

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL  
*Foundation*  
FOR  
RESEARCH INTO TEACHING



# TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH EXCHANGE

## Reflections on Implementing Traditional Dene Teaching Methods, Skills and Values: Success Redefined

By Ann Alphonse, Sheena Koops  
and Joyce Mercredi

Project #48  
October 2002

This research was partially funded through a grant from the McDowell Foundation. However, the points of view and opinions expressed in project documents are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

The purpose of the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching is to fund research, inquiry and dissemination of information focusing on instruction (both teaching and learning) in the context of the public elementary and secondary education system. Specifically, it will:

- 1) contribute to knowledge about teaching and learning;
- 2) encourage educational inquiry through a wide range of methodologies;
- 3) support the involvement of practising teachers in active research projects;
- 4) encourage organizations as well as individuals to determine and act in areas of research and inquiry; and
- 5) encourage experimentation with innovative ideas and methodologies related to teaching and learning.

The Foundation is an independent charitable organization formed by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation in 1991. It is governed by a Board of Directors with the assistance of an Advisory Committee of representatives from the educational and business communities. The selection and evaluation of projects funded by the Foundation is carried out by a teacher-led Project Review Committee. Inquiries concerning research supported by the McDowell Foundation may be directed to the following address:

Research Coordinator  
Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation  
2317 Arlington Avenue  
Saskatoon SK S7J 2H8  
Telephone: 1-800-667-7762 or (306) 373-1660

# Acknowledgements

---

First, we are indebted to the Black Lake First Nation Chief, Councillors, Education Committee, and Elders and the community of Black Lake, as well as the Education Co-ordinator, Principal, staff and students of Father Porte Memorial Dene School for the continued support of this research in its many stages. It is our hope that our efforts will bring you honour and encouragement.

Second, thank you to the McDowell Foundation team. Your kindness, enthusiasm, and professionalism has buoyed us over and over and over.... We especially thank Verna Gallén who has been with us from the beginning. Verna, your gracious willingness to help us redefine success has meant everything.

Third, we are grateful to the late Dr. McDowell, who looked North into the future and saw three teachers who one day would experience the transforming power of action research.



# Table of Contents

---

Introduction .....	1
Logistical Problems and Stalled Initiatives .....	3
The Community and the School Program .....	4
Reflection on Factors Affecting the Study .....	5
On Language and Culture .....	5
On Teacher-Community Relationships .....	7
On Bridging Two Worlds .....	8
Reflections on the Process .....	10
Reflections from Black Lake .....	12
Conclusions .....	14
Final Thoughts after Presenting at the 2002 Learning from Practice Conference .....	16
References .....	17
Appendices	
A. Recommendations for Improved Teaching .....	18
B. Recommendations Implementation Questionnaire .....	20

*All of the material in this report has been discussed by and proofed by all the participants in the research group. However, authorship of individual sections of the report has been attributed to individual researchers because the material in each section involves personal reflection and is written in first person. By attaching names to the sections, we remain accountable for our statements personally as well as within the group.*

# Introduction

---

## - ANN ALPHONSE

In 1998-99, with financial assistance from the McDowell Foundation, we carried out a research project that involved administering a questionnaire to four different age cohorts (16-29 years, 30-49 years, 50-59 years and 60 years and over) in the northern Dene community of Black Lake, Saskatchewan. The questionnaire was carefully designed and administered in both oral and written forms to ensure that all players in the Black Lake educational process were given a chance to voice their dreams and become involved in improving the current educational process. We wanted to learn:

1. What are the traditional teaching methods, content for curriculum (knowledge and skills) and educational values of the Dene in Black Lake?
2. How can these methods, curriculum and values be acknowledged and incorporated into the classroom and school system?

By asking questions about traditional Dene knowledge, skills, values and teaching methods, we were trying to find ways of developing a more relevant and equal educational system for Dene students. The responses to our questionnaire revealed educational strengths, weaknesses, and areas to be explored in bridging the worlds of the Dene and the non-Dene. It became clear that in education, we must be sensitive to many voices, different kinds of experiences, and a wide range of knowledge.

On the basis of the responses to the questionnaire, 49 recommendations for improving the teaching of Dene students were developed. These are listed in Appendix A and grouped under the following headings: Teaching Methods, Teaching of Traditional Skills, Teaching of Traditional Values, and School Administration. A full account of the survey findings and a full discussion of the recommendations may be found in the final report on the research submitted to the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching. The report is entitled *Dreams and Involvement: A Black Lake Quest for 2000 – Interpretations and Recommendations for Improved Teaching* (Project #42, November, 1999) by Ann Alphonse, Sheena Koops and Joyce Mercredi.

Following the submission of our final report, we decided to add another phase to our research focusing on the implementation of our recommendations. We framed two new research questions:

1. How can Dene and non-Dene educators use their unique expertise to implement the recommendations?
2. What impact will our previous research and recommendations have on the integration of a Dene perspective, including the use of Dene skills and knowledge, into education at Father Porte Memorial Dene School in Black Lake?

