

# STATE OF ABORIGINAL LEARNING

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by

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## ***STATE OF ABORIGINAL LEARNING IN CANADA***

### **Part A: Background and Purpose**

This report responds to a call from the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) to support the developmental work of the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre. The Canadian Council on Learning is a national, independent, non-profit organization whose mandate is to establish a pan-Canadian learning architecture that will address information and knowledge gaps and provide evidence-based information to support all stages of learning, from early childhood through to the workplace and beyond.

Funded by the federal government through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, CCL is currently in the process of planning and creating five Knowledge Centres to be located in five regions across Canada. Each Knowledge Centre will focus on a specific learning domain. The CCL will engage in activity in three areas: research and knowledge mobilization; monitoring and reporting; knowledge and information exchange. The Knowledge Centres will support each of these components, focusing on a specific learning domain, as follows:

- Adult Learning in Atlantic Canada
- Early Childhood Learning in Quebec
- Work and Learning in Ontario
- Aboriginal Learning in the Prairies, Northwest Territories and Nunavut
- Health and Learning in British Columbia and the Yukon

Each centre must be national in scope and thus must include all the regions of Canada in their focused activities. Each Knowledge Centre located in a particular geographic region will constitute a national network of excellence. This pan-Canadian mandate will be reflected in the organization, governance, objectives, and operations of each Knowledge Centre.

### **The Aboriginal Knowledge Centre**

The Aboriginal Knowledge Centre is the final centre to be created, delayed to ensure that Aboriginal people have maximum opportunity to become apprised of the Centre, to express interest in future collaborations, dialogues and research partnerships, as well as to ensure that the participation of Aboriginal peoples is suitably and effectively achieved.

As a first step in this process, CCL's CEO Paul Cappon invited a small group (list attached) of people active in Aboriginal learning to advise CCL in getting started with its pan-Canadian Aboriginal Knowledge Centre. Meeting participants included accomplished Aboriginal scholars, leaders, and advisors who represented a cross section of Canada, regions and nations. In his letter of invitation to the individuals, CEO Paul Cappon wrote, "We hope to encourage a collaborative approach in the establishment of

this Knowledge Centre. To that end, we have formulated a meeting that relies very heavily on the active engagement of all participants in an exploration of the possibilities of this innovative approach. Through dialogue, we hope to establish a conversational tone of inquiry and exchange.”

At this meeting, the group discussed processes to establish successfully a Knowledge Centre. It was agreed that hosting a developmental conference in the fall would allow stakeholders from various perspectives – community groups, learners, government and NGO’s – to identify collectively issues, exemplary practices and priorities for an Aboriginal learning knowledge centre.

To help contextualize the discussion at this developmental conference, it was decided that the CCL would commission a report to identify central issues, gaps, learning initiatives, and success stories. Given the extent of pre-existing findings, rather than undertake new research, it was agreed that this report would review and synthesize some of the many research documents produced over the past decade. This report would help to clarify the directions and gaps of Aboriginal learning and enable future decision-makers to draw on the rich research base already conducted by and among Aboriginal peoples.

Recognizing that there are learning issues unique to each of the three Aboriginal groups of Canada - First Nations, Inuit and Métis - this report is an amalgamation of three separate research activities undertaken by key writers and researchers who are acknowledged as respected leaders in their field and represent each of the three Aboriginal groups of Canada. During the summer of 2005 the researchers drew on published public documents that had community-based discussions, interviews, roundtables, focused groups, and/or other qualitative data collections conducted in the past decade or more as their primary research method. These three research reports are provided in the Appendix A, B, and C of this report.

## **Report Structure**

Part A of this report provides the context for the CCL Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre. Part B outlines the principles established to guide the CCL in developing its Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre. Part C summarizes the respective learning contexts of each of the First Nations, Inuit and Métis. Included in this section is a table synthesizing the major learning themes derived from the three above-mentioned reports. Finally, Part D identifies potential priorities and directions for an Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre.

