LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this module, you will achieve the following objectives:

1. Understand Aboriginal ontology, epistemology, axiology, and pedagogy.
2. Understand how issues of colonialism, racism, prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, and bias toward Aboriginal people have impacted Aboriginal education.
3. Appreciate the importance of creating culturally relevant Aboriginal education for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.
4. Understand and implement the theories and pedagogies necessary to design, implement, and assess programs for students that teach to and about Aboriginal people.
5. Create learning environments conducive to the intellectual, social, emotional, physical, linguistic, cultural, spiritual, and moral development of Aboriginal students.
6. Critically analyze educational tools, resources, and learning strategies to ensure cultural relevancy and develop Aboriginal education materials that are reflective of Aboriginal values, traditions, and teachings in order to facilitate student success.
7. Demonstrate an openness to innovation and change.
PART 1: CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

Understanding traditional Aboriginal education is essential in creating a culturally relevant educational process for today’s Aboriginal children. In order to bring forward the foundations of the past into the present, the cultural core that informs the educational process must be closely examined. This section describes Aboriginal philosophy and practice as they relate to the developmental processes of children, traditional values and beliefs, teaching methods, and the responsibilities of the learner.

Belief in the oneness of all life informs Aboriginal philosophy and practice: “Regardless of ecological base and specific lifestyle, Aboriginal people of Canada shared certain cultural attributes, which included a belief in the unity of all aspects of life and the consequent lack of distinction between the ‘secular’ and the ‘sacred’” (Barman, Hebert, & McCaskill, 1987, p. 3). The responsibilities of family life were highly valued, particularly the obligation to educate children in a holistic fashion, as the education process encompassed all aspects of a child’s life—mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. “Children were raised to assume adult roles in an atmosphere of warmth and affection. Learning emphasized such values as respect for all living things, sharing, self-reliance, individual responsibility, and proper conduct” (Barman, Hebert, & McCaskill, 1986, p. 3). It was also imperative that children learn how to utilize the environment most effectively for economic survival, through a teaching process that included a modelling approach (Ross, 1992).

Elders teach that learning begins at the point of conception. Even as a child is carried in the womb, he or she is influenced by the mother and all activity around her. Therefore, to prepare the pregnant woman for her role as a weaver of knowledge, Elders continue the teachings that began at puberty.

A variety of techniques were used to transfer knowledge, skills, values, and morals. Teaching was primarily done orally and through role modelling. The oral method was often used when conveying ideas about feelings, culture, attitudes, and ways of life. In addition, students would watch their teachers complete tasks repeatedly. Children were naturally able to observe tasks again and again because they were involved in almost all aspects of adult life and activities. When the teacher thought the student was able to complete a task, the student was given the opportunity to try; if the student did not succeed, then he or she was given more time to master the task. Learning was considered a personal journey toward wholeness, determined by the individual’s own pace of development (Beck & Walters, 1977).

When children completed daily tasks or performed activities essential for survival, a transference of skills occurred. In learning how to make snowshoes, for example, children also learned many other teachings: the language, the culture, and the knowledge of nature. More specifically, children would learn about trees and flexibility, acquiring hand–eye coordination, geometry, ways of measurement, and the ways of stringing or weaving the snowshoe (English, 1996).

Children were also expected to master the morals and values they’d been taught through storytelling, dreams, and lived experiences. Stories and storytelling in earlier years of Aboriginal culture were primarily tools for “teaching” proper behaviour—whether through explicit directions or explanations of rites of passage and levels or planes of existence. Stories taught children who they were and the reasons why they were born, helping them become all they were destined to be, including how to live and move from one circle to the next with each other in the home, in the community, and in the natural environment. The stories told were subjective. Told to children who were learning, growing, changing, and weaving knowledge in that very moment, these stories were intended to develop individuality, to allow children to claim and express themselves and know the journeys of life. Elders saw stories as being
able to help shape children's independence by developing their ability to analyze a situation for themselves and make decisions (English, 1996). (See the “Storytelling and Aboriginal Pedagogy” section later in this module.)

Teachers in the community were servants who acted to bring balance to communities and individuals. By helping individuals perceive and clarify the natural and spiritual world, teachers were able to bring them into harmony with both worlds. The Indigenous learning process recognized that anyone and anything could be a teacher, including the natural and spiritual world (Hart, 1996). It was understood that a student could also be a teacher, resulting in a cyclical learning process (Hart, 1996).