This report documents the ups and downs of attempting to move our research into an implementation phase. We found ourselves trying to implement the recommendations for improved teaching in a fluctuating school and community milieu. As a result, the report on the second phase of our research focuses on the dynamics that stalled the implementation process, as well as the dynamics that may have framed a more natural and perhaps lengthy implementation of improvements in the education of Dene students.

# Logistical Problems and Stalled Initiatives

---

## - SHEENA KOOPS

In the school year 1999-2000, the research team planned a follow-up to its initial research with a new project entitled *Implementing Traditional Dene Teaching Methods, Skills, and Values*. Two members of the team, Joyce Mercredi and Sheena Koops, remained employed at Father Porte Memorial Dene School in Black Lake. Ann Alphonse had relocated to Saskatoon and then Christopher Lake, Saskatchewan. Of the six people who had been involved in some part of the research (Penny Micklewright, 1996-1997; Jeremy Schubert, 1996-1998; Vicki Alphonse, 1997-1998; Ann Alphonse, 1997-2002; Sheena Koops, 1996-2002; and Joyce Mercredi, 1998-2002), only two remained in the community.

In August 1999, the team attempted to begin the implementation of its recently completed research at the orientation for school staff. However, the time scheduled for the staff to deal with the recommendations and research was cancelled by the administration. During that first week of orientation and preparation, the school was having trouble with its water supply and a couple of work days had to be cancelled. Since the research team was also involved in revising the final report on its earlier research and compiling statistics for inclusion in the report, it was decided to concentrate for a while on the work needed to bring the initial research to publication.

Implementation of the second phase of our research was rescheduled to begin in January 2000, in the form of a workshop for school staff. Unfortunately, the time allotted for this workshop was cut back by the school administration from a full-day session to a one-hour presentation. Although the presentation went ahead, both the participants and the facilitators were frustrated because there was too much information from the research to go through in the time available. After the presentation, a follow-up questionnaire was distributed to the staff to gain feedback on the forms that implementation of the research might take (see Appendix B). The questionnaires were not returned.

Sheena and Joyce tossed around options for continuing the project. Should they plan another implementation workshop for the spring, or should they just concentrate on a new questionnaire? However, they were not able to get anything off the ground in the busyness of the school year. The drive that Ann had brought to the team was certainly missed.

In the 2000-2001 school year, only Joyce remained in Black Lake. From her new location in southern Saskatchewan, Sheena made up workshop binders, complete with work sheets, and sent them on the plane to Black Lake for use in a full-day orientation to the research for the staff of Father Porte Memorial Dene School. Again, due to a number of circumstances, the workshop was never held.

# The Community and the School Program

---

**- ANN ALPHONSE**

Black Lake is a small community of approximately 1500 people, 100 kilometers south of the North West Territories border. It used to be an exclusively fly-in community, but a gravel road now joins it to the South via Brabant, La Ronge, and finally, Prince Albert. It takes around 12 hours to travel one-way to Black Lake by road.

Father Porte Memorial Dene School is a K-12 school with an enrolment of approximately 440 students. Approximately 95% of the children in Black Lake enter school with Dene as their first language. For the next four years of their lives, they will be in a Dene Immersion program, in which they will learn first their Dene alphabet and how then to read and write in Dene Roman orthography while taking English as a subject. The Dene Immersion program for students from Kindergarten through Grade Two has been running for the last eight years. It consists of seven classes, which include two nursery classes (for children four years old), two Kindergarten classes (for children aged five years), one Grade One class, one split 1/2 remedial class, and one Grade Two class.

At Grade Three the students enter into an English program, while still having access to Dene teacher assistants. This assistance is available to them in the classrooms up until Grade Six, and there are also Dene teacher assistants in the gym, the library, the office (the secretary), and the special education classrooms. In addition, one of the school's vice-principals is a Dene woman from the Black Lake band. It is hoped that these efforts to provide Dene programs and staff will consistently support the Dene language and make the transition to English less traumatic or overwhelming for the students. Unlike some other non-English communities where the non-English language is deteriorating at an alarming rate, especially among aboriginal peoples, parents do not need to speak English to their children to "prepare" them for school in Black Lake.

# Reflection on Factors Affecting the Study

---

– ANN ALPHONSE

## ON LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Dr. Joshua Fishman is a socio-linguist, researcher and professor from New York who has produced over 380 books and articles. Fishman “defends the need to recognize cultural democracy as a part of general democracy and to see efforts to preserve and restore minority languages as societal reform efforts that can lead to the appreciation of the beauty and distinctiveness of other cultures as well.” (Reyhner, 1999, p. xi). Although his focus is on the United States, which is less multicultural in nature than Canada, Fishman points out how modern western democracy can sometimes detract from the rights of minority groups. He says:

The denial of cultural rights to minorities is as disruptive of the moral fabric of mainstream society as is the denial of civil rights. Civil rights, however, are focused on the individual, while cultural rights must focus on ethnocultural groups. Such groups have no recognized legal standing in many Western democracies where both establishment capitalist thought and anti-establishment Marxist thought prophesies the eclipse of culturally distinct formations and the arrival of a uniformized, all-inclusive “modern proletarian” culture. (1991, p.70)

Relating Dr. Fishman’s ideas to Black Lake, our research team concluded that because the Black Lake community is unique culturally and linguistically, it must be treated as such. In the initial phase of our McDowell study, Dreams and Involvement, we focused on exploring the level of traditional knowledge and skills among the Dene people served by the school. When interviewed about their culture, 75-80% of those aged 30 or more saw themselves as highly competent in traditional skills and knowledge, which comprised 80% of the skills explored in the survey. It should be acknowledged that what the respondents thought was proficient may be very different from what the Elders in the community, who were trained from birth in a traditional setting, might think of as mastery. Nevertheless, most older adults in the community still saw themselves as a strong link with Dene culture and felt they should be used as such in the education of Dene children.

