

## Section 1.1: An Aboriginal Perspective

*Let us put our minds together and see what we can do for our children.  
Chief Sitting Bull*



### **Aanii, Ske:no, Tansi**

The stories and teachings of many Indigenous nations continue to survive in the beauty of oral tradition. In this unbroken circle, we learn that human beings were the last created. We have been taught that we must learn from our older brothers and sisters who were here first. We were not created to dominate nature, but to learn from nature. Since the first sunrise, Aboriginal Peoples have lived and learned on Turtle Island, now called North America. The fact that Aboriginal Peoples continue to live off the land and grow in numbers is a testament to this original teaching and shows the strength of Indigenous ancestors.

In recent times, many Peoples from other lands have joined Aboriginal Peoples, bringing with them different ways. These ways, in their variance from the original teachings of Turtle Island, do not always bring honour to Mother Earth. Conflicts between these ways and Aboriginal ways have led to oppressive actions that harm all life on Turtle Island.

This document is a formal invitation to educators, policymakers, and all Canadians, to work together so that we can begin learning about *Walking in Beauty*<sup>1</sup>. This is a call to all people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, a call to end the cycle of oppression and honour the Spirit of



the Two-Row Wampum Treaty. It is a call for all of us to learn to live side by side and to honour the Earth that gives freely of Herself so that we can enjoy life here on Turtle Island.

Throughout this document are the voices of our Anishinaabe<sup>2</sup> ancestors who maintained the Teachings of our Peoples and who are willing to share these teachings today. We hear the voices of young Canadians: the graduates of public education from across Canada. These young voices tell us how little they learned about Aboriginal Peoples and this land, and how racist attitudes, that have prevailed since Canada first began, were often promoted. We will also hear, and are guided by, the voices of the Anishinaabe who are working in many First Nations communities to develop and implement curriculum that reflects our own heritage and traditions. These voices call for us to go *Walking in Beauty* together.

Respecting our relationship with creation is how we can learn to walk in beauty. Honouring creation is at the heart of the Two-Row Wampum Treaty that our Hotinonshón:ni<sup>3</sup> ancestors envisioned. They saw two nations separate and equal, working together on this land, neither in the other's shadow. In the original Two-Row Wampum Treaty between the Hotinonshón:ni and the various colonizers – including the Dutch, English, French and the United States – it was agreed that both Peoples would “travel the river of life” side by side, following their own ways. The Treaty also acknowledged that there would be times when teachings would be shared between the Peoples so that harmony would be maintained.

But the failure of the newcomers to uphold the treaties and the struggles that have occurred between the Anishinaabe People and the settlers has instead left a gulf that is widened by stereotypes, racism, misinformation and non-information. The nature of these struggles and their lasting impacts should be common knowledge, a priority in mandated curriculum. Yet, even with the curriculum expectations<sup>4</sup> that are required in the present curriculum, students who completed the SAS have little or no knowledge about Aboriginal Peoples. First year college and university students we surveyed question how they can learn about *Walking in Beauty* when they lack understanding or respect for the Aboriginal Peoples' struggles, survival and traditions.



It is no longer acceptable for teachers to continue to teach what they often do not understand. Teachers and school boards, who pay lip service to “Aboriginal Day” or Aboriginal Week or “Native Studies” units, without honouring the bravery and wisdom of our Ancestors, and without acknowledging the future of the Anishinaabe, only serve to continue teaching stereotypes and racist attitudes. The *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996) was an intensive investigation into Aboriginal life as it is today, and contained over four hundred recommendations regarding a new relationship with Canada. If Canada is to honour these recommendations, then every student should be taught about the history and the past relationship between Aboriginal Peoples and the settlers. The knowledge and traditions of the Anishinaabe can be integrated into the everyday learning of all students, in all subjects. Revising curriculum with this goal in mind will change not only the level of learning received by Canadian students, but also their respect for all Peoples.

In the spirit of Aboriginal teachings, the CAAS was formed. Elders, educators, and advocates from across this land agree that all Canadian children need a working knowledge of Aboriginal Peoples’ lands, histories, and traditions as well as knowledge of the histories and traditions of other cultures. We have a responsibility to those who came before us. This means honouring our children: teaching them to honour the natural world as well as their human contemporaries. It also means honouring our future, and preparing our children for their responsibilities to the next Seven generations. A public education system that incorporates these teachings will benefit all Canadians and their relationship with the land and Aboriginal Peoples.

It is the mandate of the CAAS to facilitate ongoing discussion and action in educating all Canadians about the relationship between all Peoples: newcomers or Immigrants, descendants of settlers, those of mixed blood, and the Peoples entrusted with the care of Turtle Island. CAAS advocates for a change in the education of all children, to reintroduce harmony, as intended in the original Two-Row Wampum Teachings. We need to change the way all children learn: enrich what they are learning about the legacies and struggles of First Peoples, the marks history leaves on this land, how individuals serve community and shape



this country. Most important is the necessity to foster right relationship to this land, Turtle Island.