Regardless of the teaching method, spirituality was embedded in each strand of the learning process. The sacred tree teaches that the spiritual aspect of individuals is based on four related principles.

First, the capacity to have and to respond to realities that exist in a non-material way, such as dreams, visions, ideals, spiritual teachings, goals and theories. Second, the capacity to accept those realities as a reflection (in the form of symbolic representation) of unknown or unrealized potential to do or to be something more or different than we are now. Third, the capacity to express these non-material realities using symbols such as speech, art, or mathematics. Fourth, the capacity to use this symbolic expression to guide future action—action directed toward making what was only seen as a possibility into a living reality. (Lane, Bopp, J., Bopp, M., Brown, 1984, p. 30)

A group of Elders\(^*\) has described a learner of traditional times as having the following characteristics:

- The foundation for the “good life” or health and capacity for learning is modelled through the structure and behaviour at home during the early years. As a child develops in age they can be asked to take on practical responsibilities relevant to their age. These responsibilities go beyond tasks to values, gathering experience, understanding it and expressing it in behaviour. This changes developmentally as a child ages. Learning is a life-long process, but each stage has different qualities. Learning involved mind, body, and spirit simultaneously, not separately.

- Experience is the foundation for learning. Understanding experience is developed over time through dialogue. Experience is neither good nor bad but a natural result of exploration.

- Children should be allowed to make choices and to gather unique and individual experience within the framework of modelled values, discussion, and community good. Each individual has something unique to offer as a result of who they are and their accumulated experience.

- Learning is a process that is accomplished through interaction with others; it is always a shared, cooperative venture.

- The foundation for interaction with others is expressed through respect, feeling, a good heart, good intentions, kindness, sharing, and knowledge of self.

- Each individual is unique yet a part of a whole community. The community and the individual have reciprocal responsibilities. In one sense the individual and the community and the world are the same entity, interdependent. What affects one, affects the others.

- Learning begins with vision—of self, of goals, of the whole, of the direction a task is to go in. It is a process that goes through the stages of “seeing” (vision), “relating” to what it is, “figuring it out” with heart and mind, and “acting” on findings in some way (behaviour).

\(^*\)A group of eight Algonquian Elders that Suzanne Stiegelbauer (1992) worked with in her study.
The old and the young need each other: one to provide the understanding of experience from their own experiences, the other to frame that discussion in terms of current and changing needs. The child's world may be different from that of the adult as it reflects a changing world.

Everyone has a responsibility to give back and to consider their actions in light of their effect on generations to come. (Stiegelbauer, 1992, p. 14)

The traditional method of teaching is non-threatening for the child. This approach contributes to independence and the ability to develop insight, critical thinking skills, problem-solving techniques, and self-evaluation. A non-threatening approach turns into a non-directive approach, which brings about maturity, self-directedness, human growth, and responsibility for one's own destiny. Traditional Aboriginal ways make room for individuality, subjectivity, freedom and autonomy, and interpretation of one's lived experiences, culture, spirituality, and connectedness to nature.

Traditional Aboriginal values, beliefs, and methods of education can inform Aboriginal education today. Therefore, where cultural transference is the goal, traditional knowledge, ways of being, and pedagogy must be implemented in any Aboriginal educational program.

HISTORY OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION IN CANADA

Elders often say that Aboriginal people must know where they have come from in order to know who they are and where they are going (Anderson, 2000; Fitznor, 2002; Graveline, 1998; Montour-Angus, 1999). This brief history of Aboriginal education in Canada looks at Aboriginal people's struggle to survive in the education system of this land.

In the early seventeenth century, missionaries were brought to Canada from Europe to establish schools to "civilize" the "Indians" (Kirkness, 1992), who were viewed by the European settler societies as "heathens." The first method of educating the Indians was the establishment of day schools. However, the children returned every day to a home life that countered the teachings offered at the school. In addition, attendance was very hard to control. As a result, these day schools weren't able to fully assimilate the children (Kirkness, 1992).

The day schools were replaced in the latter 1800s by residential (boarding) schools, which lasted right up until the 1990s, although the majority had closed by the 1980s (Milloy, 1999). These residential schools were intended to isolate the children from their families and communities in order to assimilate them into the Euro-Canadian social order (Milloy, 1999). Children attended residential schools many miles from their home and stayed in these schools for at least ten months of the year. Students attended from the age of six (and sometimes younger) to eighteen.

