverse classroom. How do we as teachers incorporate every culture into the classroom in addition to the curriculum that must be taught? Sometimes culture can be combined with curriculum, but not always, and that reality puts a strain on the ability to teach everything to students that teachers “should” be able to teach. In addition to teachers needing to be knowledgeable, teachers also need to be a force of change. Teachers need to be able to teach their learners “who we are as a force on this planet.”<sup>11</sup> In order to do that, teachers need to be able to know who they are as individuals, have a knowledge base that allows understanding of who teachers are, who learners are, and how teachers can create and advocate for change.

Teachers need to be strong for their students. Students of minorities don’t always know how to advocate for themselves, so teachers need to be able to advocate for their students and teach their learners to be able to advocate for themselves. Teenagers are generally disconnected from their adult counterparts: “teenagers rarely feel that they are understood by adults.”<sup>12</sup> Because of that reality, often adults, and often teachers, feel as though there is very little that one can do to help the teenagers when they do not feel as though the teenagers will even listen or acknowledge their advice or support. This frustration seems to be especially prevalent in Aboriginal youth: “there is a divide, or ‘disconnect’, on cultural and class grounds between Aboriginal students and their largely white, middle class teachers.”<sup>13</sup> Because of the reality that most teachers are “white, middle-class,” teens in general, but especially middle-class teens, are feeling as though teachers do not care about them. This is causing teachers to fail at their job, so it is essential that teachers are able to be strong for their students. Teachers cannot allow emotional disconnect to harm their students. It is a reality that “Aboriginal students and teachers

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<sup>11</sup> Jeanette Armstrong, “Our Role as Humans: perspectives on Sustainability,” Retrieved September 19, 2011 from <http://nativeperspectives.com/loadvid.php?watch=da4RNMHN-Pw>

<sup>12</sup> Jim Silver et al., “Aboriginal Education in Winnipeg Inner City High Schools,” *Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance*. Winnipeg: Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives (2002): 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 17.

occupy two different worlds, separated by lines of culture and class,”<sup>14</sup> but teachers need to be able to motivate their students, make their learners feel understood and comforted in knowing that their teachers do care about them, their culture, their race, and most importantly, about them as individuals. Being strong for our students allows teachers to be able to “enable [students to] not only survive, but with a positive attitude to excel.”<sup>15</sup> Strength in teachers shows students that they can succeed, that they are cared about, and that they are important.

Curriculum is of secondary importance to learners. Teachers should be teachers of learners, not teachers of curriculum. The education system in Canada dictates what we have to learn and what we have to teach. However, the education system has the ability to “function as a vehicle for cultural and economic renewal.”<sup>16</sup> Teachers are the creators of the next generation.

Regardless of how often students come to class, we as teachers spend more time with the students than their own parents do. Therefore, it is up to the teachers to be able to manipulate curriculum in order to teach students what they need to know. What students need to know does not necessarily mesh with what the government says that students need to know. However, in the work force, students will quickly learn that it is important to complete their education in order to better themselves. Employers do not care about hidden curriculum, so long as students can function in a workplace and have, on paper, done what is expected of them. The reality is that “completing year 10 or 11 increases an Indigenous person’s chance of employment by forty percent.”<sup>17</sup> Curriculum should reflect the reality that students need to finish up to a certain level of education in order to be successful. IT should also reflect the fact that students are not always

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Keahi, “Advocating for a Stimulating and Language-Based Education,” *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 58.

<sup>16</sup> Quentin Beresford & Gary Parington, *Reform and Resistance in Aboriginal Education* (Crawley, Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 2003): 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

psychologically capable of completing these years of schooling in order to better themselves. Therefore, it is essential that the curriculum we choose is based on student needs and interests, but also that that curriculum reflects what the students need to know in order to succeed in life. Teachers, through the teaching of curriculum, desire to create successful learners, but sometimes we are teachers of curriculum, and not of learners. Teachers need to remember that students are more important as individuals than the things we are teaching them out of textbooks and classroom assigned curricula.