CAAS is one of many organizations working to bridge this gap and begin a process of change and respect between all Peoples. The Coalition includes faculties of education, individuals, teachers and researchers who are working in the field of Aboriginal Education specially guided by the needs and values of First Peoples. Our network is expanding to include Aboriginal organizations and Institutions that are working locally, with schools and teachers in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal schools to improve the quality of education all our children receive. Together we are working to break down the stereotypes and misinformation and provide resources and training.

CAAS conducted the national SAS in order to shed light on what students across Canada have learned about Aboriginal Peoples. The results of this survey demonstrate the deficiencies of our curriculum. Finding solutions to these discrepancies was the work of a group of educators who gave their time freely over the past four years. This research is a first step in building toward policy changes that will support students and teachers. The report concludes with recommendations towards a new beginning, toward all Peoples of this land learning about *Walking in Beauty*.

## **The CAAS Learning Circle**

One of many Aboriginal Teachings involves the Circle. A major benefit of Circles is that they allow large and small groups of people to learn face to face while remaining equals. As a symbol, the Circle also helps us to understand that every issue has many aspects that can be viewed from both the inside and the outside. The CAAS Learning Circle was developed respecting the teachings of the Anishinaabe and helps to illustrate these points. Each of the four directions reflects these teachings and together establishes a foundation for a Good Life. The Circle as it is discussed here, however, does not include all Teachings of the Circle as they pertain to the Aboriginal Worldview, which may be found in other sources (see bibliography).



In the following sections, the work of the CAAS and, in particular, the SAS is described, using the framework offered by the CAAS Learning Circle. We will travel the circle beginning in the North then move to the East, the South, the West, and then finally return to the North. In this way, we honour our Ancestors, of the past seven generations, who came before us. It is the Ancestors who guide us as we relearn how to live respectfully on this land.

## **The Strength of the Peoples – North**

In Anishinaabe teaching, the North is where we find Wisdom and Strength. For the past five hundred years, Anishinaabe People have looked to the Spirit of the North to sustain our knowledge and traditions in the face of much opposition and oppression. The People have preserved the teachings of this land. We continue to establish a relationship with Mother Earth, in order to sustain all life. The story of Anishinaabe People and the story of this land are the same. Both have been oppressed, dispossessed, and exploited. The relationship between the Anishinaabe and Mother Earth is essential: they are created equal and what happens to one will happen to the other.

The settlers, the newcomers to this land, have not learned this reality. They came with their own ideas of Creation. They felt that creation was theirs to dominate, not to partner. As the First People of this land began to teach the newcomer, the first conflict occurred, as the settlers fired upon the Anishinaabe instead of listening to the teachings of the Land. Today, the teachings continue to be ignored and the ways of the newcomers take precedence over the land. As we honour the Spirit of the North and return to the wisdom of the land, we all can learn how to live a life that respects Creation.

Increasing our understanding was the original goal for the CAAS. We began with a group of people working to address the injustices imposed by the Church on Aboriginal Peoples. This group identified the need for all Canadians to be educated about this oppressive history and its effect on Aboriginal Peoples. They also agreed that all Canadians would benefit from the teachings that could be shared by Aboriginal Peoples with today's children.



The group expanded to include others working across Canada with the same goals. Advocates and educators were invited to participate in a network of learning and teaching about Aboriginal Peoples and the relationships of the past and the potential for the future. In their wisdom, they saw the need for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to share their stories of success and frustration. This led to the development of a web site ([www.edu.yorku.ca/caas](http://www.edu.yorku.ca/caas)) where others are invited to imagine and share ways in which schools and curriculum could be changed to ensure that all Canadians learned of our true history and of our civic and social responsibilities. CAAS was formed to accommodate and facilitate such curricular changes.

The Anishinaabe of this group were able to share insights into the traditions that have survived. Anishinaabe languages continue to be endangered yet survive; the communities have been colonized yet continue to sustain Anishinaabe ways. Healing, the most difficult path of all, is walked daily by many Aboriginal people. They do not have to prove that they are strong, in spite of the many efforts to assimilate Aboriginal Peoples and eliminate Aboriginal languages and traditions. They remain Anishinaabe: a testament to the enduring strength of Creation.

## **Experiences of Colonialism – East**

In the East, we honour the Spirit of Indigenous Ancestors and their experiences with colonialism. Their experiences reflect their resistance to the many forces imposed by the colonizers. These forces are only now beginning to be addressed by governments, Churches, and agents of the Crown. These actions involve treaties that have not been honoured, residential schools, and Indian Agents as part of an *Indian Act* imposed by a colonial government. They include the theft of land, the genocide of a People, and an education system designed to graduate servants and handmaids, not academics and intellectuals.

