

Inclusion and Aboriginal Education

Discarding the Masks and Barriers in the Way of Student Potential

By Kevin Lamoureux

In collaboration with École River Heights School of the Winnipeg School Division, I recently produced *Inclusion*, a document for the school community on the topic of Aboriginal perspectives and education. This document is intended to be a starting point for teachers who may feel unsure of how to begin working towards including Aboriginal perspectives in daily school activities. It will serve as a summary of some of the foundational understandings of our rich, diverse, and complex history, which all Manitobans should have.

Most importantly, this document is based on the premise that Aboriginal education should begin with a common goal that all educators can relate to and feel a part of. By focusing on the goal of providing all students with the opportunity to succeed, we believe that we have a vision that draws us all together as conscientious educators, rather than isolating those who have yet to find their comfort level with this still very new mandate.

Since our identity here in Manitoba is tied so inseparably to our relationship with the First Nations signatories to the treaties that made Canada possible, to the Métis communities who stood alongside the French and First Nations ensuring that the political body of Manitoba would not be ignored by an emerging nation, and to the many diverse Aboriginal families woven into the cultural fabric of our province, Aboriginal education should be about the success and enrichment of all Manitobans.

From that starting point, we also wanted to offer teachers some discussion points from the ever-growing body of literature regarding multicultural education. Since we believe that most teachers will be comfortable with the goal of providing all students with the opportunity to succeed, it is important that we also share an understanding of, and sensitivity to, the ways that culture can act as a barrier to school success or talent.

All teaching takes place within the context of culture. While teaching at the university, I often ask my students whether or not Canada has a culture. When we have an opportunity to discuss what culture really is beyond the obvious and sometimes stereotyped markers of dance, food, and costume, it is easy to see that any time a group of people behave in a way that simply seems normal to them, they have adopted a culture.

Culture is all around us at all times and is ever-changing. Culture varies across the socio-economic spectrum, between rural and urban, between old and young, and of course between ethnicities. It is easy to see culture in other less familiar people when they eat strange foods, speak in strange languages, or wear strange clothes. It is not always as easy to see that we too are immersed in a culture. We also eat the strange foods, speak the strange language, and wear the strange clothes of our culture.

All teaching takes place within the context of a culture, and this is not a bad thing. I am quick to remind my students that the culture they have is as beautiful as any other, and that if culture has afforded them any privilege in their lives it is because someone cared for them and worked very hard to provide that opportunity.

Multicultural education is not about abandoning or diminishing one's own culture, but rather about expanding a perspective to be inclusive of the perspectives of others. This is not something we do out of pity, but out of mutual respect and a desire to see all students be successful in the classroom. It is the exercise of recognizing that cultural diversity may appear as a deficit, but it is in fact an opportunity to expand one's perspective and enrich learning. It is the effort we make to recognize that students who are not of our own culture are not only working towards academic success, but also towards saving face in a system that reflects a set of norms, assumptions, and beliefs that are unfamiliar.

Aboriginal education is about making the unfamiliar familiar as a part of a wonderful social movement to reclaim our shared heritage and history. It is about classrooms where all students can succeed and achieve their potential.

Profile Kevin Lamoureux

Kevin Lamoureux is an instructor in the University of Winnipeg's Faculty of Education and for its ACCESS Education Program. He is a Ph.D. candidate in Gifted and Talented Education through the University of New England (UNE) in Armidale, Australia, where he also completed his Master's degree in the same area. Kevin works closely with schools and school divisions throughout Manitoba in support of Aboriginal education and the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives. He has published many articles and chapters on the

subject of Aboriginal education, at-risk children and youth, gifted education, mentoring, and creativity. He is the senior author of *Mentoring in a Canadian Context* (published by the Institute of Urban Studies), the recent recipient of the International Centre for Innovation in Education (ICIE) Young Scholar Award, and UNE's Merit award for outstanding academic performance. As a member of the Faculty of Education's ACCESS community, he works directly with pre-service teachers preparing for careers in the inner city.