The devastating effects of these residential schools have been well documented:

The residential schools have had a lasting negative effect on First Nations people as a whole. These schools removed children from their parents and from their communities. Generations of Indian children were denied a normal family childhood. They were denied the association with family, with their extended family's perceptions of spirituality, of acceptable behavior and of the means of survival. For many, residential schools meant the loss of their Native language, the principal means by which culture is accumulated, shared, and transmitted from generation to generation. The result was a tragic interruption of culture. (Kirkness, 1992, p. 12)

*The term Indian is used in its historical context.*
In the mid-1800s the government got involved in the education of the Indians, and the residential schools became jointly operated by Church and government (Milloy, 1999). “The government was responsible for inspection, special rules, and regulations, as well as making financial grants. The highest recorded number of such schools in Canada was eighty, in 1933. The enrolment in the school varied anywhere from fifty or so to over four hundred students of all ages” (Kirkness, 1992, p. 10).

An Inspector of Schools in the mid-1800s describes the rationale for these boarding schools:

Little can be done with [the Indian child]. He can be taught to do a little at farming, and at stock raising, and to dress in a more civilized manner, but that is all. The child who goes to day school learns little and what he learns is soon forgotten, while his tastes are fashioned at home, and his inherited aversion to toil is in no way combated. (Davin, 1879, p. 2)

In the 1950s and 1960s, the policy to “civilize and Christianize” shifted to a policy of integration. “Integration, administratively defined, was the process of having First Nations children attend provincial schools” (Kirkness, 1992, p. 12).

Integration has not met Aborigina students' cultural needs, and therefore a meaningful education for Aboriginal people has not been achieved. Chief Dan George, in his “A Talk to Teachers,” makes this comment on integration:

You talk big words of integration in the schools. Does it really exist? Can we talk of integration until there is social integration? . . . Unless there is integration of hearts and minds you have only a physical presence . . . and the walls are as high as the mountain range. (Cited in Kirkness, 1992, p. 14)

The Aboriginal view of integration is the uniting of cultures while maintaining one's identity; in other words, it is not viewed as another form of assimilation. The hope was that Aboriginal children would socialize with non-Aboriginal students and learn the skills necessary to survive in the dominant society while maintaining their identity as Aboriginal people. However, for the European educators and government of the 1960s, integration meant the "melting pot."

The Hawthorn Report of 1967 listed forty-one recommendations for the schooling of contemporary Indians. As a result of this report and the White Paper of 1969, the 1960s and 1970s marked a stage of revitalization for Aboriginal peoples as leaders began to react to the government's treatment of their people. A Standing Committee on Indian Affairs report presented in the House of Commons in 1971 “unfolded before the Canadian public the educational problems facing Indian people.” The report's findings included the following:

- drop-out rate four times the national average (96% of Indian children never finished high school)
- a related unemployment rate averaging 50% for adult males, going as high as 90% in some communities
- “inaccuracies and omissions” relating to the Indian contribution to Canadian history in texts used in federal and provincial schools
- an age-grade retardation rooted in language conflict and early disadvantage, which accelerated as the child progressed through the primary and elementary grades
- less than 15% of the teachers had specialized training in cross-cultural education and less than 10% had any knowledge of an Indian language
- the majority of Indian parents were uninformed about the implication of decisions made to transfer children from reserve schools to provincial schools. (Cited in Kirkness, 1992, pp. 14–15)
This report sparked the Assembly of First Nations’ 1972 document, *Indian Control of Indian Education*. In that policy paper, “The need for an education relevant to the philosophy of Indian people was recognized as being essential: ‘We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity, with confidence in their personal worth and ability’” (Cited in Kirkness, 1992, pp. 15–16). As George Manuel stated,

> We want our children to learn science and technology so that they can promote the harmony of man with nature . . . not destroy it. We want our children to learn about other peoples in literature and social studies, and in the process to learn to respect the values and culture of others. Our philosophy of education looks at learning and teaching as an integral part of living, both for the teacher and the child. It is not a five-hour, five-day-a-week exercise for a dozen or so years. It is a life-long commitment. (*The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, cited in Kirkness, 1992, p. 16)

Almost twenty-five years after the *Indian Control of Indian Education* document was released, the final report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) represented a specific historical moment in the ongoing policy struggle that began in 1972. The Royal Commission’s report identified the shortcomings in and barriers to Aboriginal education and listed forty-four recommendations for improvements. And because the RCAP process addressed all areas of Aboriginal relations with Euro-Canadian society, the report was able to link education to such areas such as self-government and language. Therefore, education could be addressed holistically.