Anishinaabe grandmothers and grandfathers sustained great pain and suffering during these times and found ways to maintain the integrity of our traditions. They were also able to find individual settlers whom they invited into their communities to live and, in some cases, marry into their families. They were able to sustain their families with new technologies as



their own ways were ridiculed and, too often, eliminated through encroachment and cultivation.

The mandate of the CAAS is to ensure that all Canadians learn of these injustices so that these actions will not be continued or repeated, against any Peoples. Canada has developed into a nation where all people are welcomed and able to find a new home on this land. But the history of this immigration is not without many injustices. Tomorrow's children inherit our mistakes. It is in our children's best interest to be aware of these mistakes. A peace-seeking future requires these young ones to know that we must never allow the pain and suffering of assimilation policies to happen again on Turtle Island. Facing the pain of our ancestors allows us to grow in respect for all of our brothers and sisters, all of our relations.

CAAS advocates for a curriculum that acknowledges this history, and honours the Anishinaabe who have survived. It advocates for those who maintain the traditions in the strength and beauty of the first sunset. We support the many efforts that are being made across Canada today and celebrate all new curriculum that teaches the truth about Canada's past, and prepares all students to participate in determining Canada's future.

## **New Growth – South**

Here we take time to celebrate the many Nations and their Teachings. We honour their differences and their unique ways.<sup>5</sup> This reminds us that each creature has a unique story, a gift that allows him or her to serve the community. Our stories or teachings tell us of the joy that results in diversity. We celebrate the many cultures contributing to the continuous growth of Canada: one nation among many on Turtle Island. Our walk in beauty teaches us to pick up what was left on the path, to learn the ways of sustainable living. We meet face to face, not living in the past as artifacts, but as Peoples embracing and balancing technology with traditional wisdom. As balance is restored, we return to the stories and songs of this land, songs the land longs to hear.

Ongoing dialogue among teachers is one way for all teachers to gather strength in their own teaching. Using a model developed by educators connected to our network in Manitoba,



CAAS is developing materials to promote “Sharing Circles.” A Sharing Circle of local teachers will help each participant develop and implement units of study and lesson plans that contain appropriate expectations and materials. The stories of each teacher struggling to understand cultural differences and finding appropriate materials can be shared with others. Together, solutions can be found. The support from Boards and Districts of Education comes with providing the space, travel expenses, the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal consultants, and the materials that teachers will use in their classrooms. Education will change with input from educators and policymakers like you, the reader. It begins with us putting our minds together!

## **New Relationships – West**

From the West, we can begin to implement change across the curriculum. The young adults surveyed have left their mark on our hearts. Many became so frustrated by their lack of knowledge that they quit answering questions in the surveys. In debriefing these students, CAAS members heard many things from them, like “Why didn’t I learn about this?” and “How can I be a responsible citizen without this understanding?” In comments written on their surveys, they tell us of their need to know more, or of the entrenched, stereotyped attitudes already accepted by this “educated” population. As educators, it is our responsibility to listen to and honour their words. Students need to know that their education is complete and honours all Canadians. When they are told or when they discover that they were not taught this information about Aboriginal Peoples and important concepts of the land, the students tell us that they are angry and disappointed.

The second lesson from the students is that they have not been given the time or education to learn who they are and what gift they received from Creator. These lessons are essential elements of an Anishinaabe education and empower a young person with the skills and knowledge they need to be a contributing member of the community. This includes learning our Past and having the knowledge (Teachings) to plan for the future. Without this foundation, students are taught to be consumers in a wanton society based on commercial interests, not based on the interests of the Land or the Peoples. Education that respects the



Land and our Resources, and honours our students and their abilities, will ensure that the Land is healthy and resources are available for the next seven generations.

It is time to repair and build bridges between all partners in education. It is time to honour the true nature of our history and to share the teachings of this land so our future can be beneficial for all. This is a call to action that has been heard since the first encounters between our Peoples, and continues to be as fresh as each new day.

This completes the circle, returning us to the North and the wisdom that is ours to take. It is given freely and without prejudice. We must find the strength within ourselves to accept this challenge to us by our Ancestors and our students. May tomorrow's children learn from our mistakes and inherit our wisdom.



## Section 1.2: Traditional Indigenous Education

What is traditional education? An anonymous quote, attributed to an Aboriginal educator, starts from the position that “There’s more to traditional education than some Mickey Mouse courses in moccasin making.”

In keeping with Aboriginal worldviews -- including conceptions of the world in which all exists in fluid relation to all else -- traditional education lasts a lifetime. Jeanette Armstrong writes that it is

*...a natural process occurring during everyday activities ... ensuring cultural continuity and survival of the mental, spiritual, emotional and physical well-being of the cultural unit and of its environment*  
(Cited in Kirkness, 1992:7).



