Read

TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

Experiential Learning

In traditional Aboriginal societies, children did not go to school for only a few hours a day as many children do today. Instead, teaching and learning took place all day every day in both the home and community. This is because the purpose of education in traditional Aboriginal societies was to learn how to live, how to survive, and how to participate in and contribute to one’s household and community. Therefore, children were encouraged to take part in everyday activities alongside adults, to watch and listen, and then eventually practice what they had learned. In this way, Aboriginal children learned the skills and knowledge they needed by observing and listening to their parents, grandparents and other community members. Similarly, it was the job of every adult in the community to make sure that each child learned the information and skills that they would need for adult life. For example, in Coast Salish communities young boys learned how, when and where to fish by going fishing with their fathers, uncles and grandfathers, and by listening to the stories that these men told about their fishing experiences. Similarly, young girls learned how to weave beautifully patterned blankets from mountain goat hair and intricate baskets from the bark of cedar trees by watching and helping their mothers, aunts and grandmothers. In this way, many adults in the community became teachers by passing on, or sharing, their knowledge and experiences. This informal, experiential style of teaching and learning started when children were very young and continued throughout adulthood.

Storytelling

Along with modeling practical skills such as fishing and basket weaving, Aboriginal Peoples also taught their children important lessons, spiritual beliefs, values and histories through oral storytelling. In fact, oral storytelling played an extremely important role in traditional Aboriginal education and culture, and it continues to be an essential part of Aboriginal societies. There are many different types of stories. For example, some are life experience stories, some are creation stories, some are stories that teach morals and values, and some are oral histories of a particular place or community. In addition, each Aboriginal community and even family has its own stories. This means that many stories are unique to a particular First Nation, community or family. These stories are only told and/or heard by members of that group of people. Also, many stories include specific geographical places such as mountains, rivers or lakes and specific animals such as ravens, coyotes, rabbits, and buffalo that are found in a particular First Nation’s territory. Therefore, in order to truly understand a story, the listener often has to be familiar with the land where that story comes from. These stories are frequently used to teach Aboriginal children about the land and the animals, and the importance of maintaining balance and harmony in the natural world. Sometimes these
stories explain how a particular place was created, or where the sun and moon come from. Some stories have a moral, or a lesson about right and wrong, while others tell of great journeys and adventures. Therefore, by listening to these stories during childhood and throughout their lives, Aboriginal people learn who they are, where they and their ancestors come from, how the world was created, and how to interact with that world.

The Trickster

Many of these important lessons are taught through stories about the Trickster. The Trickster is an important character in many Aboriginal stories because it is through its attitude, actions and experiences that lessons are taught. The Trickster character takes on many different forms in Aboriginal stories because of the diversity of the many Aboriginal cultures in Canada. For example, in some cultures the Trickster is in the form of Coyote, while in other cultures the Trickster may be Raven or Whiskey-Jack or Rabbit or even an old man. The Trickster can also change its form to be a human male or female, an animal or a supernatural being. Even the personality of the Trickster varies from story to story. In some cultures, the Trickster is a powerful, helpful, and well-intentioned character, or even a Creator. In other cultures, the Trickster has a more devious role, and is often creating trouble for itself and others. This trouble often comes because the Trickster has not followed important advice or rules, or because it has been selfish or greedy. Sometimes it has not thought carefully about the consequences, or effects, of its actions. The form and personality that the Trickster has depends on the culture of the particular First Nation and the landscape of its territory. However, no matter which form this character has, there is usually an important lesson in the story that is being told.

The Storyteller

Because storytelling plays such an important role in Aboriginal culture and education, not just anyone can have the job of storyteller. Every detail of these stories has to be remembered and retold exactly, so that the story does not change as it is passed on from one generation to the next. Therefore, in many communities, only respected Elders know and tell certain stories, especially important oral histories that explain the origins of a particular place or First Nation. However, an Elder is not simply an older or elderly person in the community. Although each First Nation defines who an Elder is in its own way, usually an Elder is someone who is very knowledgeable about the history, values and teachings of his/her culture. Also, he or she lives his/her life according to these values and teachings. Because Elders have gained their position through their knowledge, wisdom and behaviour, they are considered to be valuable role models and teachers to all members of the community. Therefore, it is the Elder's responsibility to accurately remember and teach the oral histories and stories of his/her culture. These oral histories and stories have been passed down from generation to generation for thousands of years, and they are essential to maintaining Aboriginal identity and culture.