

Narrowing the Education Gap

By Sherry Peden

Every year, an increasing number of both Aboriginal students and new Canadians enrol in Manitoba schools. These groups often arrive at school with a cultural world view and value system that is far removed from that of many current teachers and school administrators who come from a predominantly Euro-Canadian background. While this cultural diversity can be, should be, and is celebrated and attended to in many provincial schools; if we use graduation rates and school attendance as the measures for academic success, a significant amount of literature suggests that the academic, cultural, and linguistic needs of Aboriginal students are still not being met.

Some economic forecasts suggest that by 2020 the cost of doing nothing more to reduce the education gap between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students will be in the billions of dollars. These costs will be difficult to pay by our aging, ready-to-retire baby boomer population. Educators and business people alike seem to recognize the necessity and urgency to do more to better address the needs of our growing Aboriginal student population.

Many educational initiatives have been developed in the past 15 or so years with the express purpose of reducing the education gap. My research interests are embedded in and have developed from my studies of the first two years of the implementation of the Aboriginal perspectives course that is now mandatory for teacher certification in Manitoba. Whereas some findings suggest that student teachers who take this course leave with both a willingness and commitment to adapt their teaching, views, and practices to improve how they meet the needs of Aboriginal students; other findings suggest that these same student teachers are hesitant to implement these changes if they are in schools that do not consider Aboriginal perspectives to be a priority. Other findings identify a pressing need for ongoing in-service training and professional development for the existing teacher and administrator body. I continue to be interested in finding better ways to teach this course at both the pre-service

and in-service level.

I find that the use of real people sharing real stories and experiences is a useful strategy when attempting to teach about and expose potentially contentious material because, as one Elder noted, “the Canadian history books and education systems have not always been positive about the contributions and value of the First Nations people.” Because of this, there is sometimes a resistance (or maybe it is simply a fear) when teachers and administrators who have spent years in a career are asked to do things in a manner that is different and even contradictory to their own value system or world view. Teachers and administrators are typically nurturing people and, when exposed to harsh realities of history such as the residential school era, they often feel a degree of guilt for the actions of their ancestors or for the systems that have been good to them. The reason for having these conversations is not to assign blame, but to develop an understanding of how and why things are the way they are today – the “looking back to see forward” concept that is prevalent in Aboriginal stories and values. This concept was taught to us as we grew up as “You gotta know where you were to know where you are going or can go.” Stories are a good way of examining some of these issues.

I have also found that when teachers, parents, and administrators have the opportunity to engage in real dialogue or conversations in a safe atmosphere, there is a willingness to accept and even embrace different ways of doing things to meet the collective needs of our students. As such, I am highly motivated to use whatever skills I have to help develop those bridges, connections, and collaborations whereby authentic dialogues can happen, and whereby stories can be used as one of the strategies to improve how we meet the needs of Aboriginal students in our schools.

For some, this may seem to be a simplistic way to state a research agenda, but my 30-plus years of work in the school system coupled with 10 years or so of university study have shown me that long-term sustainability can only be accomplished with a solid foundation of understanding by all parties involved. As the Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba boldly states, “We are all Treaty people.” I suggest that, “We all need to work together so that all of our grandchildren will have a positive future, and we can begin that by engaging in the dialogues and collaborations that will then establish the bridges or pathways of action towards that end.”

Meegwetch!

Profile Sherry Peden

Sherry Peden is an arm’s-length member of the Tootinaowaziibeeng Treaty Reserve, located in the western parkland region of Manitoba. She uses the term arm’s length because she was raised off-reserve due to Indian Act legislation of the 1950s that prohibited her mother from staying on the reserve after she married. As such, she was raised in what she refers to as “in the bush” on a small subsistence farm.



Sherry spent the past 30 years working in various educational roles that primarily served the northern and Aboriginal community. She began her career as a Middle Years teacher, then an Early Years teacher, a school

administrator, a high school teacher and guidance counsellor, and then moved to community-based teacher education. Sherry then went on to coordinate the academic program and field experience for all of the Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Centres.

Sherry then moved on-campus to the Faculty of Education at Brandon University, where she teaches instructional methodology, reading courses, and Aboriginal education courses to Middle and Senior Years teachers. She has also been involved with English language arts and Aboriginal perspectives curriculum development.

Sherry attained her Ph.D. in Educational Administration and Aboriginal Education at the University of Manitoba in October 2011. She is an Associate Professor at Brandon University.