Although there are particular life passages which call for temporary separation from parts of the community -- such as the time of a woman’s first menses -- there is no discrete separation of children from others for instruction over an extended period of time either daily or for a defined period of years. Integral to each day and each life, community members take responsibility for passing on needed skills and understandings as events come to pass within the community.

Whether learning the ways of the fisher, the ways to conduct a ceremony, or the ways to prepare hides or meat or to gather berries, community members work together, each taking on the responsibilities appropriate to their abilities and knowledge. Watching and trying, children, youth, and adults are expected to participate in daily work and other activities in the



ways that their developing competencies allow them. The use of the present tense throughout this passage is to alert the reader to the fact that these traditions continue to be part of many Aboriginal Peoples' lives.

Although Nations across North America vary significantly in the details of traditional education, and in its persistence today, there are some striking similarities among groups in terms of beliefs and values. Vicki English-Currie, cautioning against any romantic notions of perfect and idyllic life, writes that these educational values were evident in her upbringing as a member of the Blackfoot Nation in what is now called Alberta:

*At the gatherings, there was no separation of the children and the adults. It was an extended family; even community members could become involved. All of the talk was comprehensible so the children were included in the conversation, although the adults did most of the talking.... I remember spending many days walking with my grandfather in the woods or down the road. Many of the stories he told me were turned into a life lasting informal education of values (1990:48).*

She goes on to say:

*The Indian people's non-directive approach is a way of guiding offspring. It determined a basis for a future lifestyle. We matured rapidly and we became adept at determining our own actions and making our own decisions, while being sensitive to the expectations of the collective and of our elders (1990:50).*

Rita Jack, a member of the Secwepemc Nation in the interior of the current British Columbia writes:

*The methods used to teach skills for everyday living and to instill values and principles were participation and example. Within communities, skills were taught by every member, with Elders playing a very important role. Education for the child began at the time he or she was born. The child was prepared for his role in life whether it be hunter, fisherman, wife or mother. This meant*



*that each child grew up knowing his place in the system.... Integral to the traditional education was the participation of the family and community as educators. (Jack, 1985:9)*

Clearly, it will be a complex undertaking to begin to take seriously Aboriginal worldviews and traditional education in schools and classrooms. Without diminishing the complexity of this challenge, this brief overview underscores that teachers and others in Canadian schools have much to learn from considering such ways of conceptualizing education.

The CAAS Learning Circle (discussed in The South) is one pedagogical framework that presents Aboriginal worldview. The use of this tool can become an important step towards changing relations within classrooms. If teachers make the effort to use our Circle, they can move themselves towards deeper understandings of the history of this land, further enhancing the possibilities for rebuilding approaches to, and the content of, curriculum.

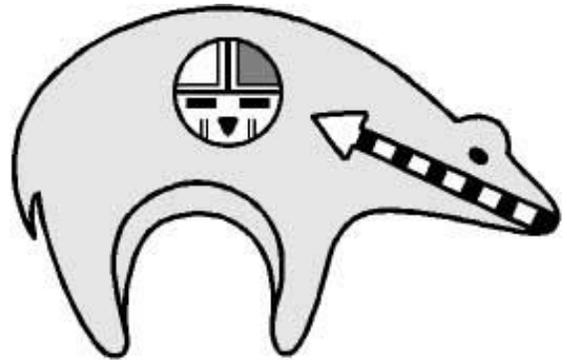


## Section 1.3:

# The Importance of Placing Aboriginal Perspectives in Canadian Classrooms

In “the education of Aboriginal children, the seeds of the future are being planted in early school experience” (*RCAP*, vol. 3, 455). Certainly this is true for many Aboriginal Peoples. Twenty-five or so years ago, when many of the authors of this report were young adults, what Aboriginal Peoples learned about themselves in school was not a

positive experience – to say the least. The curriculum failed Aboriginal Peoples. It was not even recognizable as Aboriginal curriculum to Aboriginal students in the classroom. Each Aboriginal student tried in vain to reconcile it with their own experiences and understandings of their own cultures and communities.



Portrayals of Aboriginal Peoples as inferior to Europeans, as primitive or “savages”, created conflicts. These images made some Aboriginal Peoples, as well as members of their families, communities and friends, turn away from the school system altogether. Those who persevered in the education system faced years of serious challenges, because of the ignorance and bias we encountered in the Canadian education community. The odds were against any Aboriginal person emerging from Canadian schools with his or her self-esteem intact.

