

# TOWARD FULL EMPOWERMENT IN NATIVE EDUCATION: UNANTICIPATED CHALLENGES<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

With the growing empowerment in Native education certain unanticipated consequences may arise which can threaten the full potential for Native visions of education. The more the heritage culture is emphasized in Native education, the more distanced from mainstream education it becomes. The result is a series of unanticipated consequences that need to be addressed. First, the question of differing standards becomes more salient and potentially difficult to resolve. Second, Native educators may come to lose sight of the unique aspects of their programs that they have fought so hard to achieve. We hope by raising these issues to facilitate the march toward a genuine Native vision of education.

Dans le contexte de l'habilitation croissante de l'éducation autochtone, certains facteurs imprévus peuvent menacer l'expression potentielle complète des visions autochtones de l'éducation. Plus on met l'accent sur la culture traditionnelle dans l'éducation des Autochtones, plus cette éducation se distance de celle offerte à la majorité. Cette distance se traduit par un certain nombre de conséquences qui doivent être abordées. Premièrement, la question de la différence entre les normes des deux genres d'éducation devient plus importante et plus difficile à résoudre. Deuxièmement, les éducateurs autochtones peuvent perdre de vue les aspects exclusifs de leurs programmes qu'ils ont obtenus de haute lutte. En soulevant ces questions, nous espérons faciliter l'élaboration d'une vision réellement autochtone de l'éducation.

One of the most exciting developments in Native education over the last twenty years has been, despite numerous false starts and stumbling blocks, the inexorable march toward Native control. We have been privileged to witness the empowerment process first hand in a number of communities as researchers, teachers, and curriculum developers. The move to Native control over education is one that we support and indeed hope that we have contributed to.

In the early years, attention was focused squarely on finding and training Native teachers and preparing appropriate materials. Meeting these needs was an overwhelming challenge and thus there was little opportunity to reflect on the possible subtle and unintended consequences of the process. Native control over education has been evolving now for some twenty years, and while the process is far from complete, sufficient progress has been made to allow educators to pause and reflect, however briefly, on these consequences. In doing so, we are not challenging the fundamental assumptions underlying the empowerment process, nor the inherent justice and logic associated with Native control over education. Rather, we have begun to notice phenomena that we believe need to be addressed because they may impact negatively on Native education. Simply put, the more a school system genuinely adopts a "Native" style of education, the more distanced from mainstream education administrators, teachers and students can become. This would not be important in and of itself, except that Native communities often expect that their students will not only value their heritage language and culture, but also be prepared to pursue mainstream

higher education if they so desire. Ironically, this distancing from mainstream education may be having the corollary consequence of Native teachers and student actually coming to lose an understanding of, and appreciation for, the heritage components of the education they, and others, have fought so hard for.

Our purpose here is to describe the nature of the dilemmas that Native control over education may produce, in the hopes that these can be addressed in a manner that does not compromise the continuing march toward a truly Native vision of education. We will focus our attention on teacher training programs since it is the area with which we have had the most direct experience, but we do so bearing in mind that similar dilemmas may be confronting all levels of Native education.

We begin our analysis with a description of different teacher training programs which can vary greatly in terms of the level of Native content, and then focus on the types with which we are most familiar. Indeed, while our in-depth experience is limited to eastern Canada, the different communities we have been involved with represent a broad spectrum of the possibilities that can be found throughout North America. We then address the evolutionary pattern that seems to be taking place in Native education and how the desperate needs in the early phases pose dilemmas later in the process. Next we focus on the issue of comparable standards with mainstream education and the impact this has on Native teachers. This is followed by a discussion of literacy as a special case involving standards, but one that is central to cultural identity. Finally, we discuss the lack of appreciation for Native education that Native teachers themselves may develop precisely because of the unique circumstances that surround Native education.

## **Models of Native Education**

Any mandate for Native control over education immediately precipitates a number of decisions, all of which are impacted by the socio-economic history of contact with mainstream society, political will and available resources (see, Taylor, Crago and McAlpine, 1993). The variety of decisions can be seen as falling along a continuum from a strong focus on Native culture on the one hand, to that of preparing children to be successful in mainstream culture, on the other.