### **Part B: Foundational Principles for Aboriginal Learning and Education**

A synthesis of the reports and literature on FN, Inuit and Métis learning and education has resulted in a number of core foundational principles for learning and education. These principles have surfaced frequently and consistently throughout the reports and should be read as belonging to a whole and not sequentially or linearly in terms of importance:

- Aboriginal peoples view education as a vital area for holistic and lifelong learning and for transformation of their economic livelihood.
- Learning is acknowledged as a lifelong process that requires both formal and informal opportunities for learning for all ages.
- Land, the knowledge and skills in and from place, language and culture are integral parts of the learning and education process among Aboriginal people.
- Aboriginal learning must be integrally linked to elders and community and opportunities realized to build upon these connections and their language, knowledge and culture.
- Learning development must focus on Aboriginal individuals in a holistic manner based on their spiritual, intellectual, emotional and physical selves and acknowledge and foster their gifts and abilities.
- Selecting and legitimating curricular knowledge are issues based on power, voice, and agency that require Aboriginal people to be participating in all aspects of curriculum development, deciding on the knowledge to be included in the curriculum, and in what languages the curriculum is to be delivered. This requires new skills and knowledge to bring Aboriginal people into these participatory realms as well as power changes to systems in policy making.
- The participation and involvement of parents and community is essential to building a successful learning continuum and healthy resilient communities.
- The legitimate right of Aboriginal peoples across Canada to develop and control all aspects of their own education must be recognized, resourced, and realized.
- Inequalities in educational funding create uneven capacities for Aboriginal people and require immediate fiscal and applied solutions.
- The development of any learning and research activities with and for Aboriginal peoples finally must be developed within ethical principles of research involving Aboriginal communities and leadership. These are to ensure that Aboriginal peoples are invited as participants and owners of research, as well as researchers, who are involved in all aspects of the research, the analysis and conclusions, identifying the solutions and recommendations that they will benefit their nations and communities.

## **Part C: Summary of Learning Context**

### **First Nations (FN) Learning Context**

First Nations across Canada represent a rich and diverse character of Canada, speaking some 72 languages in over 600 reserve communities. They also are a young growing population with growing populations in urban areas who leave reserves for schooling, employment, and other services. Colonization of First Nations has seriously affected their lives, and the people feel the oppressive nature of prejudice and racism in Canadian society. Very early colonists justified land seizure; removed First Nations from their homelands and put them on isolated and under resourced reserves; imposed residential and federal day schools and compulsory English colonial education; subjected them to overt, covert and systemic racism; imposed disempowering policies, practices and attitudes that have continued to the present, restricting their movement, livelihood, and survival. As a result, it is understandable but tragic that First Nations youth have the highest school departures before graduation, the highest suicide rates, highest incarceration rates, and perform far below the achievement and employment rates of average Canadians. They continue to have the highest rates of infant mortality and family social problems. These facts are often repeated in Canada, but little is known about First Nations learning, development, knowledge and language for much of the research has focused on their ‘incapacity’ and little on their potential for influencing positive transformations in their own and in Canadian society in general. In fact, Canada and its provincial curricula has continued to marginalize or be indifferent to First Nations peoples, since their political legacies has divided their interests and the created hegemonic power relations evident in colonization, racism and domination which continue to effect First Nations present and future. With the future of Canada soon to be dependent on a large Canadian Aboriginal population, the learning issues, gaps, and challenges must be addressed.

### **Inuit Learning Context**

The North is a distinctive environment characterized by a rich, rural landscape that has been the home of the Inuit. The Inuit have developed a long and enduring relationship with this environment based on a culture of respect for the land and for those elders and people who maintain their culture and society. The influx of European people from the south and other countries has had a huge tragic impact on the people, on their culture and on the land, which continues to threaten their future survival. Imposed colonial policies of southern schools have developed a cognitive dissonance or discontinuity with which the people continue to struggle although they continue believe that education can help them to address the eroding capacity of people to live in modern society. That education, however, must enrich and accommodate their language, culture and society. The people have learned to live from knowledge of their place and its rich resources and have developed an intimate relationship with land. Their formal school education has not, however, been directed to their land and environment and has resulted in a high number

of youth leaving school early because they have not found relevance to their northern life and in the southern skills that are often not fully developed in the north. The youth have to leave their communities to receive formal schooling and in so doing lose connections with elders, their families and communities, and reconnecting them to their ancient knowledge and traditions is a challenge that has many gaps in learning. The loss of their Inuit language and the rich store of traditional knowledge will have dire consequences for the people in the North.

