

Elder Betty McKenna and Ed Doolittle- Transcripts

Aboriginal Education for all Students

>> Now, in regarding creation, so you asked me to say a few words about mathematics and creation and our mathematics, our early mathematics, our counting numbers and our rules for games and so on, those are encoded or contained within a creation story and that's a vehicle for our teaching things about numbers. Though our creation story's a vehicle for teaching about numbers and teaching about all the other basic things in creation, about the names of the plants and the animals, about the rules for the games to be played, about our clan system, which tells us who we can marry and how our interpersonal relations should work and so on; so all these things are contained within our creation story. Now to tie this in with your earlier question about bias, I've been in situations where I presented some of this material to indigenous students and was told that I was not to do that, that it was not the true creation story that I was presenting so that people don't have the openness that they used to of being able to accept all of our various truths and our various ways of being and our various stories. But nowadays, some people say that they have the true story and I think that that's a bias that even our own people have in we've got to work against that. There's one thing I'd like to say about being in the Saskatchewan, well I was born in Ontario and I moved to Saskatchewan to work for First Nations University and I've come to know the education system there. There's one thing that they do very well and I would like to see emulated across the country and that's including outcomes that are connected to indigenous knowledge within the curriculum, within the official government approved curriculum that is done nowhere else and I think it should be done everywhere.

>> As an elder in the Regina School System, we help the teachers do that adaptive dimension that helps them be able to bring the learnings and the teachings through elders and knowledge keepers into the school system and they actually have measurable outcomes for the lesson plans that the teacher does for the children. So I feel it's a -- it's been a huge move forward from where we were maybe -- I've been with the school board as an elder -- on the elder's advisory for 10 years now -- or over 10 years and working in the school -- in the school that long in Regina and I've seen such a difference in the teachers having that confidence now that we have the outcomes there to be able to teach in those classrooms to those children that they didn't have before.

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Community Involvement

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>> When we come into this world and both 7 stones are waiting for us, everyone in the community provides us with one of those stones and those stones are to be given to us before we hit the age of 13 because that's a sacred age; between 13 and 19 there's 7 years. Those 7 sacred years are the 7 years that will make it or break us as human beings as we go through life for the rest of our life as everybody can remember those 7 sacred years. They treasure them as they grow older.

So we go into the rapids. They put us in ceremony into the rapids at the age of 13 and the rapids are like, if you've ever seen rapids, they just come at you like gangbusters. So you have to be able to make decisions very quick and the 7 stones are growth, order, adequacy, love, security, social approval and self-value. Those stones are given to us by the time we're 13 so that we go through those rapids of life and we can manoeuvre those waters without being sucked under or hang on to a rock of false belief.

For instance, the rock of social approval if it's at home, we're not going to go out there looking for it if we have it in our community and someone has taken a child and taken interest and they help them and they mentor them and they guide them that child feels valued, there's a value there and value is what you build yourself, your self-value is what you think of yourself not what somebody else thinks of you. You will not go looking for social approval somewhere else and when our children don't have that sense of self-value, they go looking for social approval. They'll join gangs, they'll smoke, they'll be promiscuous. It doesn't matter what it looks like they're getting approval, they're getting that sense of I belong, I have a feeling of goodness about myself even if it's the most terrible thing in their life and that's what happens to our people.

So those 7 stones are so important to a child's life so that when they get to the age of 20 we take them out for ceremony and they're on their way then to be able to live a good life, but the 4 stones set on, those 4 major stones sitting on the medicine wheel that circle the medicine wheel we have growth, we have order, we have love and we have adequacy and those 4 stones sit in the 4 directions.

So it's growth in the north, it's order in the east, love in the south and adequacy in the west and adequacy is what a person, each individual will have their own sense of adequacy. If you give someone an excess of something, it doesn't make life easier for them. You can't find yourself.

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Deficit Model

>> One bias that we have to overcome is I think this deficit model, and we hear about this a lot, but it's very hard to overcome it. We talk about indigenous children not performing as well as non-indigenous children in standardized tests, for example. So we automatically say that there's a level, and the indigenous students are not rising to this level, but they're at a lower level. I think that we need to value indigenous education system in general and understand that we are here, as [inaudible] has said. We're here because we have an education system that has functioned since time immemorial very effectively, and we have been able to survive in this extremely harsh environment because of the teaching and learning that has occurred over that immense period of time. So we have enormous skills in education, and that actually we can turn it around and say what can non-indigenous people learn about education from us.

Relationships

>> Hire some of our. And when they see their own people as teachers and as administrators, that's going to make a difference. Then they know that they belong there. The parents will feel accepted there when they see someone of ours there. I go into a lot of schools where there isn't any of our school.

>> I would say an important feature of community engagements and engagement to parents is to show proper respect and basic manners. And this is something that maybe we're a culture of misunderstandings can cause very--very severe problems. That people in the school, teachers, administrators who were not raised in an aboriginal context or have not lived on a reserve or--so people who have not lived in an aboriginal community don't know the culture and may not know the way to show respect and to greet people properly and to engage with them in a way that fosters further engagement. And I think many times I've heard of aboriginal people feeling that that have been treated badly and experience rudeness within the school system. That's immediate deal breaker. That will shut everything down. So that's something very basic that people have to learn. Now there is an etiquette for aboriginal relations just like there is an etiquette in European drive societies. There are rules of etiquette. So we encourage everybody to learn what aboriginal etiquette is about.

