

# WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Traditional Environmental  
Knowledge

**Traditional Knowledge**

Excerpt from *Peoples and Cultural Change*

Government of Alberta ■



## TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

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## TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

### *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*

Elders have always played a central role in Aboriginal education, which is fundamentally in inter-generational process. Elders are keepers of tradition, guardians of culture, the wise people the teachers. In Aboriginal societies, Elders are known to safeguard knowledge that constitutes the unique inheritance of the nation. They are revered and respected. While most of those who are wise in traditional ways are old, not all old people are Elders, and not all Elders are not old.

Traditional knowledge is a discrete system of knowledge with its own philosophical and value base. Aboriginal peoples hold the belief that traditional knowledge derives from the Creator and is spiritual in essence. It includes ecological teachings, medical knowledge, common attitudes toward Mother Earth and the Circle of Life, and a sense of kinship with all creatures.

Each nation also has its own body of knowledge that encompasses language, belief systems, ways of thinking and behaving, ceremonies, stories, dances and history. Through thousands of years in the Americas, nations have evolved intricate relationships with their lands and resources. While Western academics and intellectuals have begun to give some credence to Aboriginal understandings of the universe, including ecological knowledge in particular, the gatekeepers of Western intellectual traditions have repeatedly dismissed traditional knowledge as inconsequential and unfounded. They have failed to recognize that their approach to knowledge building is also defined by culture and that Aboriginal intellectual traditions operate from a different but equally valid way of construing the world. Aboriginal people have particular difficulty with the Western notion that knowledge can be secular or objective, divorced from spiritual understanding and deeply embedded values and ethics.

Traditional knowledge also has its own forms of transmission. Rooted in an oral tradition, knowledge is frequently passed on in the form of stories, which are rendered in accurate detail to preserve their authenticity. These stories, often simple on the surface, are multilayered and address complex moral and ethical issues. Traditional knowledge is also transmitted through one-to-one instruction and by modelling correct behaviours. Often, traditional knowledge is intended to be conveyed only at particular times

## ASSIMILATION

Education makes a huge impact on our lives. It shapes how we view and understand the world around us. It helps prepare us for our adult lives. In a lot of ways, it determines who we become.

For thousands of years, of course, First Nations and Inuit peoples educated their own children. They taught them the skills they needed to live and contribute to the community. They

taught children how to behave, how to work together, and how to treat each other well. They taught them the oral history, songs, dances, and spiritual beliefs of their ancestors. In time, those children grew up to raise and educate children of their own.

Like many aspects of First Nations and Inuit life, the process of education changed drastically after Europeans arrived in Canada. Over the course of a few decades, governments and churches took control of First Nations and Inuit education.

## **TRADITIONAL EDUCATION**

In traditional Aboriginal education systems, learning is seen as an individual's life-long responsibility. Traditional teachings stress personal responsibility and relationships. Teachers model competent and respectful behavior. A specific product or grade is not as important as the process of learning and living.

The holistic nature of traditional education shapes the teaching styles and methods. This educational philosophy nurtures learners, showing them how to achieve their individual goals while at the same time meeting the collective needs of the community. Education passes on the values central to Aboriginal communities and families.

Traditional Aboriginal education prepares students for total living. It focuses on a four dimensional approach balanced to meet the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual needs of the learner. Teachers concentrate on what learners can do rather than what they cannot. This reinforces each learner's unique abilities. Traditional teaching strategies involve:

- Strong visual components or tools.
- Learning in real life, rather than by practice in artificial settings.
- A focus on people and relationships rather than on information.
- Language is essential to learning and identity.

We had . . . our own teachings, our own education system teaching children that way of life, and how children were taught from the grandparents. They were taught how to view, to respect the land, and everything in Creation. Through that, the young people were [educated about] what were the Creator's laws, what were these natural laws. What were these First Nations' laws. And talk revolved around a way of life, based on their values. For example . . . to share, to care, to be respectful of people, how to help oneself. How to help others. How to work together.

— *Cree Elder Peter Waskahat, Frog Lake First Nation,  
Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan*

At the core of traditional education lies Aboriginal spirituality and traditional knowledge. Elders play a vital role passing on traditional knowledge to students. Holistic teachings and counselling from Elders brings continuity to students' lives — they learn from Elders both in and out of school. By conducting and providing instruction in ceremonies such as Sweat Lodges and pipe ceremonies, Elders teach learners to honour what is sacred in the universe as well as what is sacred in themselves. These ceremonies are powerful esteem-building tools used to show learners that they are integral, respected members of their community.

Like all peoples, Aboriginal peoples rely on education to continue their culture. Using extensive parental and community participation, Aboriginal educators work toward developing qualities and values in their students that include respect for Elders, cultural tradition, leadership, generosity, integrity, wisdom, compassion for others, and living in harmony with the environment.

Traditionally, Aboriginal cultural knowledge is transmitted and documented primarily through the oral tradition, but also through such things as dramatic productions, dance performances, and they are documented on such artifacts as wampum belts, birch bark scrolls, totem poles, petroglyphs and masks. This is the Aboriginal way of transmitting knowledge and of recording information and history.

— *Greg Young-Ing, Vancouver, British Columbia, June 4, 1993,*  
Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples