

# FINDING THE MOCCASIN FIT

**DOUG SMITH**

*College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan*

**ABSTRACT** *Preparing preservice teachers for the teaching of Indigenous students is a challenge for Canadian teacher educators. As a teacher of preservice classes, I meet the task through reflective talk illustrated with moccasins representing four decades of educational contact with Indigenous people. They also represent change in Canadian federal government policy toward Indigenous education from segregation, to integration, to devolution of control to band controlled schools.*

*Below, I describe my experiences, reflect (in italics), place myself in the context of changing government policy, suggest educational implications, and provide elements for effective Indigenous education derived from my Maori bi-cultural school findings.*

## TRANSFORMING PRESERVICE TEACHERS AND MYSELF

Despite more employment of First Nations teachers and increasing enrolment in band-controlled schools, over 75% of Indigenous pupils still receive instruction from non-Indigenous Canadians (Urion, 1992). Consequently, I strive to improve my preparation of preservice teachers for Indigenous education.

For example, as I reach the section in my teacher education course where I want them to understand transformative education, I bring in a bag of moccasins: mementos and milestones that mark my life path toward understanding Indigenous people. I use the footwear as metaphors to help my students consider what it means to walk a mile in another's moccasins and as indicators of the changing educational relationships between Indigenous and immigrant people. The different moccasins are also indicative of the differences among Canadian Indigenous people.

As we form a living ring, I designate the four points of the compass with moccasins, and invite the students to discuss how the four directions, four seasons and inter-relationships between Indigenous people and the physical, spiritual, social, and political worlds, are encompassed by a circle. This interconnected world-view contrasts with mainstream separations between these dimensions. To illustrate spiritual and physical merging, I explain how an Indigenous person respectfully leaves an offering of tobacco in exchange for a medicinal plant taken from mother earth. I contrast this action with mainstream strip miners who take gold in exchange for ravaged earth and tailings.

*I want them to be sensitive and supportive of perspectives that differ from their own. Will I really get them to understand? Do I understand what walking in another's moccasins means?*

Each moccasin evokes change in time, place and relationship with Indigenous people, in the chapters from my life story spanning forty years. The 1958 Dene Nation design is from my undergraduate years as a student working in the Western Arctic. The 1960s sealskins remind me of personal beginnings: of

marriage, as a second year teacher, and in opening a school for Northern Inuit. The Peigan pair, made in 1975, represent my years as high school teacher, author, and play producer in Southern Alberta. The 1989 Cree coverings mark my move Eastward, and the beginning of my Sakatchewan college instructor years. Then, while barefoot, my discoveries as a researcher with the New Zealand Maori in 1995.

When I finger each moccasin, I explain how they also represent change in Canadian federal government policy toward Indigenous education. The policies evolved from "segregation for protection" in schools run by religious denominations, to "integration" in provincially run schools," to "devolution of Indian Education to Indian society" in band controlled schools and in encouragement of preparation of Indigenous teachers (INAC, 1982, p. 2).

Below, I describe my experiences, reflect (in italics), and place myself in the context of changing government policy. Then I suggest educational implications and provide elements for effective Indigenous education derived from my Maori bi-cultural school findings.

## DISCOVERING COLONIZERS

The Dene moccasins have solid beading covering the top puckered moosehide uppers, worn beaver fur trim and letters in white beads contrasting against the black background spell out Y-U-K-O-N. *I drift back to the late 50s, my undergraduate summers along the Mackenzie river.* While there, I began to understand how government, religion, industry, and the military used their power to educate Indigenous people. Delegating responsibility for education, the Canadian government chopped the river catchment and its people into chunks to be given to French, Oblate fathers or English, Anglican missionaries. Every other village, like contrasting beads strung along the river, was either Roman Catholic or Anglican. I learned that these river people received staples for skins, an imported religion chosen for them by the government and "segregation" into inadequately-funded schools staffed by religious volunteers. Also the government did not adapt education to meet the differences between Dene and Inuit pupils. *What happens to cultural identity when outsiders decide the religion and schooling for your village? And what lessons do Indigenous people learn as the engines of progress rip across their land and lives?*

Bull dozers, river barges, army trucks, and airplanes brought prospectors, oil seekers, and armies from two countries. They built the Alaska highway and the Canol pipeline during World War Two. Next, university students like me were refining fuel for the DEW (Distant Early Warning) line, our string of defensive ears listening for invaders during our cold war with the Russians. Few First Nations' folk became workers and I had little contact with them.