At the basis of these decisions is the particular vision that the community has of what Native control will mean in terms of defining education. What does the community hope that formal schooling can provide for its children? What are graduates expected to know, how should they feel and what should they be able to do? Whether or not a vision is clearly articulated, every decision that affects the school environment is based on the particular

vision that a community has of Native education. The emphasis can be placed, for example, on teaching in the heritage language to the extent that it is still viable, or teaching it as a second language. The focus may be on developing curriculum materials that better represent the lived experience of the child. Or, administrative structures may be changed to incorporate the voice of Native parents. Regulations may be passed that control the ancestry of those who teach in the school. All these decisions lead to a variety of teaching and learning structures.

If the decisions made incorporate a large number of shifts away from mainstream schooling culture, the result will be a schooling experience that highlights Native culture and values over mainstream ones. If the decision is to limit the changes, then the schooling experience will fall more in the middle of the continuum. Finally, some communities may decide that they do not wish to make dramatic changes. For example, children may attend mainstream schools at the end of the elementary cycle, and the schooling experience of the children here will more closely mirror that of mainstream culture.

Having briefly described the variety of models of Native education that are possible, we now want to focus on teacher training programs. Teacher training programs reflect the vision a community has for Native education generally, and so will vary along the continuum we have described.

At one extreme are regular mainstream, on-campus, teacher education programs for which individual Native applicants apply. Their applications may be treated the same as all others or there may be some form of affirmative action policy. Nevertheless, once individuals are accepted they follow the same program of study as all other students. Such programs rarely incorporate material related to Native issues. A variant of this form of program is the option for the student to follow the regular program and then incorporate a Native studies component, or a minor in Native studies through an appropriate selection of elective courses.

At the other extreme are communities who choose to control their own teacher training. Some may even choose not to seek university accreditation so as to be completely free from external constraints. This is usually the result of a desire to focus very strongly on the heritage language and culture.

Most models of Native education fall somewhere between these extremes. For example, programs may be designed particularly for Native trainees but be campus-based; such programs, whether run by Native or mainstream academics, tend to have a strong pan-Native focus. Others may be a combination of both campus-based and field-based elements. This approach enables communities to ensure that certain key cultural

elements are incorporated into the training; at the same time, a more general educational approach is evident in the on-campus element. Finally, communities may negotiate a totally field-based program with a university which enables them significant control over the program elements while still ensuring university accreditation.

What needs to be underscored here is that many programs that place emphasis on the heritage culture are not designed to be exclusionary. That is, often the vision is one where students will develop full bilingualism and biculturalism. Native advocates with such a vision recognize first, that emphasis needs to be placed on the heritage culture because of its vulnerability, and second, that a strongly rooted heritage language and culture will permit rapid transfer of learning to mainstream culture.

## **Evolution of Native Programs**

We are focusing on Native teacher education programs which many communities see as primary vehicles for changing the schooling environment for their children. Our specific interest is in totally field-based programs that are able to indigenize program elements to meet the particular needs of the Native community. In general, prior to communities being granted local control, schools tended toward a mainstream model of education. Members of the community, including leaders and parents, were painfully aware of the loss of their heritage language and culture, and this precipitated demands for greater emphasis in these areas. Thus, when field-based teacher education programs are initiated in such communities, the community is anxious to seek out potential teachers who have a strong traditional base, including fluency in the heritage language where possible, along with hunting and survival skills. Communities hope to attract candidates that can help preserve and pass on traditional knowledge to the coming generations so that it is not lost.

Consequently, candidates nominated for teacher training will frequently not have strong academic skills from a mainstream perspective. Indeed, mainstream pre-requisites may actually be viewed as factors that might undermine effective Native education. In other words, communities are aware of the weight being placed on traditional skills over mainstream knowledge, and intentionally choose candidates that further the objective of indigenization of the schooling environment.

