

“Dreams and Involvement: A Black Lake Quest for 2000”

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All players in the Black Lake educational process were given a chance to voice their dreams and be involved in improving the current system: hence the title, “Dreams and Involvement”. The second part of the title highlighted our understanding that a project of this magnitude was of millennial consequence and duration.

A three-member research team from Father Porte Memorial Dene School in the northern community of Black Lake began in 1998-99 to explore traditional Dene teaching methods, skills and values. The team consisted of the school’s vice-principal who is a Dene band member, a teacher from the south who is a newcomer to the community, and an experienced northern educator married to a Dene band member who had integrated into the community twelve years ago and was currently pursuing graduate studies. Each researcher brought a different perspective to the collection and interpretation of data concerning Dene education, and together they reflected the variety of backgrounds to be found within the school staff.

The first phase of the study centred on the development and administration of a 13-page questionnaire to age cohorts within the Black Lake community. The questionnaire was administered personally to elders by translators trained in its delivery. Adults who received the questionnaire were generally expected to complete it on their own, while students were allowed to work on the questionnaires during school on a voluntary basis. The responses from each age cohort were compiled and interpreted by the various members of the research team in a reflective and often personal style.

The results indicate consensus within Black Lake regarding more elder involvement in the school system. They also validate existing initiatives such as the Dene Immersion Program, the Annual Bilingual Book Making Workshop, and the use of Dene-speaking teacher associates.

The questionnaire identified a variety of Dene skills that includes fire-making, beadwork, trapping, the making of bannock, preparing hides, setting nets, drying meat and fish, making lard from caribou bones, drumming, telling stories and legends, raising children, playing hand games, surviving in the bush during summer and winter, saying Dene prayers, making moccasins, preserving berries, and cutting up caribou. The community expressed a desire for the school to play a part in the development of these skills, which are strongest among the elders.

No specific Dene teaching methods were identified by the questionnaire. Dene skills are often learned by watching and then doing, but respondents also indicated that the Dene learn by listening, thinking, touching, seeing and experimenting. In interpreting this response, the researchers suggest that teachers of Dene students may wish to use a variety of teaching styles and learning strategies.

When asked about the values that education should promote, Dene respondents suggested that schools should: 1) advocate respect, 2) plan fun, 3) encourage health, 4) nurture happiness, 5) promote family, 6) develop independence, and 7) foster cooperation.

On the basis of the information received, the research team developed 49 recommendations for improving the education of Dene students. The recommendations address teaching methods, the development of Dene skills, the incorporation of Dene values, and the administration of schools for Dene communities. A second phase of the research project has been initiated to follow up on these recommendations. In this phase the researchers plan to test how well their recommendations honour traditional Dene teaching methods, content and values, and to consider how the school staff, which includes both Dene and non-Dene educators, can work towards their implementation.

The report on phase one ends with the following paragraph:

The modern school plays a daunting, yet exciting role in the emergence of the Dene. It is imperative that the school purposefully and methodically plan to acknowledge and incorporate Dene teaching methods, skills, and values into the classroom and school system. In so doing, the school validates the importance and strength of students' identity and heritage. Likewise, the school must prepare students to be active citizens in the global community. In so doing, the school empowers the Dene to share their unique voice: both adding their strength to the solutions of tomorrow and, at the same time, advocating on behalf of their own needs and rights. It is not only an honour, but a responsibility, that the school play a significant role in creating a learning environment in which students can prepare themselves to walk and succeed in both the Dene world and the global community.



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