Aboriginal Peoples are not concerned with education for its abstract value. Success or failure in school determines one’s success or failure in many other areas of life, including employment, relationships, and personal wellness. After the family, the education system is the most powerful influence in molding the character of children. Yet it has a devastating



impact on Aboriginal children due to the individual, systemic, and cultural racism within schools.<sup>6</sup>

Things have not improved dramatically in recent years. The 1991 *Aboriginal Peoples Survey* cites that, among Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24, 68.5% left school without obtaining a diploma (*RCAP*, 1996:Vol. 3, 455). Leaving school is not a hasty decision, but the result of a process that begins much earlier, and has not been adequately addressed – in part because of fiscal restraint policies at provincial levels as well as off-loading of social responsibilities for Aboriginal Peoples from the federal to the provincial/territorial levels.

The number of Aboriginal students who do graduate from high-school remains tragically low, as John Richards shows in his 2001 study for the C.D. Howe Institute.<sup>7</sup> Richards relevant findings (Richards 11-20) are summarized in the following two paragraphs.

In Winnipeg, about 66% of the community in poor Aboriginal neighbourhoods, and 55% of all Aboriginal people in that city, have no diploma. Roughly 61% of Aboriginal persons in Regina and Saskatoon's poor neighbourhoods left school without a high school diploma, and in non-poor neighbourhoods the rate is close to 50 per cent. In Vancouver and Calgary, about 48% of Aboriginal people in poor neighbourhoods have no diploma, but among Aboriginal persons living in non-poor neighbourhoods the rate of early school leaving improves to about 40 per cent. In Toronto and Montreal, the situation is slightly better than in the west: those with incomplete high school are about 45% of the population in poor Aboriginal neighbourhoods and around 40% among Aboriginal people who live in non-poor neighbourhoods. Across Canada, even the Aboriginal people living in non-poor neighbourhoods have significantly higher drop-out rates than non-Aboriginal persons living in poor neighbourhoods.

Virtually all Métis and Aboriginal students living off-Reserve attend Canadian schools. Again referring to data from Richards' study, in 1996 somewhere between 800,000 and 1,100,000 Aboriginal persons lived in Canada. In that same year, nearly 50% of the Aboriginal populations lived in Canadian urban areas – up from only 7% in 1956 (3).<sup>8</sup> A host of historic



and contemporary social, political, and economic reasons explain this migration. As the majority of Aboriginal people are under 25 years of age, these statistics indicate that a very large number of Aboriginal students attend urban Canadian schools.

These numbers do not include all the on-Reserve Peoples; many of the children and youth living on-Reserve, an estimated 40%, attend Canadian schools through financial agreements between the First Nations and Canadian school boards.<sup>9</sup>

The shortcomings in existing Canadian curriculum about Aboriginal Peoples, and its classroom delivery impact the lives of a clear majority of all Aboriginal children and youth on a daily basis. These deficiencies also affect Canadian students and Canada as a whole.

While there may not be agreement with all Richard's conclusions, and nor do we limit our proposals to the improvement of education for Aboriginal students, we do agree with the following statement made by Richards:

*What is required from both orders of government are policies that simultaneously respect aboriginal expectations of cultural survival, offer sensible economic incentives to undertake work over welfare, and assure higher quality in public services – in particular, schooling at the kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) level (1).*

First Nations communities and Aboriginal and antiracism educators across the land are working to address the obvious shortfalls: developing improved curriculum, identifying classroom resources, promoting certification of more Aboriginal teachers, improving related education policies, finding ways to support students, increasing cross-cultural awareness among educators and students. However, too few Canadian schools have taken up the challenge of finding successful ways to implement these new policies, guidelines, and curricula. Few, as well, have prioritized development of materials and resources that will serve their own student populations. Much remains to be done.



Non-Aboriginal children are experiencing the same limited and narrow curriculum, with the same stereotyping and one-sided viewpoint regarding Aboriginal Peoples – a point discussed from several perspectives throughout this report. In fact, non-Aboriginal students are generally exposed to a curriculum that is even weaker in content than that offered to Aboriginal students. They are even less likely to be placed in schools, courses, classes, and extra-curricular activities where the new, improved content is being delivered on an “optional” basis.

The impact of this on Canadian young people, who will become Canada’s voters, policy-makers, teachers, employers, tradespeople, judges and other professionals, is profound. The seeds of racism can be planted very early when the curriculum does not reflect the culture and reality of all members of a school's population. This inadequate stereotyping in education contributes to the lack of Canadian understanding of Aboriginal rights, culture, and traditions.