However, over time two factors may lead to changes in the type of applicant sought. First, Native communities typically have small populations, and so over time there may be fewer and fewer candidates available who possess strong traditional skills. Second, a gradual shift in the community's attitude about the characteristics to seek out in potential candi-

dates may occur. Over time, comparisons begin to be made with mainstream teachers in the community in terms of such factors as entry-level requirements, the length of training programs, and course materials. As well, the majority of parents will not have experienced Native-based schooling in their own childhood. Most would have been required to pursue mainstream schooling and been socialized to believe in its virtues. Because of their experience with mainstream education, parents may feel quite unsettled by the Native-based schooling their children are receiving and the fact that their child has a Native teacher who represents and emphasizes heritage values. These parents were socialized to believe that success in mainstream society is crucial and they may be worried about the new emphasis that is being placed on preserving local language and culture. The result is that as schooling becomes more genuinely reflective of Native values because of an emphasis on Native teachers with strong heritage culture skills, there may be pressure from parents to shift the schooling goals to a greater emphasis on mainstream knowledge, language and culture. Consequently, there may be an increasing demand for teachers who have strong mainstream skills. The ideal candidate in their minds would be a Native teacher who is fully bicultural and bilingual, but at this early stage of empowerment such candidates are very difficult to find.

## **Standards of Education**

One of the questions most frequently asked by both Native students, Native community members, and the administrators of mainstream institutions that provide field-based culturally relevant teacher education programs for Native students, is whether there are differences in the standards of education for Native teachers and for non-Native teachers. The answer is a simple yes, but largely because the reference standards are quite different.

In our experience, Native student-teachers come into field-based teacher education programs with a different set of abilities than non-Native students. Potential Native teachers will often enter the program as mature students, since it is older members of the community who are the best exemplars of heritage culture. These Native students enter without the academic background of their mainstream counterparts, largely because they, themselves, were the product of unsuccessful mainstream pedagogy and schooling. And once admitted to the program, Native teachers may be required to function in a second language, if the language of instruction is English or French. Also, if the heritage language is the vehicle of instruction, then there is a serious shortage of written materials.

These realities result in field-based teacher training programs adopting culturally relevant assignments and grading criteria. Assignments generally involve less and easier reading, and access to library facilities is precluded, although often government documents and reports by Native organizations are relevant substitutions. The written form of assignments may not be as complex or lengthy as work produced in courses for non-Native students, and may be supplemented by oral and experiential assignments.

On the other hand, Native trainees come with a far richer set of life experiences than many non-Native students. They often have a comprehensive, experientially-based knowledge of children and child development that they can immediately apply in the classroom. They also have their own experience of being a Native learner and their own capacity for culturally appropriate styles of teaching that help them be effective with their own students. As well, the student-teachers may speak their heritage language which clearly makes their students feel more comfortable in the formal school environment.

These unique characteristics of Native teacher trainees lead to different kinds of programming and different standards. Faced with these different standards, Native and non-Native instructors alike, even with the best of intentions, can exacerbate the problems associated with these differences. Non-Native instructors in Native education courses may grade their Native trainees too easily, believing that these future teachers will become discouraged if they receive less than excellent grades. Conversely, Native instructors may be excessively demanding of Native trainees precisely to counteract any stereotype that might suggest that differences in standards implies that those for Native trainees are inferior. These uses of double standards, however well-intentioned, may not serve Native education well.

What is less straightforward about the discrepancy in standards is the ways that these differences may impact on the educational situation without people being aware of it. For instance, Native teachers who teach in English often ask themselves if they are as capable as an English mother-tongue teacher. This question is not only asked by the teachers but by the Native-controlled school committees and by the Native parents as well. Such questioning can often undermine a Native teacher's sense of professional competence. This sense of inadequacy arises because the Native teacher is making a comparison with a mainstream teacher whose first language is English. A different problem arises when a Native teacher who teaches in English makes a comparison with other Native teachers who teach in the heritage language. Native teachers may feel that they are superior teachers if they are teaching in English, thereby undermining the

feelings of competence of those Native teachers who use the heritage language.