Many Black Lake children have parents who cannot do traditional tasks because they were never taught, they have little bush experience, they were in school from an early age, or they have drug, alcohol or social problems. In this situation, it would be unfair to leave all education in traditional knowledge and skills to the community, since some children would be left out. It would not be accurate to assume that since the knowledge and skills are intact within the community, they will be transmitted incidentally through community life even if the school is not involved. As mass-media are infiltrating more homes for more hours every day, domains that normally were Dene, authentic in the language as well as cultural

experience, are being replaced by a different culture dominated by English and mainstream thought. Most of the Dene who were interviewed in our study supported the incorporation of traditional Dene teaching methods, skills and values into the school program.

Although many Black Lake Dene consider their language and culture an important part of education, there must be a critical mass of support to get and keep things moving towards this goal. With the strong turnover in the professional staff of Father Porte Memorial Dene School, the onus for implementing change again fell onto the Dene-speaking Teaching Associates on staff. The school had at least three Teaching Associates at the time of our study, each with more than 20 years of experience in the classroom. These on-going members of the school staff provided the continuity in the school as it moved from one group of teachers to the next.

Although a basic Dene culture program existed within the school, it was skeletal in nature and needed more development with both the professional staff and the Teaching Associates so that professional knowledge of one group could be complemented with the traditional knowledge of the other group. Both groups needed to participate in this development in order to see each other's strengths and reorganize appropriately the allocation of power within the school. All the Teaching Associates were very quiet. If they were not asked, they did not volunteer information. The exercise of using mixed groups really brought out the strengths of all members of the teaching team in the school.

Andre Giroux has encouraged teachers (I would say 'educators') to:

[O]rganise classroom relationships so that students can draw on and confirm those dimensions of their histories and experiences that are deeply rooted in the surrounding community,...assume pedagogical responsibility for attempting to understand the relationships and forces that influence students outside the immediate context of the classroom,...develop curricula and pedagogical practices around those community traditions, histories, and forms of knowledge that are often ignored within the dominant school culture,...create the conditions where students come together to speak, to engage in dialogue, to share their stories, and to struggle together within social relations that strengthen rather than weaken possibilities for active citizenship. (Giroux, quoted by Darder in Sleeter and McLaren, 1995, p. 199-201)

In discussing Giroux's ideas, Darder defines culture and points out a few studies that show how students' motivation and performance peak and a positive self-concept is developed when they are "given a student's opportunity to learn and develop academically within a school setting that respects, reinforces, and enacts their cultural worldview" (Sleeter and McLaren, 1995, p. 327). Interestingly enough, according to Darder, the teacher's perspective can have just as much an impact on student learning (or not learning) as the child's cultural frame of reference.

In completing a questionnaire on the success of the Dene Immersion program, one professional teacher who is Dene commented on the program's strengths as consisting of "Students speaking their language in school and learning how to read and write in their language." When asked what she considered to be her own personal strengths within her classroom, she responded, "My Language! And also my ability to read and write in Dene and English!" Most of those interviewed

commented on the following program strengths: relevant classroom materials, using the Dene language and culture as a take-off point for teaching, the ability to discipline students in their first language, supportive staff members, and ongoing development of materials for the school that were specific to the Dene Immersion program. These strengths reflect the recommendations from our research but they are not being utilized because we recommended them. They can appear naturally in some situations.

## ON TEACHER-COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

A great deal of community politics surrounds many schools, e.g., in the double standards and with regard to paraprofessionals and professionals in the school. As frustrating as these are to many teachers, it should be remembered that every community has family and political dimensions that may seem aberrant to those looking at the community from the outside. Nevertheless, it also needs to be remembered that when cultural, linguistic and social dimensions are added to the picture of the community, the magnitude of the differences in the local way of life can overwhelm outsiders who come to teach in the school. When these differences are combined with isolation and separation from family, the result is frequent teacher turnover.

One basic observations may be offered about school systems in general and the school in Black Lake in particular. Regardless of what program the school is delivering, the effectiveness of the program is limited or enhanced by the school staff. If the program is good and the teacher is poor, the students' learning will be limited. On the other hand, even if the program is poor, if the teacher is strong the students will excel. However, in order to optimize educational success, it is best to strive for both a strong staff and a strong program. That is why, for example, I wanted the teachers in the Dene Immersion program to have some input into the assessment of how well the program was running, but I also encouraged them to personally examine their teaching strategies and their pedagogical craft within their own classrooms.