Curriculum should include Aboriginal content so that everybody in the classroom feels heard and respected. The classroom needs to be a “visionary space to talk and to listen, to learn about our uniqueness and similarities, and to share ideas and practices that have supported and shaped learning experiences.”<sup>18</sup> Teachers need to ensure that what we are teaching is accurate, and that the curriculum we are teaching includes content from the First Peoples of Canada. It is required that our curriculum is taught from a Canadian context, but teachers need to understand that Aboriginal content is part of teaching from a Canadian context. Including Aboriginal content in the classroom matters to Aboriginal students, and it also benefits the non-Aboriginal students that are learning it as well. One of our goals as teachers, through the curriculum, needs to be to create an inclusive environment so that every student feels safe and understood. Therefore, it is essential that our curriculum includes Aboriginal content in all subject matters, not just in a segregated Aboriginal course. Aboriginal teens have a “desire to know more about themselves and their culture and history,”<sup>19</sup> but often do not have the chance to learn more about themselves and their histories. Unfortunately, it has been stated that “Aboriginal content in the curriculum is

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<sup>18</sup> Maenette Kape’ahoikalani Padenken Ah Nee-Benham & Joanne Elizabeth Cooper, “Gathering Together to Travel to the Source”, *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 2.

<sup>19</sup> Jim Silver et al., “Aboriginal Education in Winnipeg Inner City High Schools,” *Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance*. Winnipeg: Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives (2002): 21.

not mandatory.”<sup>20</sup> All too often we do not include Aboriginal content in the curriculum. This blatant exclusion of essential learning has created an epidemic in the schooling system, and the sad reality of schooling for Aboriginal students is that “the school system has failed to meet the needs of Aboriginal students.”<sup>21</sup> The failure to meet the needs of Aboriginal students is negatively affecting our students and “continues to be a major contributing factor to socioeconomic disadvantage among young Indigenous people and, consequently, to the future prospects of their communities.”<sup>22</sup> Curriculum needs to be set up and designed to create success for all students, not just those that are predisposed to success.

What we choose to teach needs to affect our students. Students are often bored, and are inundated with messages through media that are not necessarily healthy for them to experience. Therefore, we as teachers need to choose to teach things that will affect our students more-so than the messages they are receiving from outside sources. One of the things teachers need to teach their Aboriginal students is the importance of their native language. Many Aboriginal Education theorists have stated that “in language, we find our identity and the very essence of our existence.”<sup>23</sup> Language is essential for all learners to know who they are and where they come from. It is beneficial, then, that a “key feature of today’s world is a trend away from centralization and toward diversity and devolution of control.”<sup>24</sup> This puts more freedom into the hands of the teachers to teach the importance of language. Given that most teachers are still of Caucasian descent, it is irrational to expect the teachers to teach the native language to the Aboriginal students. However, teachers can teach the students the importance of language, where

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Quentin Beresford & Gary Parington, *Reform and Resistance in Aboriginal Education* (Crawley, Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 2003): 21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Keahi, “Advocating for a Stimulating and Language-Based Education,” *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 58.

<sup>24</sup> Steven May, *Indigenous Community-Based Education* (Dublin: The Linguistic Institute of Ireland, 1999): 8.



to access their language, and why it is important to be able to speak, or at least understand, their native tongue. It is also important to teach the students to be able to create political change as a way to “recover and revitalize Native language and culture.”<sup>25</sup>

The involvement of community is essential to create healthy relationships between teachers, learners, and learning. In Jeanette Armstrong’s article, she uses a quote that discusses the essential cooperation between community and education:

We don’t really understand what this problem is about, but there is a lack of understanding. One side understands this and another side understands that. And what’s happening in this conflict is somebody is trying to get the other side to agree to their side. Rather than spending our time trying to argue, lobby, or politicize each other, what we’d better do is outline for each other what our view is. We hear each other out.<sup>26</sup>

Community must be based around the importance of listening to one another. The community does not necessarily have to agree with all that the teachers and curriculum are teaching the learners, but they do need to listen, try to understand the importance of the teaching, and acknowledge that other people will see things differently than the community may, but that does not necessarily make the teachers or the community wrong, it just makes them different. The community is also an essential part of education because “community [can] only thrive if we believe we belong and we actively participate as members.”<sup>27</sup> The community must be an active part of the learner’s education, otherwise the learner does not realize the importance of community, and will be more likely to disconnect themselves from their own community in the

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<sup>25</sup> Jeanette Armstrong, “A Holistic Education, Teachings from the Dance House,” *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 36.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 42.

<sup>27</sup> Maenette Kape’ahoikalani Padenken Ah Nee-Benham & Joanne Elizabeth Cooper, “Gathering Together to Travel to the Source”, *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 17.

future. This disconnect from the community creates a great problem for the individuals, because, as Armstrong states, “when a person does not have community, they do not have family and a part of their whole self is emotionally missing.”<sup>28</sup> A student, as discussed before, needs to be a child, a student, and a learner all in one, and needs to incorporate their family and community into their identity in order to be whole.