Canadian settler and newcomer children and youth can, through ignorance and inherited prejudice, turn the educational experience of the Aboriginal students in Canadian classrooms into a painful voyage towards failure. At an Aboriginal women’s antiracism gathering held in central Canada in April, 2001, an Ojibway mother and daughter echoed one another’s experience, across the generations, of prejudice and ignorance in rural Canadian schools. A young woman who had just completed high school, commented:

*I've seen a lot of racism in the school because there's a lot of our family in our area. It's a small community...in school we all hung out together because we weren't rich and [didn't] wear nice clothing and didn't drive nice cars, because my parents didn't have money, we weren't accepted as the rest of them. And we were called names – “skids” – any name in the book that they liked to call us —“dirties.” (Gathering the Voices, 5)*

This problem is not unique to smaller School Boards, which may be seen as lacking adequate resources for developing an appreciation of diversity. Another young woman said:



*I'm 15 years old... I go to school in Toronto, high school, and there's a lot of racism still there even though it's very multi-cultural. (Gathering the Voices, 12)*

Sometimes it is the school administration that cannot see the ugly cycle of ignorance and prejudice that feeds the failure of Aboriginal students. Another woman at the antiracism gathering talked about the education of her children in urban Canada:

*I've been off the reserve since I was a very young girl. I just now moved home a year ago, I'm forty years old now. It's the best feeling I had, to go back home and be with my people and to see my children grow up with our people. They were so angry in the city. Schools discriminated against them. The schools would tell me, 'No we're not discriminating against your children', and I'm like, you are, I see it every day. My boys would come home fighting because people would call them f-ing Indians. The school kicked them out of school, but they never kicked the white boys out of school or the other children, it was always my boys. So this is why I'm here to let you know that it's there everywhere – even though they try to tell us it's not there, it is there. Everyday we face it. (Gathering the Voices, 12)*

The failure of many Canadian schools to incorporate valid, appropriate Aboriginal perspectives, histories, and cultural content across the mandated curriculum is, however, not uniquely detrimental to Aboriginal students. Respectful, accurate and appropriate cross-cultural education will help create a strong, balanced Canada. It will allow all founding Indigenous and settler Peoples of this land to collaborate in building an informed society that offers all our children a vibrant future. Failing to address this current shortfall means that the existing social and economic problems will continue to escalate for those who are marginalized. The intensification of these problems will have increased negative social impacts on all populations within Canada, further worsening trends currently evident in many inner cities across the country.

Aboriginal Peoples know what needs to be taught in Canadian schools in order to combat the biased and stereotypical attitudes. RCAP addresses this with a call to Canadians for collaboration on solutions:



*Negotiation and renewal to establish a more just relationship have begun... But if the process is to gather momentum and be sustained, the misconceptions of the past... must give way to more authentic [Aboriginal] accounts of their origins and identities... The scope of the undertaking we are proposing should be Canada-wide [and] firmly under the direction of Aboriginal people, mobilizing the efforts and contributions of granting agencies, academics and educational and research institutions, private donors, publishing houses, artists and most important Aboriginal nations and their communities. (RCAP, vol.1, 237-8)*

Canadians and Canadian educators must develop an overall understanding of Aboriginal value systems and how integral this understanding is to all aspects of our traditions, cultures, and worldviews. In Aboriginal communities, schools are striving to create Aboriginal-perspective curriculum, developed by Aboriginal educators. Aboriginal Peoples' insistence that this new, accurate, valid curriculum be offered to all students in Canada is not a question of right or wrong. It is simply a call to have Aboriginal voices and perspectives presented as part of the total education program in this country.

This cry for balance is beginning to be heard outside Aboriginal communities as well, through the voluntary union of academics, traditional teachers, classroom teachers, education and human rights activists - both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal - who believe that reliable, insightful Aboriginal Studies should be available for all students in Canada's provincial and territorial schools. These concerned educators and activists have come together in the CAAS.

While CAAS is aware that appropriate Aboriginal curriculum policies, materials and resources exist, there are major gaps between the ideal situation and the on-the-ground scenario in many Canadian classrooms. Access to quality instruction and materials on Aboriginal Peoples' histories, cultures, and perspectives is very much a "hit or miss" situation for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in provincial and territorial schools. These findings have been substantiated by our research.

For CAAS, it was an important step to measure the extent of the shortfall. Our findings from the SAS are found throughout this report. From this research, we see that students



educated in Canadian classrooms continue to complete their elementary and secondary education without acquiring adequate or even accurate information about Aboriginal Peoples.

The SAS results provide a vivid snapshot of what today's students know, and what they don't know, about Aboriginal Peoples. Even more to the point, on the coming pages the reader will find analysis that argues why and how this must change.



## Section 1.4: The Teacher as Individual Learner

For many reasons, Canadian teachers find it difficult to incorporate Aboriginal-perspective curriculum into their classroom programs. Anecdotal explanations, from CAAS members, for this include:

- teachers are not able to handle it (that is, they are not prepared or trained);
- principals of schools with few Aboriginal students do not feel it is relevant to their students or feel that the resources required to bring on staff someone who *could* teach the curriculum are not justified;
- often the appropriate content is not part of the mandated curriculum.