### **Métis Learning Context**

The Métis is a distinct society among the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada. Located throughout Canada but in particular in the Prairies in heritage communities and urban areas, the Métis have a common political will, consciousness, language, culture, history, and homeland. Recognized in the Constitution of Canada in 1982 as one of the distinct Aboriginal Peoples of Canada, they have both unique and similar experiences with First Nations and Inuit peoples. Uniquely, they are seeking a national approach that would provide the representation and authority to advance the implementation of self-government and thus enable their control and regulation of all programming for Métis Nation. Without the federal status of First Nations, they have no funds for education and other services guaranteed to First Nations through treaties. Their unique political history of dispossession and resistance to land seizure and exclusion from Canadian settlements stands as a symbol of the tenacity of the people and their determination to remain a distinct part of Canada's identity. They also face similar issues as First Nations from the lack of control over their present and future, a lack of education and employment and training, high levels of poverty, and many of the same healing issues surrounding residential schools and racism in Canada.

### **Synthesis of Major Learning Themes:**

<b>First Nations</b>	<b>Inuit</b>	<b>Métis</b>
<p><b>Context of First Nations (FN) Learning</b>  Growing FN youth population  Colonization assimilation, residential schools  Damage to individuals and families  Loss of self-knowledge and self-sufficiency  Loss and erosion of FN language  Poverty and high unemployment  Eroded family bonds and culture  Families and students in stress  Cognitive dissonance, suicide, social ills</p> <p><b>Contemporary Education</b>  FN have hope in education  Racism and general ignorance of Canadian population  Nationalistic Canada curricula  Cognitive and cultural dissonance  Schools lack participation of FN people/leaders/elders</p> <p>Lack incentives to remain in school  Few learning skills related to career, health, recreation, and artistic expression  High drop out rate  High stress for students  Low English skills  Females more likely to graduate  Females have lower employment  Low literacy skills in English and FN languages  FN schools have uneven capacities and resources</p> <p><b>Learning needs in Early Childhood Education (ECE)</b>  ECE for young children necessary  Prenatal health learning needed  Language immersion and Head Start  Mother and child programming  Extended family rearing  Life skills-nutrition, health, home management, parenting, cultural economic and cultural renewal  Resource rural areas</p>	<p><b>Context of Inuit Learning</b>  Rapid social change  Assimilation  Residential School  Federal schools away  Resettlement  High unemployment  Eroded families bonds  Loss or erosion of language  Loss of useful traditional life skills  High cost of living in North  Families economically stretched  Climate change</p> <p><b>Contemporary Education</b>  Schools use southern Canadian curriculum  Teachers are non-Inuit</p> <p>Cognitive and cultural dissonance  High stress for students  No incentives to remain in school  Few learning skills related to career, health, recreation, and artistic expression  High drop out rate  Females more likely to graduate high school than males  Low literacy skills  Low life expectancy  TB, cancer, drugs, alcohol  Environmental pollution</p> <p><b>Learning needs in ECE</b>  ECE needed beyond daycare  Care of women and prenatal health  Learning parenting  Extended family rearing  Develop readiness for students at different levels  Building resilient healthy communities</p>	<p><b>Context of Métis Learning</b>  Colonization and racism  Historic exclusions in Canada  Some attended residential schools  Large Métis populations in prairies  Small remote communities elsewhere  More urban than rural population  Tradition living on the land remains in some northern areas  No recognized land base, except AB  Weakened cultural base  Disconnection with land and languages</p> <p><b>Contemporary Education</b>  Education is seen be a foundation for promotion and preservation of Métis Nation  Rich with possibilities  No Métis schools  Provincially controlled education  Lack of Métis specific curriculum makes a Canadian public unaware of Métis  Lack participation of people/elders  Children streamed into areas not parent choices  Support for families needed  Incomplete high school completion-52%  Need infrastructure/local capacity bldg  Long term strategy needed</p> <p><b>Learning needs in ECE</b>  ECE necessary for lifelong learning  Learning starts at home  Forming identity needs strong Métis education and family participation  Unify family and reconnect to Métis heritage  Exemplary models under Métis control: Gabriel Dumont Institute and Louis Riel Institute  Aboriginal Head Start needed  ECE provincial responsibility without Métis jurisdiction—devolution to Métis needed  Métis control of ECE  Public education be accountable for</p>