With the importance of community comes the importance of family to the educational goals of individual Aboriginal students. The family needs to be at a healthy standpoint before they can be involved in a learner’s schooling experience. There is research that suggests that children from a two parent household that eats at least one meal a day together are more open to learning and well-adjusted than other students.<sup>29</sup> This proves that learners need to have a healthy home environment in order to thrive to the best of their potential. Family is also important because the family is the living example of what the student is expected to amount to: “elders are the best living examples of what the end product of education and life experiences should be.”<sup>30</sup> It is essential that teachers show students that it is detrimental to their development to “disengage emotionally from family, extended family, and community.”<sup>31</sup> Even if the family is not a healthy unit, the child can still benefit from having a family, so long as the child has a strong, supportive community that is healthy and assists the child in understanding what healthy relationships look like.

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<sup>28</sup> Jeanette Armstrong, “A Holistic Education, Teachings from the Dance House,” *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 39.

<sup>29</sup> Marsha Weinraub & Barbara M. Wolf, “Effects of Stress and Social Supports on Mother-Child Interactions in Single- and Two-Parent Families,” *Child Development*, 54.5 (1983).

<sup>30</sup> Maenette Kape’ahoikalani Padenken Ah Nee-Benham & Joanne Elizabeth Cooper, “Gathering Together to Travel to the Source”, *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 17.

<sup>31</sup> Jeanette Armstrong, “A Holistic Education, Teachings from the Dance House,” *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 39.

In order to create a healthy learning environment, the community, family, learner, and land all need to be involved in the learner's life. Learners need to be tied to the land through their extended familial circles in order to best benefit, and they need to learn that "what the community does severely impacts the land in a healthy or an unhealthy way."<sup>32</sup> Teachers need to be aware of the statistics surrounding the realities of the communities and families of Aboriginal students. For instance, a recent study regarding domestic violence found that "80 percent of Aboriginal women had personally experienced family violence; fifty-three percent of Aboriginal women who responded to the survey [indicated] they had been physically abused."<sup>33</sup> Out of those 80 percent that indicated they had experienced familial abuse, "seventy-four percent indicated they did not seek help."<sup>34</sup> These numbers are shockingly high, and indicate the type of behavior that Aboriginal learners are being taught, albeit inadvertently, is acceptable. These statistics also show that the family is not a healthy environment for many Aboriginal students to be learning in. Because of this, teachers need to be prepared to teach the students about the land, to involve the students in discovering the importance of their connection to the land. It is not essential that the teacher incorporates land into every lesson, but it is essential that the teacher has an understanding of why land is important, and what role land plays in the development and education of Aboriginal children.

Ultimately, we must remember that "everything, including ourselves, is part of everything else."<sup>35</sup> We cannot be an individual island. We cannot remove ourselves from what we do not wish to see. We cannot be just a teacher; we must be a learner, a member of a family, a member

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<sup>32</sup> Jeanette Armstrong, "A Holistic Education, Teachings from the Dance House," *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother's Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 38.

<sup>33</sup> Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission, "The Justice System and Aboriginal People," Retrieved September 16, 2011 from <http://www.ajic.mb.ca/volumel/chapter13.html#7>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Jeanette Armstrong, "A Holistic Education, Teachings from the Dance House," *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother's Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 40.

of a community, and a teacher all in the same moment. We cannot remove ourselves from one role to play another; we must be able to play all roles simultaneously because we are all at the same time. It is important, also, that teachers remember that the model they are teaching from regarding Indigenous education does not have to be based in “past, pre-Colonial context, but that the model must also look to the future.”<sup>36</sup> We must look to change. We must look to create change. We must treat each student, regardless of their race and ethnicity, but also remembering their race and ethnicity, as an individual. We must do what is best for our students. And we must remember that it is our job as educators, as teachers of learners, and as individuals, to create an environment where all students can learn well. We must also remember that we do not have all the answers, and that we need to change when we realize that we may have made a mistake, or our views on life and education need to change. In the words of Darrell Kipp: “if educators do not constantly seek to define and fine tune their teaching abilities so they teach at their optimal level, they are a disgrace to their profession.”<sup>37</sup> With Kipp’s words in mind, we as teachers cannot get too comfortable, but rather must always be evolving and doing what is best for each individual student.

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<sup>36</sup> Kate Cherrington, “Building a Child-Centered Model,” *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 32.

<sup>37</sup> Darrell Kipp, “A Commitment to Language-Based Education”, *Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother’s Voice* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000): 63.

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