These obstacles are frequently compounded by a general lack of resources (due to budgeting issues and political priorities), precluding implementation of this sort of course.

As one exemplary case (of which there are many), the Mi'kmaq Studies Grade 10 curriculum, from the Nova Scotia Department of Education, bears special discussion. First, it enhances the opportunity for, and quality of, the study of the Indigenous Peoples of that region of Canada. Second, it allows Mi'kmaq and Canadian students to work together to form a common understanding of each other and their history. Third, the teacher resources take special care to guide non-Aboriginal educators in the pedagogical task ahead of them. The accompanying Teacher's Guide supports non-Aboriginal teachers:

*Mi'kmaq Studies [grade] 10 brings a unique First Nations perspective to the school's curriculum as it draws on the experiences and world view of the Mi'kmaq people. For teachers of First Nations ancestry,*



*Mi'kmaq Studies 10 provides the opportunity to explicitly incorporate their cultural knowledge and perspectives into the learning experiences of their First Nations students and in creating a positive learning experience for all their students.*

*The nature of instructional leadership provided by non-native teachers will necessarily be different. They will actively share in the learning process with their students. In their attitudes and behaviours they will demonstrate their interest in the history of Mi'kmaq people, their respect for Mi'kmaq culture and spirituality, and their commitment to open-minded dialogue between the inheritors of different cultures.*<sup>10</sup>

(Nova Scotia Department of Education Guide #169, 1998)

This kind of guidance encourages classroom teachers to take the risks and meet the challenges of teaching something that they have been taught poorly.

## **Helping Teachers Feel Comfortable Teaching About Aboriginal Peoples**

Tucked away in diverse classrooms across Canada, some teachers are already doing a better job with this curriculum, while others are actively trying to learn how to improve. They are finding ways to fit content from an Aboriginal perspective into mandated curricula that does not require it. These teachers are using scarce professional development time and resources to search out first-person resources: a speaker from the local Friendship Centre, relevant curriculum from a nearby First Nation's community historian or school, or books by authors such as Joseph Bruchac and Olive Dickason. They are taking their classes to local Pow Wows, and showing films from the series released by the National Film Board, *First Nations: The Circle Unbroken*.<sup>11</sup> They then augment such resources by locating and using professional development supports such as Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture Teachers' Guide cited above.

Many of the teachers who are presenting such exemplary pedagogy in their classrooms report feeling very isolated, or even professionally vulnerable. Their interest and enthusiasm for Aboriginal Studies is not always shared or supported by their colleagues and administrators. Never-the-less, these exemplary teachers continue to reflect on, struggle with,



and expand their teaching practices and their own understandings of Aboriginal Peoples, so that they can provide their students with a better understanding of Aboriginal Peoples' histories, cultures, worldviews, and contemporary issues.

In an ongoing study, non-Aboriginal teachers who are comfortable in their teaching about Aboriginal Peoples are being asked to explain how they made this journey from the kind of oppressive curriculum described above to handling Aboriginal-perspective content confidently and appropriately in their classrooms. Early indications are that teachers who do teach about Aboriginal Peoples in a respectful, knowledgeable way, have had to make an extra effort *on their own* to get to the stage where they can help their students gain a better understanding about Aboriginal Peoples. Since Aboriginal Studies are not currently part of pre-service training for teachers, interviews with initial candidates for this study identified a transformative process that precedes feeling capable with this content. Teachers who demonstrate “best practices” reached a moment in their teaching when, overwhelmed by misinformation or a total lack of information, they felt compelled to seek out more valid sources and resources for themselves. All teachers however, do not move from this juncture towards the transformation that enables them to improve their programmes.

The following preliminary conclusions are drawn from these initial interviews:

Φ Teachers who present this “exemplary” practice credit some sort of transformational experience for helping them acquire the interest and desire to improve their teaching. It may begin elsewhere and then expand to an interest to improve teaching about Aboriginal Peoples, or this focus may be the initial goal. Transformational experiences are those that alter the paradigm by which the individual operates, evaluates, and makes decisions. Catalytic ways to encourage this process must form the basis of further studies.

Φ Teachers often do not have direct access to a method of learning about Aboriginal Peoples. Even if they do have *access* to learning about Aboriginal Peoples, they may not use that route. Making resources available to teachers does not ensure that they will be



understood or used. Most teachers who are not familiar with the histories or cultures of Aboriginal Peoples will not be comfortable with the range of materials that are available, and will not be able to find the context in which to use them. To assist teachers to become more aware of Aboriginal history, culture, world-views, and contemporary issues, there are conferences and other professional development activities available, but they are limited and not accessible to all teachers (although this is something CAAS is trying to change). While challenging, some teachers who decide to make this journey *are* able to find the resources and individuals that could assist them in this new learning. An examination of why some teachers do make this journey, and others do not, will help to define the catalytic process we seek to replicate.