## **Part D: Potential Conditions and Directions for an Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre**

This report offers a summary of three reports of First Nations, Inuit and Métis. These shared insights emerged from discussions with and among Aboriginal peoples of Canada. What is known is largely about the effects of colonial relations that have created conditions in communities that Aboriginal peoples are dealing with. The major gaps in understanding are about what Aboriginal peoples consider important and desire in future learning opportunities and is about their languages, cultures, knowledge, relationships, socio-cultural, political and economic survival. The ‘what is’ then is not ‘what ought to be’, nor are the exemplary practices all that can be. Decisions about the future are still to be localized to the many First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nations to consider as they have repeatedly urged that their voices be heard, their participation be respected in any policies and programs that affect them, and decisions be based on the contexts in which they live, on their languages, and on their cultures, world views, knowledge foundations, and diverse ways of knowing and learning.

How then can CCL benefit from the partial knowledge produced in these reports from communities and nations of Aboriginal peoples? In particular, how does this report fit in terms of the mandate of CCL? The following areas then offer some questions raised by this research and the considerations of those directions in the areas so named as the functional areas of the Aboriginal Learning Centre. It should be remembered that the reports do not shed light on monitoring issues, or even dissemination of knowledge issues, as these have not been raised in the reports as significant local issues. Rather what is happening or not happening is what was found significant.

### **1. MONITORING AND REPORTING:**

- What kinds of monitoring can be shared effectively across diverse jurisdictions to offer better analyses of the state of learning among Aboriginal peoples?
- What kinds of monitoring are missing so that education planners can make better learning and educational programming?
- How can diverse jurisdictions, provincial, territorial, and First Nations schools benefit from shared monitoring of students literacy and achievements?
- How can research methodologies structured toward reduction in analyses offer insight to holistic learning?

Building a case for sharing monitoring schemes and reporting mechanisms among and across diverse governmental and institutional jurisdictions is sensitive business. While all Federal, Provincial, Territorial, First Nations, Inuit and Métis jurisdictions have some monitoring going on, these have not been shared widely with each other for various reasons, although one might infer the implications of monitoring is as much about learning, scrutiny and criticism all occurring simultaneously in the monitoring business. Governments, institutions and groups monitor for their own purposes, and use their data for resolving many issues dealing with their local resourcing, curriculum changes,

professional development of their staff, teacher resourcing, students enrollments and how to resource them effectively. Monitoring has evaluative consequences, which carries the possibility that the effects of monitoring will be used to critique the jurisdictions, their schools, and teachers, or perhaps the learners themselves. Hence, decisions need to be made about what kind of monitoring of Aboriginal students, schools, programs, funds, and other output measures can be seen as an effective use of time, money, and resources. This raises the problematic issue of governance of research involving Aboriginal peoples, wherein ethics, frameworks, roles and responsibilities, and processes must be considered.

## 2. KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

- How can Indigenous knowledge be effectively translated into educational developmental theory and practice?
- How can Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy and Aboriginal languages and learning inform contemporary institutional curricula and pedagogy?
- How can the knowledge and current scholarship of racism, antiracism, critical multiculturalism, and postcolonial education be shared to inform new directions in provincial and public education in Aboriginal education?
- What lessons can be learned from exemplary program practices and how can these be most effectively shared?
- How can technology be used appropriately and more effectively to share and communicate across diverse groups and from rural areas?
- How can current research, literature on learning be made available in an appropriate way for lifelong learning?