High teacher turnover alone can affect the students greatly since it takes time to build rapport, strong emotional ties and trust. The relationship between teacher and students is sometimes just blossoming when the teacher decides, for many reasons, that it is time to move on. Year after year, this turnover in teachers affects the students. They do not respond to the discipline administered by a first or second year teacher as well as they respond to someone they know has been in the community for several years. Once again, it is important for the school to have T.A.'s from the community who can speak in the children's first language, who know the students' parents, and who can reason with the students about where their actions may be leading them.

Some teachers are very involved in the community. Nearly all teachers are very enthusiastic initially, spending many extra-curricular hours with the children. For example, in my time at Black Lake, I contributed around 100 extracurricular hours

every year. Since most of the entertainment that is available in an isolated community consists of what you create for yourself, club activities, skiing, movie nights, bingo's, dances, and sports for the students fill the days. In addition to the regular school hours that school employees put in, their weeks are crammed full with meetings, classroom preparation and assessment, home life, and extra events (e.g., marriages, deaths and wakes, carnivals, fishing derbies, camping, hunting, ski-dooing, skiing, dog-sledding, intramural sports and dances with the children, pilgrimages, A.A. round-ups, bingo's, socials) in both their own and other Dene communities. Again, this level of involvement shows how many of the recommendations derived from our study are sometimes applied naturally by many of the teachers.

Some teachers felt that the community did not back them 100% in what they were trying to accomplish with students and the community. However, in talking to parents in meetings and at home, I found the responses of community members very encouraging. This support was also expressed very strongly in the *Dreams and Involvement* study by all the age groups interviewed.

Another weakness that teachers perceived in support for the school was limited funding. As teachers, we compared ourselves to the teachers in Inuvik, where there are four official languages – French, English, Inuit, and Dene. It was thought that the funding provided by the government should be distributed more evenly to address the instructional needs of different linguistic groups. However, the budget for curriculum development at our school, depending on whether one or two people were working in this area, came out of the pot for funding the whole educational term. So money for curriculum development actually was provided at the expense of other educational possibilities or even an increase in pupil-teacher ratios. Materials always had to be made by hand, and although attractive small reading books could be made for the children in their own dialect more easily with the assistance of technological advances, such as a colour photocopier, materials development was time-consuming and costly nonetheless.

## ON BRIDGING TWO WORLDS

The fact that the school now has print materials with native role models and cultural relevance is a large step in validating the Dene culture. This sort of validation was nearly non-existent for Dene children before the last ten years. The culture that children experience plays a role in their learning as they constantly make hypotheses about the world and watch to see if their interpretations are correct or need to be modified. Their understanding of the world comes from their interaction with it. A child who is pulled between two very different cultural worlds that have very little overlap begins to ask which world is accurate or appropriate. For example, in the past, much over-generalizing about financially restricted parents led to the connotation that such parents are also culturally deficient. LaRogue in her book, *Defeathering the Indian*, speaks at length of this process by which one world can begin to discredit the other:

The need is to prepare the students to function, and excel in both worlds. There is a need to be able to walk and talk in both worlds so that the Dene can remain distinct and independent, yet critical and

reflective about what is happening at their community level, as well as more globally. This will reflect in decisions to be made in different social, political and cultural arenas, for youth, adult and elder alike.

The ultimate strength of the Dene Immersion program lies in the fact that 95% of the students come to school speaking Dene fluently, with a minimal amount of code-switching around words like 'pop', 'juice', 'TV', 'computer', and 'video', which remain in English. The goal of the school program is to build on this fluency. Students are taught to read and write in their first language so that they can eventually flip into English and maintain both languages at a high proficiency rate. The students in the high school grades, for the most part, continue to talk to each other in Dene. The people in Black Lake, adults as well as children, strongly identify with the need or right to be a Dene person. The adults want the children to know the traditional Dene ways, knowledge, games, and spirituality. The children in Dene immersion enter into a world that is culturally and linguistically theirs.

The chart developed through the *Dreams and Involvement* study to show the levels of linguistic competence within the community and peoples' language of preference in different community locations was important research because it provides a base line for future reference. Most Aboriginal languages are encountering huge difficulties in maintaining their linguistic standards and frequent use of the mother tongue. With our initial research, we have a point against which any loss or gain in the use of Dene language may be gauged.

The importance of such monitoring is underlined in the numerous articles or books on Language Maintenance, Revival and Loss by Fishman, who has carried out numerous studies on this topic around the world (Fishman, 1991). Allsup, in his article on "Postmodernism, the Politically Correct and Liberatory Pedagogy" (Sleeter and McLaren, 1995), speaks of the need for liberatory pedagogy, which includes both feminist theory and multicultural theory. Another article by Pease-Windy Boy in the same book speaks of the alternatives taken at one Aboriginal higher learning educational institution in pursuit of a liberatory pedagogy. The new paradigm must be extended into all realms. It must be pro-active in defending the rights of the various people. As Darder says, "We are in search of the true America – an America of multiple cultures, multiple histories, multiple regions, multiple realities, multiple identities, multiple ways of living, surviving, and being human" (Sleeter and McLaren, 1995, p. 320). Anything we can do as teachers and community members to aid successful self-motivated learning and reflection at the student level can provide students with a strong base for future encounters with decision-making. This self-directed learning should be the aim of all learning institutions – beginning and ending with the student. No one has all of the answers, and even if someone did at one time, nothing is static; there is a constant evolution of thought and matter with the passage of time. We must understand and enjoy the process, as well as the final product, as Cleary expresses in his translation, *The Essential Tao: An Initiation into the Heart of Taoism*:

If we are delighted even to be in a human form alone, insofar as the human form changes in myriad ways, without ever an end, the enjoyment therein must be incalculable. ...For them (sages), youth is good and so is old age: for them, the beginning is good and so is the end. (Cleary, 1992, p. 107)

# Reflections on the Process

---

## - SHEENA KOOPS

While taking an Action Research class at the University of Regina with Dr. David Friesen, I experienced a failure in my mini-project. I went to Dr. Friesen to explain how things were backfiring and that my outcomes were very different from my expectations. Dr. Friesen smiled and said, "Not every story is a happy story." This rang true for me. In the context of my mini-project, I knew there was a lot to learn, but in a larger sense as well, my story was evolving outside the box I had constructed.

With this in mind, I reflect on the process by which we intended to implement the recommendations from our initial research. As stated earlier, we did not succeed in our planned implementation. As researchers, we have to ask ourselves: Did our research therefore fail? To this question, I answer, "Absolutely not!"

Some may regard my optimism as simple rationalization; however, my guess is that such people would not have experienced the unique joys and challenges offered by education in Canada's North at the turn of the century. The poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, says in his essay, *Self Reliance*: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines" (1965). If we had charged ahead with our notions of implementation, ignoring the extenuating circumstances faced by our school system and community, in the name of "consistency" or "timelines" or "progress", we would have been small-minded. It was because we were necessarily sensitive to and involved in the circumstances affecting the school that our planned implementation stalled. For example, in the school year that I returned South, leaving only Joyce to implement the next phase of the project, the Black Lake school and community faced the following developments:

- the suicide of the school's maintenance man (this man was one of the twelve children of the school's former resident Elder and his death greatly affected the community),
- the death of a teaching colleague who had taken over the store front program I once ran,
- the death by freezing of a special needs student,
- the death of a student from disease,
- the 50% turnover in the professional staff which provided new colleagues to orient and nurture, and
- a new principal who left the school by Christmas leaving Joyce to assume many of the principal's duties in addition to her responsibilities as a teacher vice-principal.

Any one of these developments was potentially devastating to the teachers at the school. When combined, they became overwhelming. How could these professionals

set their sights on collecting research data when day-to-day survival had become a heroic professional goal?

However, even as we saw our hopes of carrying on with the research project slipping away, we could also see that many of the recommendations were being implemented in the natural course of things in Black Lake. Some implementation arose from decisions by the Chief and Council after they and the Education Council had approved our final report to the McDowell Foundation. For example, the band built an independent cultural building and setting to give students whole authentic cultural experiences and instruction, an idea that our recommendations had borrowed from the Dene Kede curriculum developed in the North West Territories. On reflection, it may be possible that the need we felt to officially implement our set of recommendation was an imposed need, almost negating the possibility of a natural progression that parallels the recommendations. However, with the continual huge turnover in the professional staff at Father Porte Memorial Dene School, any move forward through natural progression is inevitably quite slow.

This aside, there are other reasons to celebrate our research process. It provided us with professional development, closure (leaving something learned intact for other new arrivals to grow from), and hope, as well as achieving a benchmark for future research. Action research, which the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation promotes, is synonymous with professional development. In *Action Research for Teachers: Travelling the Yellow Brick Road* (2001, p. 8), the authors assert, "The action research journey offers many ways to make daily practice more professional." In our dialogue throughout the project's six year time span, my colleagues and I have discussed how we are enjoying professional development almost as a fringe benefit. Rubbing shoulders with other McDowell Foundation researchers at the Learning from Practice conference has proven inspirational. My colleagues and I agree with Arhar, Holly and Kasten's description of the first three characteristics of action research:

1. It is a potent form of professional development and life-long learning.
2. It is a form of reflective practice that can become a natural part of teaching and learning.
3. It enables us to learn consciously from experience. (2001, p. 8)

Black Lake and other Northern communities experience continuous teacher turnover. This scenario of continual change does not occur because the teachers are flippant or disloyal. Teachers leave the school for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, of the six dedicated teachers who have worked on our research over the past six years, only one remains in the community as of 2002. One of the greatest needs I experienced personally when leaving the community was the need for closure. I needed to feel that I was leaving something behind so that I could move on. This research helped me to meet that need.

Hand in hand with the need for closure was the need for hope. A part of my closure was uncovering a view of the present that was optimistic and opening the door for an optimistic future. Perhaps our research will not be needed today or in the next five to ten years, but maybe down the road it can be a starting point for another generation of researchers in a system and a community ready for the next step. Our project began as a vision for the future of Black Lake, and it remains our hope and dream that others will continue to nurture this vision.

