

They BEAT the DRUM for ME

JAN HARE

I attended a graduation ceremony in my community not so long ago, in which all those who had graduated that year, whether from the local elementary school, the high school or a university, were acknowledged for their hard-earned successes. Our ceremony began with a prayer in Anishinaabe, followed by words from a community Elder. Finally, the graduate student, who had traveled from across the country to be there, gave words of encouragement to all who attended the ceremony. Each of the graduates received a small gift, and at the conclusion of the ceremony a group of women from the community rose and honored all graduates with a drum song. I was one of those graduates, the first member of my community to complete a doctoral degree. And though I had been honored at the University of British Columbia's convocation ceremony, where a ceremonial drum was also beaten when I crossed the stage, I had come back to the community for this important celebration.

The ceremony at the community centre in M'Chigeeng embraced what Aboriginal people have always valued in education: a continuity of culture, language, and traditions. Yet, included in the ceremony were new elements for acknowledging the completion of our studies, demonstrating that the way forward in Aboriginal education calls for differing cultural perspectives to work together to ensure Aboriginal culture, languages, and ways of knowing will continue, with their contribution valued and respected. This can best be achieved through greater Aboriginal

participation in the design, delivery, and evaluation of educational programming for Aboriginal children. The history of Aboriginal education reveals how these important aspects of culture, ways of knowing, control and ownership, have been undermined for Aboriginal people in the schooling of their children and youth. Yet, Aboriginal people are making great strides to recover these elements to ensure the educational success of their children and inform and enrich present conceptions of education.

Drawing on the tradition of the medicine wheel, a circular framework, we can conceptualize educational history to see how forms of learning have changed for Aboriginal people and how we can still move forward in a way that allows us to encompass beliefs, practices, and a spirit that can revitalize Aboriginal participation and success in schools. The circle is significant to many Aboriginal societies. It represents holism, balance, and interconnectedness. The number four also holds particular meaning. Cycles on the land can be observed in patterns of four; the four directions, four seasons, or the four elements. Phases in Aboriginal education can be situated in the four dimensions of the circle. The circle starts with traditional forms of education, moves through the phases of formal and residential schooling, to arrive at education today for Aboriginal people. It is at this point in the circle where we move forward in education by re-incorporating traditional forms and values, while at the same seeing the importance and necessity of western

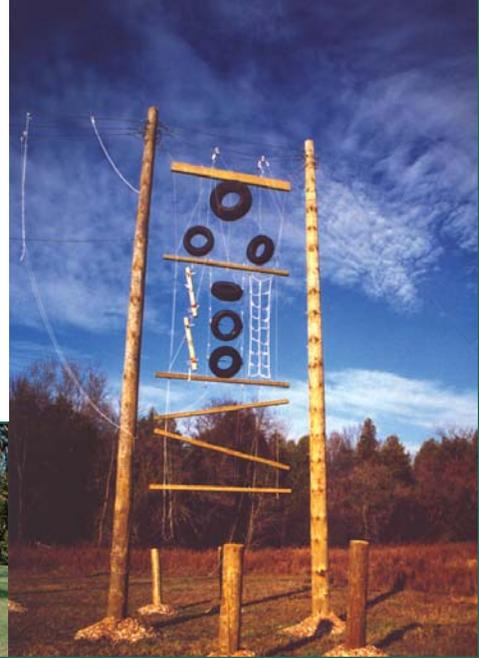
forms of knowledge.

Prior to the arrival of the Euro-peans, Aboriginal peoples taught their young a wide range of skills and knowledge, through a variety of instructional techniques and with a wide range of multi-generational teachers. Teaching and learning were aimed at sustaining the community, clan, or family, always with an eye to ensuring that they thrived, physically and culturally, through the seasons.

Miller describes the most notable approach to learning as the three L's, which emphasized looking, listening and learning.¹ Learning referred to hands-on experiences, in which children were prepared in their behavior and skills for life as adults. Responsibility for teaching the young rested with the family, community, and Nation. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and Elders were all included. Parents modeled for their children appropriate social behaviors, taught their children to survive on the land, and prepared them for participation in the larger clan or community systems. Elders are respected and revered for their wisdom, knowledge, and experience. They are leaders, healers, counselors, and cultural experts in Aboriginal culture, responsible for the preservation and transmission of our teachings, which represent coherent sets of practices and beliefs about how we live as Aboriginal peoples. They are an important link to our worldview.

The transmission of our worldview, our perspective from which we make sense of the world, occurred through our daily living on the land and

Prior to the arrival of the Europeans... teaching and learning were aimed at sustaining the community, clan, or family, always with an eye to ensuring that they thrived, physically and culturally, through the seasons.