A further complexity is the fact that increasing Native control of schools and teacher education may well lead to increasing differences between the Native and non-Native teachers. These differences could be rightfully construed as the increasing appropriateness of Native education and educators, but they might also unexpectedly lead to further comparisons with non-Native teachers. Such comparisons might, in turn lead to ongoing judgements of not only difference but also of lesser competency.

Another by-product of different standards is that they may truncate Native trainees' education at a certain level. Programs that require very little reading and written work do not help to prepare Native trainees who wish to pursue degrees at the graduate level.

Especially delicate issues arise when older Native trainees with strong traditional skills share the classroom with younger trainees who are more fluent and literate in the mainstream language, as so often happens. The younger English mother tongue trainees often feel put down by the Native language speakers for having lost their language. In turn, the English mother tongue trainees sometimes flaunt their ability to enrol in mainstream universities as opposed to community-based programs. Furthermore, if considerable reading is required, the English mother-tongue Native teachers excel and are sometimes bored while the Native language teachers struggle to keep up.

We have raised a number of issues associated with academic standards and all revolve around the extent to which teacher training programs reflect a Native vision of education. The more Native-like the program the more salient the difference in standards. Fundamental to resolving the dilemmas that arise is not equating "difference" with "inferior".

## **The Literacy Dilemma**

Closely paralleling the standards dilemma is the issue of fluency versus literacy, which deserves special attention because of its far-reaching implications. Literacy, as distinct from fluency, is highly respected in mainstream culture because it is associated with the democratization of information. Reading and writing skills allow everyone equal access to information, even where populations are large or geographic distances formidable.

The question of literacy is central to Native education because Native communities who have maintained the heritage language are anxious to enhance its status, and those who have lost, or are in the process of losing, their heritage language, are struggling to revive it. Native communities through their heritage languages emphasize an oral tradition which is

fundamentally different from the emphasis on literacy which characterizes mainstream cultures.

We have already noted how Native teacher trainees struggle with writing assignments, which is to be expected given the oral tradition of most Native cultures. On the surface it would seem that the dilemma can be addressed in a straight-forward manner. That is, why not encourage literacy skills in the *heritage* language? Such an initiative would have two benefits; increasing the literacy skills of Native trainees and broadening the power and flexibility of the heritage language to ensure that it remains viable and functional.

Unfortunately, such a solution may challenge the very essence of Native culture. As Ferdman (1990) so eloquently describes, every culture has its own norms for socializing literacy. He underscores how literacy is the manner in which members of a culture are socialized to interface with their environment. Hence, any shift away from Native oral traditions involves fundamental changes to the roots of Native culture. Ferdman (1990) has argued against having one definition for literacy that is modeled after mainstream culture. What Ferdman (1990:201) proposes is that "perhaps more sensitive and articulated models of literacy acquisition can be developed that better take into account the social context in which literacy is defined and expressed".

Clearly, the more Native-like the teacher training program, the greater the distinction between the emphasis on fluency as opposed to literacy. Any compromise strikes at the heart of Native cultural identity and thus ways need to be found to respect the differences without again relating these necessarily to inferior standards.

## **Unanticipated Consequences of Native Controlled Programs**

The most progressive program in terms of Native control of teacher training that we have been involved with is that of the Kativik School Board which serves the Inuit of the fourteen communities in Arctic Quebec (Nunavik). The board is controlled by elected Inuit commissioners and the training of Inuit teachers has been ongoing since 1976. To date some 61 have graduated from McGill University with a teaching certificate, and eight of these have continued on to receive their Bachelor of Education.

The teacher training program has certain vital features that are central to understanding the dilemmas of interest here. First, prospective Inuit teachers receive all their formal courses in various communities in Nunavik. Second, the majority of the courses are given in the heritage language,

Inuttitut, by Inuit instructors. Courses are developed initially by a team of University professors and senior Inuit instructors. The first time a course is offered, the university professor takes the lead and thus English or French is prominent with ongoing translation and elaboration in Inuttitut. Thereafter in a progressive manner the Inuit instructor assumes control so that ultimately the course is offered exclusively in Inuttitut, with the University instructor serving merely as a consultant to the Inuit instructor.