# Reflections from Black Lake

---

## - JOYCE MERCREDI

The implementation of the research did not take place as we expected. Sheena has already pointed out many of the stumbling blocks that we were dealing with over the past two years. The deaths of a teacher, two students and others in the community, plus the departure of the principal at Christmas, all put our plans on hold. However, even though our research was not implemented as strategically as we planned, many of our recommendations for improved teaching have, in fact, been implemented.

The current situation is somewhat more positive for the school in Black Lake. Since the replacement principal was not offered a new contract, a new principal was hired for 2002-2003. The man who has become principal lived in the community for years, and during his stint in Black Lake, he played a variety of roles, including teacher, special education teacher, principal and director of education. He is married to a Dene woman from the community, and they have four bilingual children. When he was director of education, he backed the initiative to develop the Dene Immersion program for the school, and it is hoped his appointment will be a strong first step toward reacknowledging some of the goals for our research.

The administrative leadership in the school is also strengthened by the fact that the second part-time vice-principal is a teacher who has been with the school for eight years now. For the duration of her teaching contract, she has run the Special Education part of the school program and has been invaluable to the school as resource. She can be counted on to provide important background information to new staff.

There was not a huge turnover of staff in the 2001-2002 year because of six Dene TEP students who have chosen to remain in their home community. There are only five new staff members in the school compared to the normal number of new teachers, which ranges from 10-13 each year. This relatively small turnover will have a huge impact on continuity within the school. It will allow a higher level of rapport between teachers and students, and it means the staff is beginning the year with a higher level of synthesis (for some teachers) between the cultural and academic programs of the school.

One of our goals for the year is to encourage a peer mentoring program, in which less experienced teachers can pair up with teachers who have more experience. This pairing will also aid in passing along through word of mouth some traditional Dene material, including the history of what has been done and what has yet to be tried. Another option for achieving this transfer of information is a common planning time for teachers of children in the same grades or of the same age to discuss their struggles, unify areas of planning, and to strengthen each other's teaching.

All teachers and support staff in the school will be encouraged to take out the copies of the report and recommendations from our research, as well as the binders that Sheena put together for an implementation workshop containing all of the information from the library. Each staff member will be asked to work alone or with

partners at incorporating three of the recommendations before Christmas. It is hoped that in this way, the research will remain a valuable tool for those in the classroom.

Some of the recommendations have already been put in place and continue to be acted on with staff support. They include:

- ***Teaching in the Dene language.*** The Dene Immersion program is still used from at least Nursery to Grade Two. In addition, Educational Assistants are available to translate and provide one-on-one instruction for students up to Grade Six as well as in the special education classroom. The school secretary also is bilingual in English and Dene to make it easier for those students, parents, and teachers who are more comfortable communicating in Dene. The special education program and the store front program thrive.
- ***Collaboration with educational assistants.*** The teachers are encouraged to plan with their educational assistants, which allows the educational assistant to provide alternative ideas and perhaps integrate some Dene knowledge into the instruction that students receive. Many of the E.A.'s have more than 20 years of teaching experience, so they have seen experimentation with many good ideas and can suggest a variety of ways to get important information across to the students.
- ***A traditional setting for instruction in traditional Dene knowledge and skills.*** A cabin has been built as a site for outdoor education, to be used by any of the classrooms throughout the seasons.

This year Father Porte Memorial Dene School in Black Lake has a strong group of teachers who are eager and enthusiastic about the coming year. They will be provided with the copies of our research , support to learn from it, and a chance to grow as teachers in a unique cultural setting. Every year in our school there is potential for unlimited growth and achievement. We begin again at this spot.

## AN UPDATE IN THE FALL OF 2002

Last year, in 2001, the Chief and Councillors received a report about the research and our progress in implementing it. They were genuinely interested in our work and excited by our commitment to it.

For the next school year, 2003, we will put the recommendations into the teachers' handbook.

The 2002-2003 school year had the lowest turnover in staff we have experienced (only five new teachers) because we now have eight professional teachers who are Dene. These teachers integrate into the community and necessarily teach more culturally relevant language and science-based material.

# Conclusions

---

## - ANN ALPHONSE

Looking back at our recommendations and the implementation of them that has taken place, it is possible to look through the trials of the past years to many positive steps that have been taken, some of them planned and some of them occurring naturally. For example:

- The cabin has been built as a milieu for teaching and learning traditional knowledge, and classes travel there with Elders.
- There are still many children coming to school with Dene as their first language because their parents do not have to teach them English to get them ready for school. (However, there are fewer Dene-speaking students entering the school than ten or even five years ago, and they speak more English.)
- An Elder is still an integral part of the school, while other Elders are brought in to teach units in the CRISP.
- The CRISP is a **C**ulturally **R**elevant **I**ntegrated **S**cience **P**rogram that was developed by teachers 15 years ago and has continued to grow throughout the years (I re-worked the Grade 1-3 level).
- Students in Grades 1-3 have a strong program with bilingual language resources tied to the curriculum as references. The program for Grades 4-7 is not as strong, but the Grade 8-10 program was reworked by a past principal, Steve Davidson, to include political and historical issues.
- More students from Black Lake are reaching higher levels of education. (I have eight nieces and nephews who are involved in post-secondary education in Prince Albert or Saskatoon, taking either upgrading, community college courses or university programs). Ten years ago Black Lake had only a handful of graduates from post-secondary education in the whole community.
- Although the immersion and culture programs in the school have not been extended as we had hoped, they have been maintained.
- A daycare has been established.
- There are still many paraprofessional Dene-speakers in the education system to support students and new teachers.
- The storefront and special education programs are functioning well.