The underlying theme throughout the history of educational relations between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian people has been the ethnocentric view that Aboriginal traditional life is inferior, thus categorizing Aboriginal people as inferior. Given this assumption, the Western Europeans felt it necessary to take a paternalistic role in assimilating the Aboriginal people into European culture, which, they believed, would serve them better. This paternal attitude remains, in that the Canadian government refuses to relinquish complete responsibility of Aboriginal education to the Aboriginal community. With respect to Aboriginal children in public schools, we need to question whether assimilationist practices still exist, even if less blatantly.

The report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples clearly identified the shortcomings of the current education of Aboriginal children. Yet, while the picture painted here may be a bleak one, recent band control of Aboriginal students living in First Nation communities has resulted in more students not just graduating, but graduating with a cultural knowledge of who they are as Aboriginal people (Chiefs of Ontario, 2012). It is this pressing need to develop students’ sense of Aboriginal identity that we turn to next.

**RATIONALE FOR ADDRESSING ABORIGINAL EDUCATION NEEDS**

Aboriginal people of Canada have experienced cultural loss, and this void has been filled with shame, isolation, and repression. These unhealthy ways of being have been transferred to many Aboriginal children, who, through the workings of oppressive colonial institutions, have been denied their culture. Aboriginal students report that formal education has not recognized their cultural needs and has therefore impacted negatively on their cultural identity.

These students lack a culturally relevant curriculum (Battise, 2000), including historically accurate information and traditional activities. They also lack Aboriginal teachers and Elders (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Moreover, Aboriginal students report that acts of racism, prejudice, and discrimination against them as individuals, and collectively as a people, have had extremely negative effects on their sense of cultural identity (Bell, D.,...
2004; Bell, N., 2005; Berry, 1999; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Haig-Brown et al., 1997). Students have told of their extreme stress in having to face racism on a daily basis—which has resulted in a lack of desire to attend school and has led many to leave school altogether (Bell, N., 2005; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

The public school system must therefore assist Aboriginal communities in striving for the reversal of shame, isolation, and repression by helping children search to the core of their “self” in order to positively identify themselves as Aboriginal.

THE NEED FOR DEVELOPING A CULTURAL IDENTITY

As we have seen, it is a foundational teaching of Aboriginal people that in order for a person to know who they are, they must know where they come from. This knowledge will enable them to develop a strong cultural identity that will in turn enable them to create a positive future for themselves and their community. So the “Who am I?” question is an imperative one for Aboriginal children (Anderson, 2002)—and one that publicly funded educational systems must assist these students in answering (Battiste, 2000; Ministry of Education, 2007).

A positive Aboriginal cultural identity comprises a number of interrelated components:

- the perception of oneself as Aboriginal
- considering identification as an Aboriginal person important
- having positive feelings about being Aboriginal
- wanting to remain an Aboriginal person
- expressing these aspects in one’s daily behaviour (Berry, 1999)

When there is consistency among these components, a person is considered to have a consolidated cultural identity (Berry, 1999).

Yet it’s important to note that some Aboriginal people, including children, don’t wish to identify themselves as Aboriginal. There are many reasons for this, since of course identity is a complex concept. Nonetheless, many Aboriginal children yearn, either consciously or unconsciously, for an understanding of what it means to be Aboriginal. Indeed, healing research (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2004) has found that the most effective mode of healing for Aboriginal people is learning about their culture—knowledge of which addresses the yearning for a cultural self-identity by filling that void with pride and understanding.

Today, Aboriginal people around the world are engaging in a process of identity development, struggling to combat the acculturation of all Aboriginal peoples and creating a collective voice. The public education system has an important role in helping Aboriginal children learn about their culture so that they may identify positively with themselves and envision a future free from the hegemony that has been so prevalent in our history.

Providing an educational space whereby Aboriginal students have an “identity firmly anchored in the cultural world of their people while at the same time possessing the skills and knowledge required to succeed in the larger society” (Kulchyński et al., 1999, p. xxiv) will enable these students to pursue any goal they choose. Every Aboriginal child may thus be rooted in a cultural sense of self, and able to culturally respond to the age-old essential question, “Who am I?”

*The choice of cultural identity as the appropriate concept here signals the view that although there are many specific Aboriginal cultures in the strict sense of the term, Aboriginal peoples in Canada share many cultural attributes, and frequently a common history in relation to the larger society (Berry, 1999).