All the Dene, except one family, lived South of us at Fort Norman. I traded canned goods and tobacco for the moccasins of our locals. The father taught me how to carry supplies on a pack board and his wife taught me to skip wildly to the first "oom pa" of a polka.

As I connected pipes in my summer-student, oil-field work, I expected to see "Huskies" as the Inuit were called here. No luck. I caught fleeting glimpses of

hand-crafted river boats pushed by outboard "kickers" rounding river bends but I never knew who the dark-haired occupants were.

## SEARCHING FOR CURRICULUM RELEVANCE

I learned three years later, when my wife and I became the only whites in the Arctic, Inuit school site. Our aluminum "biscuit box" home was set on Hudson Bay Islands 90 miles from Northern Quebec. I had this knee high, waterproof "kamik" boot made with shaved bearded-seal soles in dark brown, and silver spotted, ringed seal uppers. The government, now directly involved in schooling, hired me as a qualified teacher and asked me to follow an Alberta provincial rather than territorial curriculum. In that icy year, warmly remembered, my adult mentors taught me how to build an igloo, steer a dog sled, and stack rocks to stop the huskies from eating the newly dead. The puzzled looks of my student mentors informed me that the required *Dick and Jane* reading books had little relevance to Inuit life styles. I exchanged character names for Inuit equivalents such as Lucassie for Dick, Ptsolak for Jane, and Netsik the ringed seal for Puff. But these attempts to adapt curriculum gave minimal satisfaction. *What was I giving and what was I taking away by bringing outside curriculum to their igloo interiors?*

Reaching for relevance, I recalled that this hunting group clad in eider duckskin parkas were bird experts. Thereafter, I supported my class in writing and illustrating their own culturally relevant book about the "Birds of the Belcher Islands". I treasure the set of recorded bird calls my class made to accompany the book. When I hear their trills, squawks, and honks, once more, I see a "V" of geese veer from a straight sky-path, while my class call from behind sheltering rocks and help me learn in their world.

*I, however, still had difficulty in veering from my straight path of prescribed curriculum and methodology. Mostly, I stepped out of their soft sealskins back into my hard-soled shoes, teaching as I had been taught, preparing them to fit into mainstream society. I never thought to ask how learning took place in their culture or how my education would prepare them for their world. Except for our bird book, all other materials, methods and curriculum were Southern imports taught through the values, context, and words of the English language.*

## REMEMBERING A FORGOTTEN DRUM SONG

Unlike my kamik sewn with water-proof, caribou sinew, my Peigan moccasin has its upper rounded over the foot and threaded with linen to the sole at ground level. Still reeking of smoked moose hide, it takes me back to 27 years as high school teacher, play producer and friendship board member with the Peigans and Bloods of Southern Alberta. In those years, I was honored to share in re-creating the legend of Charcoal, a mystic Blood, who with his two wives and several children, outwitted a RCMP manhunt for several months. One year interviewing and play writing, another as director and actor, I tried to write and present an Indigenous perspective of this historic person who was hanged because of cultural misunderstanding. Joe Crowshoe, elder, medicine man and drummer, cradled my infant understanding of his people. Oral-history source, cultural consultant, he taught me an outlaw's spirituality: sunrise prayers, pipe ceremonies, and the steps

to match throbbing drumbeats. He preserved the legacy of Charcoal: passing his tale to our friendship board, prompting my play writing, involving his family, and singing Charcoal's death lament at each performance. My wife in the play, *Pretty Wolverine Woman*, took these moccasins from the feet of the chief's son and gave them to me.

Despite my Charcoal contacts and teacher efforts, I failed in my attempts to keep my integrated high school students on the required provincial school path. Choosing between two cultures, my most promising students left to join the "Sitting on Eagle Tail" dance troupe. Passing grades and months of momentum in the integrated class were exchanged for a new pride in traditional practices. My increased cultural awareness, and references to their lives, historical figures and practices, fell on deaf ears.

*They danced to the forgotten drummers. They began the return to Indian control of Indian education and departure from the integration of Indigenous pupils in provincial schools.*

## **SUPERVISING INDIGENOUS STUDENT TEACHERS**

The soles of these Cree moccasins wrapping over the sides of my toes join the tapering tongue, topping the middle of my foot. For the last ten years, I have taught classes and supervised field experience for mainstream and a growing number of Indigenous student teachers. They are needed to fulfill the government policy of encouraging education and hiring of Indigenous teachers. Each of the latter is unique, many of the younger ones stand among the top 10% of undergraduates anywhere, some come from prosperous homes, others bear the scars of boarding schools, foster homes, abusive relations, and continuing poverty. Most of them are female with family responsibilities.