The obvious dilemma that arises for this type of program is the extent to which the teachers receive a form of training that is far removed from mainstream education. Most Native programs have as their mission not only to maintain and promote the integrity of the heritage culture, but also to prepare students so that they can participate fully in higher forms of mainstream education should they so desire. While the teachers are well placed to relate to their students as genuine cultural role models, they will have less to offer the students in terms of the culture of mainstream education. And, it is not that they are fully bicultural and choose to emphasize heritage culture and language. If this were the case they would at least be in a position to share mainstream information if, when, and to the extent, that they choose to do so. But this new progressively prepared Native teacher is limited in terms of his or her understanding of mainstream culture.

Fortunately, this dilemma may be relatively easily resolved. Information about mainstream educational culture is readily available from Euro-Canadian teachers in the school. The key is to recognize the need to impart this information to students and so not to take it for granted. Thus the information needs to be formalized, delivered at the right time, in an appropriate manner and, most importantly, in a form that does not threaten the integrity of the heritage culture.

There is, however, a more serious dilemma that arises. Because Native trainees have virtually no exposure to mainstream education, they may not fully appreciate the rather unique educational experience they are receiving. Native teacher trainees in a mainstream context immediately see that the cost of a university education, just in terms of tuition, books, supplies and room and board, is quite formidable since they pay individually and directly. Native trainees who receive all their training in their own community have no opportunity to appreciate the cost associated with their education since they are normally not responsible for individually paying for the courses they receive. The trainees accept their circumstance as the norm, since they are unaware of other ways of being prepared as a teacher, and therefore begin to demand more. In Native teacher training programs this may surface in the form of wanting to actually be paid to take a course and to get days off from teaching because of days spent taking a course.

Beyond the direct financial implications are a host of infrastructure supports that soon come to be taken for granted in a field-based Native teacher education context. For example, when courses are given in the community, someone has had to bring all the textbooks, and appropriate translations of materials, to the community. Trainees never see that the books are selected from a library with hundreds of choices and that translation requires effective long-term planning and skilled human resources. Shipments to the community include a range of pedagogical materials including paper, pencils, highlighters, computers, discs; in short, every conceivable material that students might require. Having no experience with mainstream education, the students come to expect this infrastructure support and take it for granted.

Support for such progressive Native teacher-training programs may even extend to family and dependents. Young children may accompany Native teacher trainees on expensive flights, the children are housed with a family, day-care may be provided, and often some support is provided for babysitters who accompany the teacher trainee. Any mainstream educator would find such support excessive, but that is only because mainstreamers have little appreciation for the role of family, and especially extended family commitments, that are central to many Native communities. Nevertheless, Native teacher trainees may not appreciate the accommodations that have been made in support of their family and community obligations. Like anyone else they are prone to take these accommodations for granted and focus more on what they perceive to be less than full support.

In short, potential Native teachers who have strong heritage culture skills are rare and valued resources. Teacher-training programs that are avant-garde in terms of their Native emphasis may tend to treat such teacher trainees with kid gloves. The unanticipated result is that Native teachers may not be aware of the unique aspects of their training that communities have fought so hard to obtain. Native teachers may well grow dissatisfied and the response in times of fiscal restraint may be to promote a more mainstream model of teacher training. The end result would be that the culturally relevant dimensions to their training would be compromised.

## **Conclusions**

We have pointed to a number of unanticipated dilemmas that arise especially with Native teacher-training programs that show fundamental respect for the heritage culture. No easy and obvious solution presents itself. However, an awareness of the issues may itself help prevent potential negative fallout from the empowerment process in Native education. Mainstream educators are being asked to raise their level of awareness in terms

of Native issues and to seriously address the question of standards, and curriculum content. Equally important is the need of Native educators to become aware of the essentials of mainstream education, and in so doing, become aware of the unique features of their own education.

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### Notes

1. There are a number of terms that can be used to identify the first inhabitants of North America. These include Aboriginal, Indigenous, Native, and First peoples. We have chosen the label "Native" as an inclusive term representing all those who identify themselves as Inuit, Metis, Dene, or First Nations.

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