From our experience in trying to implement the recommendations from our research, two major conclusions may be drawn:

**1. THE NEED TO TEACH TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND VALUES**

The goal of our recommendations, which was the incorporation of traditional Dene knowledge, skills and values into education, is important. Schools must acknowledge that students come to school with different levels of ability in English as a second language, and many enter the school system with a strong level of oral language ability in Dene. The school program must reflect the changing world of the reserve and be relevant to the life that the students know. There will always be a need to re-evaluate curriculum and instruction and implement new ideas and programs as the world and the community change. However, as the voice of the Black Lake people was reflected in our study, it was clear that almost 100% of the people support the teaching of Dene values, traditions, skills, and language, and they believe their Dene heritage must be nurtured in all domains if it is to remain their greatest asset.

**2. THE NEED FOR ON-GOING STAFF DEVELOPMENT**

A particular frustration in northern schools is the high turnover of school staff. This turnover has implications for the implementation of any new program or idea. In *Classroom Curriculum Connections: A Handbook for Personal-Professional Growth*, four stages of the implementation process are listed: awareness, exploration, synthesis and refinement (Saskatchewan Education 2001, p. 80-81). While some staff in the school at Black Lake may eventually use our recommendations at the refinement stage, the teachers who are new every year (a quarter to half of the staff) will have to go through the awareness and exploration stages before they are ready to synthesize and refine any of the information. The limitations imposed by this reality must be recognised while we are working to encourage community and individual routes of growth. At the same time, any way that can be found to train, educate and involve incoming teachers is valuable. In particular, it is important to involve new teachers with the older, culturally wise and sensitive professional and paraprofessional staff in order to form a reciprocal and progressive team ready to approach ideas in an open and harmonious manner. Any staff training that can be done, especially with staff members from outside communities, to create understanding of the cultural, language and social differences in Black Lake can only strengthen their ability to perceive the world through their student's eyes. It might be possible, for example, to extend the teacher orientation period to include more traditional trips or camps as a way of building greater attainment in both the language and the culture of the Dene.

In closing, it is important to state that throughout the school, the staff are doing an exceptional job. Although some of them are struggling with isolation or issues related to separation from family, and other have family problems and social difficulties, they are motivated and caring. Some months in Black Lake can be more trying than others, particularly February, when the days are cold and dark.

However, the children also seem to flock to the school in spite of many extenuating circumstances. Attendance is stronger at the younger ages (Grades 1-6) than in the older grades. The school program, as well as the abundant knowledge of the local support staff, provides an open and exciting world for these children, and for the most part, they tend to take part in it of their own accord. One way to enhance teaching and learning is to begin where the student is at (academically as well as culturally and socially). With a focus on the student, we can make our teaching more effective by setting realistic goals for our students that build on their comprehension. Also, by making material and work culturally relevant, the students are more motivated and will produce more in-depth work rather than simply regurgitating what they are told. For students as well as teachers, the journey must be as equally exciting and demanding as the destination.

## FINAL THOUGHTS AFTER PRESENTING AT LEARNING FROM PRACTICE 2002

Research is a seed. A seed of hope. A seed for a better tomorrow. We received our seed from the dreams of a staff and community, which was then watered by materials such as the Dene Kede and Fort Smith research.

Research is organic and dynamic. At the 2002 Learning from Practice Conference, one woman said she would take a copy of our last document with her the next time she visited Sierra Leone. Another man would take it to the Yukon. We will carry it with us wherever we go.

# References

---

- Alphonse, A., Koops, S. and Mercredi, J. (1999). *Dreams and Involvement: A Black Lake Quest for 2000 – Interpretations and Recommendations for Improved Teaching*. McDowell Foundation Project #42. Saskatoon: Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching.
- Arhar, J.M.; Holly, M.L.; Kasten, W.C. (2001). *Action Research for Teachers: Traveling the Yellow Brick Road*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, Prentice Hall.
- Cleary T. (1992). *The Essential Tao: An Initiation into the Heart of Taoism through the Authentic Tao Te Ching and the Inner Teachings of Chuang Tzu*. New York, Castle Books.
- Darder. (1988). *Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Politics of Difference*.
- Department of Education, Culture and Employment , Government of the N.W. T. (1993) *Dene Kede Education: A Dene Perspective* (Curriculum Document K-6). Yellowknife, N.W.T.
- Emerson, R.W. (1965). *Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson Selected by J. Donald Adams*. New York, Thomas Y. Crowel Company.
- Fishman, J. A. (1991) *Reversing Language Shift: theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- LaRogue, E. (1975). *Defeathering the Indian*. Agincourt, Canada: The Book Society of Canada Limited.
- Reyner, J. (1999) "Some Basics of Indigeneous Language Revitalization" *Revitalizing Indigeneous Languages*. Flagstaff, Arizona
- Saskatchewan Education. (2001) *Classroom Curriculum Connections: A Handbook for Personal- Professional Growth*. Regina, SK. Saskatchewan Education.
- Sleeter C., & McLaren P. (1995). *Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Politics of Difference*. New York: New York Press.