- Φ When a teacher decides to improve his or her teaching and is successful in learning about Aboriginal Peoples, they report that other elements of their classroom programs also improve. While this is commentary only and has not been evaluated methodically, the efforts directed towards increasing facility in this curriculum appear to have potential benefits for students, for general classroom programming, and to schools as a whole. This self-evaluation obviously merits further study.

Working with classroom teachers to assist them and by providing guidance as they acknowledge and experience this transformational process, will continue to be an area of focus for CAAS.

Another gap CAAS has identified is that not all teachers know an Aboriginal person. Many have no ready connections to Aboriginal communities or resources. Developing these contacts currently involves making personal choices, often including some sacrifice or extraordinary effort by the individual teacher. Faculties of education are where student teachers obtain their initial teaching skills; many in-service teachers also use post-secondary institutions for professional development purposes. CAAS will find ways to be effective in helping faculties develop this kind of opportunity for networking and dialogue as part of their overall pedagogical responsibility. Post-secondary institutions can find effective ways to provide the guidance and support for all teachers as they transform from student to teacher, in particular from not knowing to knowing about Aboriginal Peoples.



CAAS is challenged by these **preliminary conclusions** to see its initial focus as assisting teachers in taking that first step towards finding out about Aboriginal Peoples. This is a task that might be understood best as public education rather than professional development or other teacher education initiatives. The transformational processes that has helped teachers to improve and strengthen their teaching serves as an opening step towards understanding the kind of process that will assist all Canadians to begin this journey, and vice versa. Some of the preliminary work we have done in this area is found in Appendix F. CAAS is also committed to developing, with partners in faculties of education, upgrading and certification programmes that better qualify teachers for this subject area, especially at the secondary level.

In the meantime, and in any event, there is no single *right way* to do this. Making a commitment to learn implies a very personal journey. In Aboriginal tradition, it is the responsibility of each individual to begin the journey. Elders, family and community members provide support, guidance, and teachings that will enable the individual to grow.



## Endnotes - Section 1: North

- <sup>1</sup> The phrase is borrowed respectfully from our southern brothers and sisters of the Navajo Nation.
- <sup>2</sup> The term Anishinaabe is used throughout this section when talking about all Aboriginal Peoples of Turtle Island. The term includes all Nations from the East to the West Coast and is not meant to dishonour any one nation, but to include all nations.
- <sup>3</sup> In honour of the original parties of the Two-Row Wampum Treaty, the correct term Hotinonshón:ni is used here; it is the name the Iroquois use to name themselves.
- <sup>4</sup> CAAS reviewed expectations from across Canada for the previous 10 years, and from this research and other sources compiled our own set of Learning Expectations, presented in *The South*.
- <sup>5</sup> See our reading list on the CAAS website for materials about specific First Nations.
- <sup>6</sup> Canadian Race Relations Foundation fact sheet “Acknowledging Racism”; website <[http://www.crr.ca/EN/MediaCentre/FactSheets/eMedCen\\_FacShtAcknowledgeRacism.htm](http://www.crr.ca/EN/MediaCentre/FactSheets/eMedCen_FacShtAcknowledgeRacism.htm)>. “Individual racism manifests itself in individual’s attitudes and behaviours, and is the easiest type to identify. Systemic racism consists of the policies and practices of organizations, which directly or indirectly operate to sustain the advantages of peoples of certain “social races”. This type of racism is more difficult to address because it is implicit in the policies of organizations and often unconscious. Cultural racism is the basis of both other forms of racism, as it is the value system which is embedded in society which supports and allows discriminatory actions based on perceptions of racial difference, cultural superiority and inferiority.”
- <sup>7</sup> In "Neighbours Matter: Poor Neighbourhoods and Urban Aboriginal Policy" (pp 11 - 20), Richards analyzes data from the 1996 census on the rates of high school leaving among Aboriginal populations in eight major Canadian cities.
- <sup>8</sup> Richards cites Drost, 1995, 17.
- <sup>9</sup> Number provided by Mr. Robert A. Coulter - Director: Learning, Employment and Human Development Directorate; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.
- <sup>10</sup> Although this guide was developed for a Grade 10 Mi'kmaq history and culture course, the teaching opportunities and challenges apply to any Native Studies program. The anxiety felt by many non-Aboriginal



---

teachers can be offset by turning the teacher's "poor education" into a "teachable moment," as the guide suggests. This possibility applies to stand-alone units on Aboriginal studies, and also to treatment of Aboriginal history and culture within a cross-curriculum (elementary) or interdisciplinary (secondary) format.

<sup>11</sup> In our Appendices are some relevant materials, many of which were brought to our attention by educators who have used them successfully. As well, links to other sites and additional resources can be found on the CAAS website, which also invites educators to contact us for support with their classroom programs.