>> I look at it this way. What they know when they come into that classroom is what they learnt in school. And even there are administrators, and school board people. And what they learn in school is not our history. Our people didn't put it in those books. So what they have to do is they have to do like everyone have to do when we let go of the imperial system and adapted the system that we have now when you looked at measurement. And when you look at the imperial system as opposed to metric, we have all the people who only knew the imperial system. They try to compare it to metric. They tried to convert the two and it didn't work. What a person had to do is completely forget the metric and--or the imperial and learn the metric. And that's what people have to do now. They have to totally forget that history that they learnt in school and they have to learn the history of our people. And because our people are so varied, you can't just lump all Cree people together. So they need to know the history of the people that they're working with, the history of those children, the history of their community and they're all going to be different. So it's being aware that you need to go to the source. And going to the source is go to the people. Find out the history.

>> Everyone makes mistakes, even Indian people makes mistakes. So we have stories that teaches about how to deal with that. So there's story about Wisakedjak and he-- someone, an English speaking person will get three tries while Wisakedjak gets four. So, you know, we have ways of dealing with that and I was talking today about--earlier about the thanksgiving address and a stipend and that is--

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[Foreign Language]

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--which means, "And that was the best that I could do." So we acknowledge that we do our best and that isn't to stop us from trying if the best isn't perfect. And there is no perfect. There is just growth. So, within our context, we have ways of dealing with

growth and with learning and with mistakes and so on. So, people who want to work with aboriginal people ought to learn about the protocols of dealing with mistakes. About humility which is something else that we spoke of which is an approach to mistakes. And so, they should learn about things like humility and the cultural way of dealing with mistakes and the lack in abilities. And another thing that I think many, non-aboriginal people find is that they laughed at. Well that is not necessary negative within the context of aboriginal culture. That is actually an engagement that is a bringing of a person in rather than a rejection of someone, to laugh at them and to have fun and make fun of things that they've done. And so, the key I think is to move out of one's existing cultural context into the aboriginal context and everything will flow from there.

Seven Stones

>> When we come into this world and those seven stones are waiting for us, everyone in the community provides us with one of those stones. And those stones are to be given to us before we hit the age of 13 because that's a sacred age between 13 and 19. There's seven years. Those seven sacred years are the seven years that will make it or break us as human beings as we go through life for the rest of our life. As everybody can remember those seven sacred years, they treasure them as they grow older. So, we go into the rapids, they say. And so they put us in ceremony into the rapids at the age of 13. And the rapids are like, if you've ever seen rapids they just come at you like gang busters. So, you have to be able to make decisions very quick. And the seven stones are growth, order, adequacy, love, security, social approval and self-value. And those stones are given to us by the time we're 13 so that we go through those rapids of life and we can manoeuvre those waters without being sucked under or hang on to a rock of false belief. For instance, the rock of social approval, if it's at home, we're not going to go out there looking for it if we have it in our community and someone has taken a child and taken interest and they help them and they mentor them and they guide them, that child feels valued. There's a value there and value is what you build yourself. Your self-value is what you think of yourselves not what somebody else thinks of you. And you will not go looking for social approval somewhere else. And when our children don't have that sense of self-value, they go looking for social approval. They'll join gangs, they'll smoke, they'll be promiscuous. It doesn't matter what it looks like, they're getting approval. They're getting that sense of I belong. I have a feeling of goodness about myself even if it's the most terrible thing in their life and that's what happens to our people. And so those seven stones are so important to a child's life. So that when they get to the age of 20, we take them out to ceremony and they're on their way and be able to live a good life. But the four stone sitting on the--those four major stones sitting on the medicine wheel, that circle of medicine wheel, we have growth, we have order, we have love and we have adequacy. And those four stones sit in the four directions. We got one in the north which is growth. We have order in the east. OK. So it's growth in the north, its order in the east, love in the south, and adequacy in the west. And adequacy is what a person--each individual will have their own sense of adequacy. If you give someone an excess of something, it doesn't make life easier for them. You can not find yourself.

Silence

>> Our silence is so important. I have a brother that visits me every year. We don't say anything to one another. We sit and have tea and then he goes home. And it's the best visit we've ever had. We don't need to talk. We don't need to break that silence. That's our shared time. And it's an important place where spiritual connections begin for our people is in those silences.

>> Listening is a skill, as opposed to speaking. Speaking is emphasized as a skill in Western culture. But listening is not taught. Learning to listen effectively is very important. And to pay attention and to engage with the speaker and to be able to absorb. And listening also ties in this message about humility that I mentioned earlier. That when we come in with the intent to listen we are coming in a humble way. But coming in with the intent to speak is the opposite of that. It's arrogance. It's we do not need to listen, but we're just going to speak and everyone has to listen to us. But part of this comes from our engagement with Mother Earth, as many of our things do. I remember canoeing with an indigenous teacher and being criticized for the amount of noise that I made. And I never thought of that. You know, when you're learning to canoe you're just like, OK, here you go. Crank it out. Stick that paddle in the water and give it all you got. Well that's not really a good way to do it because you want to move through the landscape. And you might see things that are very important to see and to learn. And you might actually find some dinner that way. So you have to be very quiet and I could never actually-as hard as I tried-reach that level of silence that was most valued.