# Appendix A: Recommendations for Improved Teaching

---

For more detailed information about the recommendations given below, see:

Alphonse, Ann, Koops, Sheena and Mercredi, Joyce. (1999). *Dreams and Involvement : A Black Lake Quest for 2000: Interpretations and Recommendations for Improved Teaching*. McDowell Foundation Project #42.

This report is available from the McDowell Foundation on request and may be downloaded in summary or as a whole from the worldwide web at [www.mcdowellfoundation.ca](http://www.mcdowellfoundation.ca).

## **TEACHING METHODS**

1. Teach in the Dene language.
2. Extend the integrity of the Immersion Program.
3. Build in relevance.
4. Provide ESL structures.
5. Reflect continually.
6. Use stems when teaching in Dene.
7. Publish and utilize Black Lake resources.
8. Maintain the quality of the special education program.
9. Develop the quality of the store front program.
10. Challenge students one step beyond their abilities.
11. Administer discipline one-on-one.
12. Search out effective classroom management techniques.
13. Be yourself.
14. Utilize personal expertise.
15. Vary teaching strategies.
16. Teach specific learning strategies.
17. Vary evaluation methods.
18. Avoid busy work.
19. Divide information into bite-sized pieces.
20. Preach brain power.
21. Nurture self-esteem.
22. Promote deeper integration of knowledge.

## **THE TEACHING OF TRADITIONAL SKILLS**

1. Encourage Elder involvement.
2. Empower teacher associates.
3. Integrate Dene skills into the curriculum.
4. Explore community relevance.

### ***THE TEACHING OF TRADITIONAL VALUES***

1. Advocate respect.
2. Plan for fun.
3. Encourage good health.
4. Nurture happiness.
5. Validate family.
6. Encourage independence in students.
7. Foster cooperation.
8. Nurture staff unity.
9. Examine power issues.
10. Honour the Black Lake First Nation Teachers' Code of Ethics.

### ***SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION***

1. Empower teacher associates and support staff.
2. Provide new staff with reading material on the Dene.
3. Lobby the Northwest Territories Government for full access to the Dene Kede curriculum.
4. Build a cabin with students.
5. Read the findings and recommendations of the Dene Kede in Forth Smith schools.
6. Network with other Dene schools.
7. Develop reflection questions.
8. Prepare for exceptions.
9. Enhance effectiveness time line.
10. Model and encourage reflection on beliefs.
11. Review these recommendations periodically.
12. Encourage goal-setting and vision development.
13. Examine the inclusiveness of the school.

# Appendix B: Recommendation Implementation Questionnaire

---

Check off those that apply to you:

- Teacher       Educational Assistant       Local Staff  
 Native       Non-native

How can Dene and non-Dene educators use their unique expertise to implement the recommendations?

Do you have access to the research ?  Yes       No

Which parts can you use as a take-off point for educating Dene students?

What do you feel would still improve the school?

What are your frustrations in the present system?

Please Check any of the boxes that you agree are necessary to improve teaching. X any that you feel are not important. Put N/A beside any you feel are not applicable to your teaching situation at school.

### ***TEACHING METHODS***

- Teach in the Dene Language
- Extend the Integrity of the Immersion Program
- Build in Relevance
- Provide ESL Structures
- Reflect Continually
- Use Stems when Teaching in Dene
- Publish and Utilize Black Lake Resources
- Maintain the Quality of the Special Education Program
- Develop the Quality of the Store Front Program
- Challenge Students One Step Beyond Their Abilities
- Administer Discipline One-on-One
- Search out Effective Classroom Management Techniques
- Be Yourself
- Utilize Personal Expertise
- Vary Teaching Strategies
- Teach Specific Learning Strategies
- Vary Evaluation Methods
- Avoid Busy Work
- Divide Information into Bite-Sized Pieces
- Preach Brain Power
- Nurture Self-Esteem
- Promote Deeper Integration of Knowledge

### ***THE TEACHING OF TRADITIONAL SKILLS***

- Encourage Elder Involvement
- Empower Teacher Associates
- Integrate Dene Skills Into the Curriculum
- Explore Community Relevance

### ***THE TEACHING OF TRADITIONAL VALUES***

- Advocate Respect
- Plan for Fun
- Encourage Good Health
- Nurture Happiness
- Validate Family
- Encourage Independence in Students
- Foster Cooperation
- Nurture Staff Unity
- Examine Power Issues
- Honour the Black Lake First Nation Teachers' Code of Ethics







**2317 Arlington Avenue  
Saskatoon SK Canada S7J 2H8  
Phone: 306-373-1660  
Toll Free: 1-800-667-7762  
Fax: 306-374-1122  
E-mail: [mcdowell@stf.sk.ca](mailto:mcdowell@stf.sk.ca)  
[www.mcdowellfoundation.ca](http://www.mcdowellfoundation.ca)**