Knowledge exchange is intended to expand current available knowledge and the sharing of that knowledge. In a growing knowledge economy the local and particular have value for human dignity, identity and citizenship and in maximizing the human potential. How can knowledge among First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples effectively be engaged in education, not just for Aboriginal peoples but also for the Canadian public as a whole? How can the particular histories and knowledge be a source of understanding and inspiration for the future, and not played out as narratives of difference, so localized that Canadians can not see themselves in them nor accept the colonial narratives of the past as being part of their own history? These are challenges presented by knowledge exchange, for in the past such knowledge exchange has been a one-way street. Rather the challenge is to create a respectful conversation with Aboriginal peoples from which hope and inspiration can be found and explored through the diversity of experiences, political entities, languages, and cultures they represent.

The reports and the research demonstrate similarities of themes across each of the groups. Many successes emerged from place, from hope, from inspiration, and from caring individuals. CCL can help track and identify successes in learning and encourage demonstration projects that animate these features. In addition, such information sharing can offer so much more about how learning occurs and what features can be strengthened as they are continually supported, not just studied.

Current discourses about the value of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous peoples is finding new ground, and many new Indigenous scholars are finding the inspiration and hope for themselves and the education for the future in their own articulation of localized knowledge. In them they find stories of the people, the resonances of relationships with each other and with the spirit of place, and a new way of learning that arises from those relationships with spirit. These are evident in their languages and in their discourses, and that which was once lost or dismissed is finding space and legitimacy in all areas of scholarship. But these discourses are not evolving to a cumulative social change or transformation, but rather to the trial and error convergence toward best practices. These many best practices have not had much of an effect on institutional change. In addition, the understanding of Indigenous knowledge and its implications for contemporary education much longer course to follow. In this regard, CCL can provide a larger space for Indigenous knowledge to be explored and a developmental sequence of learning formulated.

### 3. RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION

- How can research be ethically developed with Aboriginal communities, schools, and students?
- What kinds of research methods most appropriately engage communities in local research and help develop local capacity for doing their own research?
- Why does diversity matter in a knowledge economy?

Research and Knowledge Mobilization has to do with research, finding answers to new questions, testing or identifying enriched programs and innovations and taking them to new levels of policy and reform. However, research still does not reverberate in Aboriginal communities with trust and acceptance. Many Aboriginal people have been the objects of research and have been placed under western research gaze that has left scars because of the ill treatment of researchers, the abuse of relationships, the marginalization of the peoples, their capacity, and their knowledge and the inadequacy of the research interpretations. CCL must ensure that research undertaken among Aboriginal peoples of Canada be ethically conducted, based on Aboriginal principles of respect, relationship building, participation of the people in the decisions of research conducted in their areas, access to the processes of research, control of their knowledge, and benefits accruing from research going back to the people. Several documents and literature offer much larger discussions of research principles and guidelines that must be considered for this area.

Research then done in collaboration and in consultation with Aboriginal peoples may then help resolve some of the key areas outlined in this research as follows:

1. Understanding developmental learning in and through language, culture, and knowledge or understanding how distinctive locations create conditions for learning among First Nations, Inuit and Métis
2. Identifying appropriate and effective learning environments and programming at multiple ages and stages through life

3. Comprehending obstacles to learning among Aboriginal peoples
4. Funding demonstration projects that involve appropriate levels of cultural engagement and skill building among diverse learners.
5. Discussions, dialogues, interpretation and translations of IK into school learning environments, curricula, and practical pedagogical understandings.
6. Developing effective transitions from school to work to develop the full human being
7. Filling gaps of literacy to maximize life long learning, using both the cultural competencies and connections to communities and health and work related competencies.
8. Engaging Aboriginal learners in the identification of their own learning strengths.
9. Public education in antiracist education and value of diversity in Canada