

Adapted from: Best Practices in Teaching Aboriginal Children: From an Aboriginal and Non- Aboriginal Perspective. By Theresa Wilson, (Master's Thesis: Conversations with First Nations Educators) 2001 UVic

## **Best Practices for Teaching Aboriginal Students**

### **Identity: Knowing who you are and where you come from**

- The importance of relationships in forming connections with Aboriginal students is foundational for Aboriginal educators.
- Understanding the relationships with human beings and with all living and non-living things.
- Knowing who you are in the Aboriginal culture means knowing your community, and knowing where you come from is based on your connection with the earth.
- Best practices with Aboriginal learners are grounded first in relationships.
- Important for Aboriginal learners to find a sense of place and belonging within schools.
- Space can also be created in the ways that a teacher approaches subject matter in the class.
- Re-naming can create spaces of belonging within the curriculum: sharing conversations, versus public speaking, leadership versus at-risk student program.
- Values central to Aboriginal Education: trust, autonomy, confidence, encouragement and acceptance.

### **Political Consciousness:**

- Aboriginal Education should not be seen as a single activity, or a token preservation of folkways.
- Aboriginal Education is more than Beads to Bannock, Aboriginal education must be woven throughout the curriculum.
- Teachers must be sensitive and aware to the loss and grieving that is historically and politically a significant part of the Aboriginal student's lives.
- Teaching resides in the distance travelled between the head and the heart.
- Develop political consciousness in the very young students.
- Combine critical challenge with issue of importance to Aboriginal students and their communities.
- A critical investigative attitude deploys skills such as inference, direct observation, or identifying bias and angles of vision.
- Critical challenges help non-Aboriginal learners develop a new appreciation for indigenous sources of knowledge and to discern how the truth is portrayed to the media.
- The ability to relocate: this involves being able to question one's own cultural background.
- Seeing the act of teaching as a journey toward learning in itself.
- Becoming aware of the privilege that participation in a dominant literacy confers.
- The journey involves creating a new home for the self to dwell in.

### **Teacher-Student Interactions:**

- Acknowledging the existence of a community beyond the classroom to which the teacher is responsible.
- Participate and initiate activities outside the classroom, many involving the local Aboriginal community.
- Rely on high, yet attainable expectations.
- Effective teachers demonstrate an openness to other ways of knowing and other ways of valuing how they teach and handle the materials they use in the classroom.

- Broaden teacher-student relations outside the classroom to embrace the community.
- Effective teachers were involved in student's lives.
- Emphasized the importance of forming relationships, making connections and generally being there.
- Involved students in thinking and valuing what they learned.

#### **Observing the Importance of Relationships:**

- Acknowledging the relationships that exist in young people's lives (family, friends and community).
- Acknowledge the need of students to find a place of belonging within school and community.
- Recognizing the student's desires to connect with the curriculum, or how it is being taught.
- Providing students with opportunities to participate in culture.
- Honoring the many Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning.
- Being there for students: acknowledge them as individuals.
- Having faith and confidence in them as learners.
- Building on their strengths.
- Participating in extracurricular activities.
- Being a teacher who is easy to get along with.
- Creating a relationship with the local Aboriginal communities.



#### **Best Practises of Non-Aboriginal Teachers**

- Develop relationships with students but do not try to co-opt or represent their perspectives.
- Challenge students to think critically, model this kind of thinking in lectures and class discussions.

#### **Attributes of Successful Instruction:**

- Setting high expectations: Kleinfield states that high expectations means a teacher's genuine presumption of acting as if students are fully capable of being autonomous learners.
- Showing students how to learn.
- Maintaining self awareness: The instructor does not represent himself as seeing through Aboriginal eyes. Instead, identifies and critiques his position within a dominant culture. The teacher makes a distinction between the critical tools to be acquired and the perspective or purpose through which these tools can be filtered.
- Encouraging students: when evaluating assignments, the teacher provides concrete, positive and immediate feedback.
- Supporting autonomy: the teacher's purpose was focused on the independence of the learners. The student's develop pride and confidence in themselves.
- Develop a warm supportive environment where learning can take place.
- Willing to negotiate.
- Cultivate supportive relationships with students by attempting to see reality from an Aboriginal perspective.

### **Personal Characteristics:**

- No recipe for success in teaching.
- Taking the time to get to know the Aboriginal community.
- Recognizing students for who they are and where they come from.
- Acknowledging students as individuals.
- Knowing when and how to let go.
- Communicating confidence in a student's ability to learn.
- Faith in the student's inherent worth as an individual and as a learner.
- Demonstrate an attitude of respect.
- Enjoy being there.
- Personal attributes: kindness, honest, flexibility and persistence.

### **Understanding Teaching as Living:**

- For Aboriginal educators, teaching is often a political act.
- Teaching models a consciousness and awareness of educators as Aboriginal persons.
- Living the values, belief in forming relationships and modeling the belief in the classroom.
- Non-Aboriginal educators speak about being genuine.
- How we teach will communicate how we choose to live and reflect on our lives.
- David Rattray: Abandon the assumption that living and teaching, private and public are separate.

### **Showing Respect:**

- Value respect in relationships.
- Establish a classroom of respect, instances of disrespect are directly addressed.
- Model respectful behaviour and interaction.
- Be sensitive to who your students are and where they are coming from.
- Respecting the complexities of Aboriginal identity.
- Accepting where the students are at in relationship to their identity.
- Respect extends to daily interactions, knowing when to let go and when to show concern.

### **Knowledge:**

- Educators accept as a given that teachers should try to connect curriculum to Aboriginal learners.
- Teachers in this research project stated that teaching critical thinking to Aboriginal students was essential.
- Teachers need to model a questioning stance toward the subject matter by demonstrating their own self knowledge (cultural identity) and an open spirit of inquiry.
- Understand the political nature of knowledge and the political nature of curriculum.
- General or tribal knowledge comes from a particular perspective.
- Knowledge comes from many sources, which includes emotional and spiritual ones.

### Dealing with Conflict:

- Be aware that sometimes outside teachers often bring rules and protocols that don't allow for backing down.
- Conflict can be inflamed by an inflexible model, and appeased through understanding and openness.
- Operate on a presumption of trust.
- Be aware of local protocols and processes for resolving conflict.

### Evaluating as Part of Instruction:

- Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers practiced similar approaches to evaluation that included evaluation as an extension of classroom practices.
- Collaboration and student involvement were the guiding principles of most classroom activities.
- Students who devised their own project so perspectives on projects through active engagement provided evidence of their own learning. This is sound practice.
- Evaluation wasn't treated as a separate practice but as an ongoing feature of classroom life.
- Communication with parents is also critical.
- Feedback needs to be positive and consistent rather than negative and intermittent.
- Provide students with meaningful choices.

### Summary:

Seeking out ways to turn classrooms into spaces of belonging: those ways may include paying close attention to:

- Instructional approach
- Subject matter
- Critical questioning
- Collaborative evaluative practices
- Modeling respect

Combining high expectations, particularly of critical awareness and research skills, with a belief in the importance of relationships in establishing trust and respect.

Acknowledging that teachers are also learners...