YMCA Ceder Glen Outdoor Discovery Campus

*Outdoor programs – Retreats
Initiatives – Ropes – Orienteering – Earthkeepers
Year Round Fun and Adventure*

13300 11th Concession, Nobleton, ON

Please call for your Adventure Package or
RSVP for our next complementary lunch at
(905) 859 9622

through our teachings, of which oral tradition is an important part. Stories were passed on to children, from one generation to the next, planting in our consciousness our identity, language, and the ways we were to live. Anishinaabe teachings have both a creation and re-creation story; in the creation story the Creator gathered from Mother Earth life from the four sacred directions – north, south, east, west – and blew into them using a sacred shell. The union of the four sacred elements and the life breath gave rise to the Anishinaabe.² Other stories reminded children of behavioral expectations. To ensure the children returned home from play or outings in the early evening, the Sto:lo peoples told their children about an old woman named Thoxweya who would put little children in a basket if they were out after the sun went down and would eat them later.³

The learning experiences of Aboriginal children were intimately tied to the land and the family. The family was the primary medium of cultural continuity and an invaluable context in which learning occurred. It was an education inclusive of parents, siblings, extended family, and Elders. All shared the responsibility of caring for and teaching children from childhood to adulthood. Children watched the people around them, listening to their stories, and engaging in first-hand experiences. Oral tradition contributed to cultural continuity, defining for children our language, traditions, and identity as Aboriginal people.

Learning and living changed when Europeans began taking this land as their own in the 16th century. It was the missionaries who took up the early task of providing formal schooling for Aboriginal children, always with an eye to converting us to Christianity and “civilizing” us based on newcomer ways. Various kinds of formal schooling arrangements existed for Aboriginal children following initial contact. Children would attend day schools and boarding schools, where they would live or come for a day of organized schooling, with set groupings that did not reflect traditional practice. Keen to convert Aboriginal groups, missionaries would learn the language while setting up a mission and building a school. In some instances, Aboriginal groups requested missionaries to come

The [residential] schools’ curriculum emphasized vocational skills and religious training. Boys learned farming, blacksmithing, and carpentry and girls learned sewing, cooking, and household chores... Aboriginal children were schooled for inequality, permitting their entry into mainstream society only at the lowest rungs.



As for those who graduated, who heard the drum beat for them in honour of their educational accomplishments, there is a new set of responsibilities to ensure the drum will continue to beat for others making their way through schooling.

EN BREF En utilisant l'exemple du cercle d'urgence et de ses quatre quadrants, nous pouvons conceptualiser les bases historiques de l'éducation chez les Autochtones et comprendre à quel point leur mode d'apprentissage a changé. Au début du cercle, on observe les formes traditionnelles d'enseignement, suit ensuite la phase de la scolarisation formelle, puis celle des pensionnats, et vient enfin celle du système d'éducation actuel. C'est dans ce dernier quadrant que nous devons aller de l'avant afin de réincorporer les pratiques et les valeurs traditionnelles, tout en restant conscients de l'importance et de la nécessité des formes de savoir occidentales.

to our territories, knowing full well that practices of the Bible, which entailed reading and writing, would give us access to schooling and participation in the newcomer's world. The school would then be close to the community, allowing children, youth, and adults to acquire new forms of knowledge, aimed at complementing our existing understandings of the world. Aboriginal teachers would translate sermons and teachings into the native language for the congregation. Recognizing the importance of learning about newcomers' ways, parents exercised choice in sending their children to places of learning outside the home, knowing they would return home daily or weekly. These Aboriginal parents were trying to find options for their children that would ensure their survival in a changing world.

As the government's colonial agenda dominated the land and resources of Canada, policy directed towards Aboriginal people determined their educational goals. The government's response was to make assimilation the official policy goal for Aboriginal people with the intent of eliminating the Indian from the Indian and ensuring their absorption into mainstream society. Day schools were proving ineffective as the “influence of the wigwam was stronger than the influence of the school.”⁴ Assimilation could best be achieved if children were removed from the influences of their family and community; day schools and boarding schools were collapsed into a larger category known as residential schools, and these totalizing institutions proved to be one of the most powerful tools of assimilation and the most destructive force on Aboriginal cultures, traditions, and languages.

As residential schools became more centralized in a deliberate attempt to isolate children from the socializing structures of their lives, the schools' character became increasingly regulated in policy and practices. Children dressed in school uniforms, were given a number aligned to their Christian

name, and assumed a rigorous schedule of prayer, school, and labouring. Though the government provided limited funding for the schools' maintenance, churches that ran the schools relied on the children to sustain the daily operations, limiting their time in the classroom and academic opportunities. Personal testimonies are damning: “We spent very little time in the classroom. We were in the classroom from nine o'clock in the morning until noon. Another shift [of children] came into the classroom at one o'clock in the afternoon and stayed there until three.”⁵ The schools' curriculum emphasized vocational skills and religious training. Boys learned farming, blacksmithing, and carpentry and girls learned sewing, cooking, and household chores. As Barman suggests, Aboriginal children were schooled for inequality, permitting their entry into mainstream society only at the lowest rungs.⁶

Policy and practice were systematically aimed at eradicating Aboriginal culture and language. If not banned outright, both were so disparaged in school that they were among its casualties. “We couldn't speak our own language...We weren't allowed to speak our own language. We'd get a strappin' or something,” remembers Ramona Gus, a Tsishiaa-aksup, who spent 15 years in a residential school.⁷ The constant threat of punishment or humiliation for any expression of their language or culture always loomed in the children's daily lives. A student attending Kamloops Indian Residential School reported: “...We were not allowed to speak our language; we weren't allowed to dance, sing because they told us it was evil. It was evil for us to practice any of our cultural ways... Some of the girls would get some Indian food... They'd take it away from us and just to be mean they'd destroy it right in from of us.”⁸ The personal narratives of those who attended residential school, and those who have family who attended the schools, tell a similar story. Their recollections reveal a dehumanizing experience marked by

isolation, hunger, hypocrisy, the demise of Indian culture, all carried out through spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental abuse.⁹

Although residential schools have disappeared from the Canadian landscape in favor of a mix of provincial, private, and First Nations operated schools, their legacy endures. For many families, negative attitudes toward schools today are grounded in their own experience, or that of parents and grandparents who attended these institutions. Others have suffered more severe consequences. Education continues to be a site of struggle as Aboriginal efforts to increase control and ownership of their own education are mired by government constraints. "This situation has produced several generations of chronically under-educated First Nations young people who have been denied an opportunity to achieve their full potential."¹⁰

Schools across Canada must commit themselves to programming which does more than give sporadic and isolated attention to Aboriginal issues. Schools need to increase Aboriginal content within existing curriculum, to develop more subject areas that encompass an Aboriginal perspective, and to make use of the growing Aboriginal resources. It is the responsibility of educators to be continually infusing Aboriginal history, culture, and language into the curriculum so it permeates into the lives of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.¹¹ Armed with a strong sense of identity and a quality education in mind, body, and spirit, Aboriginal children will succeed in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society. The National Working Group of the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs put the matter succinctly in its final report: "The integration of First



Nations knowledge and wisdom into curricula and pedagogy in education systems, both in First Nations and provinces and territories, will provide First Nations learners with a positive learning experience and encourage student success."¹²

On that summer evening in late June, when most of the community came out to bear witness to the celebration, there were many of a generation in the audience who had experienced forms of schooling that intended to displace their knowledge and culture or had no interest in what they or their community could bring to education. Some were residential school survivors. Others were pushed out from the schools. How proud and reassured that generation must have felt as they saw this younger generation taking hold of an education that encompassed aspects of their cultural legacy. How hopeful they must have been at the work being carried out by Aboriginal educators and others to create space for Aboriginal perspectives and ways of knowing that will be carried forward by this newly graduating generation. As for those who graduated, who heard the drum beat for them in honour of their educational accomplishments, there is a new set of responsibilities to ensure the drum will continue to beat for others making their way through schooling. Learning opportunities now have the potential to encompass the wholeness of the medicine wheel, not just as an educational force for this community, but as a means of advancing the state of education more generally in this country. ★



JAN HARE is an Anishinaabe and member of the M'Chigeeng First Nation. She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Language and Literacy

Education at the University of British Columbia.

This article draws on earlier work by the author.¹³

Notes

- 1 J. R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision. A history of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press. 1996).
- 2 E. Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book. The Voice of the Ojibway* (St. Paul, MN: Red School House. 1988).
- 3 *Shared Learnings: Integrating BC Aboriginal Content* (Victoria: Ministry of Education, 1998).
- 4 Davin, quoted in J. Milloy, *A National Crime. The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press.1999), 24.
- 5 G. Manuel and M. Poslums, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (Toronto: Collier Macmillan. 1974), 64.
- 6 J. Barman, "Schooled for Inequality: The Education of British Columbia Aboriginal Children." in *Children, Teachers, and Schools in the History of British Columbia*, 2nd ed., eds J. Barman and M. Gleason (Calgary, AB: Detselig, 2003), 55-79.
- 7 *Indian residential schools: The Nuu-chah-nulth experience* (Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council. B.C., 1996), 50.
- 8 C. Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Tillicum. 1988), 58.
- 9 Assembly of First Nations, *Breaking the Silence: An Interpretive Study of Residential School Impact and Healing as Illustrated by the Stories of First Nations Individuals* (Ottawa: AFN, 1994).
- 10 Canada. *Minister's Working Group on Education, Our Children - Keepers of the Sacred Knowledge, Final Report* (Ottawa: DIAND. 2002c), 14.
- 11 *Shared Learnings*.
- 12 Canada, Minister's Working Group, 18.
- 13 J. Hare, "Aboriginal Education and Aboriginal families: Coming Full Circle," in *Children, Teachers, and Schools in the History of British Columbia*, 2nd ed., eds J. Barman and M. Gleason (Calgary, AB: Detselig, 2003), 441-430.

pdstore.com

A not-for-profit online bookstore featuring learning resources of all types, hard to find textbooks, teacher resources and more!



www.pdstore.com