

Aboriginal Culture in the School

By Dr. Helen D. Armstrong

Recently released 2006 Statistics Canada data note the growth of our Aboriginal population, particularly in the two provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. These data, as well as information from other research studies, confirm that **Aboriginal people still struggle with the legacy of systemic discrimination: their educational and employment levels are not equal to those of the non-Aboriginal majority.**

I am involved in a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada/Community-University Research Alliances (SSHRC/CURA) program that involves bringing Aboriginal artist-educators into participating schools and assessing their effect on Aboriginal students' cognitive skills, cultural awareness, psycho-social development, sense of identity, and self-esteem. The project is conducted with an appreciation of the strength of Aboriginal communities and the gifts within them. The impact of Aboriginal cultural instruction in selected schools in terms of learning, school attendance, and retention of Aboriginal students is also examined.

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The project, which is currently beginning its fourth of six years, involves both quantitative and qualitative methods in a longitudinal follow-up design. The hypothesis is that exposure to Aboriginal culture in the school will improve Aboriginal children's cultural awareness and positive sense of identity. This, in turn, will increase the personal relevance and importance of the school, which then will translate into positive school-related behaviours and achievement. The secondary purpose, community development, is specifically related to the contribution of community members' skills and talents.

Five First Nations communities are currently enrolled in the research project, each with a community-based coordinator who organizes the artist-educator visits for in-school and after-school programming, as well as other aspects of the project such as in-school testing. Graduate and

undergraduate studies support the programming, particularly the involvement of teachers and educational assistants in the review and in-school use of grade- and/or subject-specific resources by and for Aboriginal people. These resources will then support and be integrated with the visits of the community artist-educators and, occasionally, visiting artists from other communities. Children are learning, for example, how to make dance regalia and drums and to use the Excel computer program to create beading designs. They also learn to sing, drum, and dance, and even "scratch" like DJs. They learn the traditional stories of their community, the traditional cultural practices of the particular language group, as well as the language itself.

I am also the principal investigator of a study that involves the exploration of how youth coming before the justice system would describe an "ideal school" where they would want to remain enrolled until graduation. That study involves interviews with youth and their caregivers, as well as examination of other research studies and federal statistics. Most of these youth, as other data indicate, are still both Aboriginal and male.

Both studies emphasize the importance of community members' contributions of gifts and talents—including, in the latter study, the youth themselves—with reference to the successful education of children and youth. It is hoped that the findings from both studies will provide a template for culturally relevant curricular materials and program evaluation that can be used in all schools and communities, and that will be supported by funding from both the provincial and federal governments.

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Profile

Dr. Helen D. Armstrong is a professor with the Faculty of Education at Brandon University, and her current research focus is Aboriginal education. She is the principal investigator of a SSHRC/CURA grant entitled *Community-Based Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives: Implementation and Evaluation*. Other research interests include organizational theory and development, the work of theorist Mary Parker Follett, and productivity.