I encourage them to prepare supports for the multiple expectations they may face during student teaching. In my opening remarks about school placements, I elicit their ideas and feelings about how they will educate a mainstream staff, act as role models, counsel a school's Indigenous pupils, relate to parents, face racism, and attend to personal family needs. I develop open communication with them and encourage them to proudly share Indigenous expertise at the schools, if that is their choice. I study and respect the traditional-to-mainstream identity choices they make as they place themselves at different points on the bridge spanning the two cultures, for some aspire to mainstream life, while others prefer to teach on reserves. I try to deserve their trust.

In my supervisory conferences I promote self analysis of teaching performance and awareness of cultural differences, hoping that they will take ownership for their own strengths and make needed improvements. Nevertheless, despite my pride in increasing numbers of successful graduates, I sometimes discover that, without consultation, one of my student teachers has suddenly dropped out. *Why have they left? What missing elements needed inclusion in our Indigenous education program?*

## **DRAWING IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS**

A review of my Dene, Inuit, Peigan, and Cree moccasin life-stage markers suggest implications for educators. My "Dene" years revealed that the government delegated the direct education of Indigenous children to religious denominations, and that the military and industry educated indirectly using the Dene land and resources but rarely training or hiring them as workers. The exploitation of resources, dearth of employment, and lack of shared decision-making with Dene people, likely contributed to a growing devaluing of personal worth, cultural identity, and subsequent development of social problems. Recent human relations approaches to multicultural education attempt to correct these difficulties by assisting pupils in improving self concept, and cultural identity (Zahorick & Novak, 1996).

1. *Indigenous elders and family members should be invited to be active participants in decisions about the religion and education of their children.*

My Inuit year highlighted the problems of curriculum irrelevance. Qualified imported teachers, following provincial content and communicating in English required the Indigenous people to adapt rather than the reverse. Implementing an imported education likely encouraged the decline in the use of Indigenous languages, values, and relationships.

2. *Policy makers, at all government levels, and educators should continue to create and use curriculum and methods that reflect the values, aspirations, languages, and learning patterns of Indigenous peoples.*

My Peigan years showed how the integration of Indigenous students into provincial schools became less favored as the students and parents reclaimed cultural traditions and control of Indigenous education. These early moves towards self-determination have grown into band-controlled schools, staffed with increasing numbers of Indigenous teachers who add relevant cultural dimensions to the curriculum. But the increasing Indigenous population growth and movement of Indigenous people to cities has created a growing educational challenge, for once more, Indigenous pupils are primarily taught by non-Indigenous teachers.

3. *Government support of band-controlled schools should continue and Urban Indian education research initiated.*

As I continue preparing Indigenous preservice teachers, I find increasing numbers of graduates teaching in band, mainstream schools, and elsewhere. More also pursue graduate work, but barriers to success still remain.

4. *Educators should refine inservice and preservice teacher education based on an awareness of traditional Indigenous methods of learning, research findings from studies of successful and unsuccessful Indigenous teachers, tempered with an awareness of wide individual differences among Indigenous people.*

## A PROMISING BICULTURAL MODEL

*Each moccasin step has carried me toward my own sabbatical research in New Zealand. No moccasins here. Barefoot, I step out from my own experience. My bicultural studies with the Maori may provide some answers for what, upon reflection, has become a life long quest for a more effective way of educating Indigenous peoples.*

*Disappointment has accompanied me too often on this pathway to think that I have found the single route to the many educational challenges of Indigenous peoples. But the possibilities tempt me. Have the chest-pounding Maori dancers put me more in step with Canadian Indigenous people? Have I learned what education Indigenous people desire? For four decades we have seldom asked. We need to ask and involve them now.*

*Also as Indigenous people assume more control of their own education, we need to define the role of the non Indigenous person operating the exchanges at the intersections of mainstream and Indigenous educational systems. And we need to identify and provide collateral ways of knowing to empower and satisfy mainstream and indigenous aspirations.*

*Educational cultural brokers need indicators of direction. Utilization of Indigenous values and processes in curriculum and instruction provides a path closer to embodying the wishes of Indigenous people than putting a thin smattering of Indigenous legend or practice over a course that is founded on mainstream assumptions, methods, and assessment.*

In my inner-city single-school research, "Nesting language and culture in Maori family structure: Key to successful bicultural program" (Smith, D. 1996), I found a form of bicultural education that brought satisfaction to teachers, students and families. Three weeks of interviews with administrators, teachers, teacher associates, parents, board members, and ten observations in classrooms, playing fields, the staffroom, and at a campout provided compelling multi-source data. Members of these bilingual classrooms interacted according to traditional values such as commitment, reciprocity and caring. The values were coupled with classroom structures patterned after the extended family relationships among Indigenous peoples discussed below. These Maori parents consonant with more than half of the New Zealand Maori (*New Zealand Education Gazette*, 19 Feb. 1996) wanted a balance between instruction in English and Maori to achieve competence in Maori and mainstream worlds. Biculturalism in this context means that morning instruction is primarily in Maori language with a Maori-oriented curriculum. In the afternoons the language of instruction is English with a sequence of mainstream subjects centered around a holistic theme. Moreover, English expertise is maintained in the early years because the school operates a Reading Recovery Programme (Clay, 1972) to detect and remedy any pupil weakness in reading English.

To use these bicultural procedures in Canada, the educator needs access to Indigenous elders, and if they agree to contribute, have them identify key Indigenous values as foundations for building an educational model. Then one needs to carefully explore all possibilities of meaning emanating from the value words, knowing that misunderstandings and omissions frequently accompany translations. Indigenous language as the medium of instruction is desirable but, with seven First Nation languages in Saskatchewan, difficult to implement until further study is completed.

Also, educators need to unravel the tangle of interpersonal relationships that connect learners to traditional teachers. Indigenous educational researchers and theorists (Hampton, 1995; Miller, J. 1996; Smith, G., 1996) and my own research, support teaching through an extended family relationship as a structure for Indigenous learning.

My findings (Smith, D. 1996), showed that teaching is a shared responsibility in the bicultural school. Rather than being taught by one person designated as teacher, these Indigenous children learn from each other, their siblings, elders, parents, and other members of school-based extended families. Cross-grade groupings allow peer and sibling instruction. Elders are hired as language aides to model and monitor Indigenous language and culture acquisition. Parents are regular participants in school and staff room decisions and activities. In addition, the students address teachers, aides and other adults with kinship titles adding support to family relationships in classrooms.

More research is need to show what these procedures would accomplish in Canada. In New Zealand, however, the parents reported a warm feeling in the school, and a gain in their children's self-worth that comes from membership in a school family with instruction in Maori language and culture. Seven Maori mothers felt free to help in any class, say "hi," join in staff room chat, and treat all the children as if they were their own. The staff reported an increase in pupil satisfaction and a decrease in negative social statistics. For instance, one teacher noted that these students were spirited and happy. The principal reported a decline in dropout, transient, and late students as compared to the mainstream equivalents. Although academic results were not available, the bicultural model appears to have potential for Canadian schools.

*I am ready to resume my journey through study in a Canadian inner-city school. Perhaps this time, with the help of Indigenous friends, the knowledge of previous personal and government policy history, and the example of a bicultural school patterns, I can fashion a moccasin that will fit the needs of the path between two peoples.*

## REFERENCES

- Clay, M. (1972). *Reading: The patterning of complex behavior*. Auckland: Heinemann.
- Hampton, E. (1995). Towards a redefinition of Indian Education. In M. Battiste & J. Barman (Eds.) *First nations' education in Canada: The circle unfolds*,(pp. 5-46). Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (1982). *Indian education paper phase one*. Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.
- Miller, J. R. (1996) *Shinwauk's Vision*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press)
- Smith, D. J. (1996). Nesting language and culture in Maori family structure: Key to a successful bicultural programme. *Waikato Journal of Education* 2, 81-92..
- Smith, G. (1996). *Protecting and respecting indigenous knowledge*. Paper presented at the SSHRC International Summer Institute, "Cultural Restoration of Oppressed Indigenous Peoples," Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, June 26-July 6.
- Urion, C. (1992). Big picture and paradoxes. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 19(1), 1-6.
- Zahorik, J. A. & Novak, R. (1996). Multiculturalism: The range of teacher approaches. *Clearing House*, 70 (2), 85-89.