

## CREATIVITY, “THE ARTS”, AND FIRST NATIONS

Historically “the arts” have been an integral part of Aboriginal daily life. “Art” is not a word in their cultural language, but is a meaningful and instinctual part of their daily lives. Original creative expression was the responsibility of every individual to engage in, and artistic expression was used as a tool for teaching history, community values, familial and clan structures and basic life ways to provide food, shelter and clothing. Fundamental to the process of passing down knowledge, “the arts” was and is a way to sustain a unique community.

Today, the use of professional artist-lead artistic expression within Aboriginal communities and their schools is still essential. Research and anecdotal stories show that when First Nations youth are provided the opportunities to be engaged creatively, including forms of expression from their traditional cultures as a foundation for their own creative work, many of the secondary “at risk” behaviors like suicide, alcohol and drug abuse disappear.

Those Schools using traditional values, language and cultural life ways, are showing the greatest academic achievement among Aboriginal students.

### WHY?

**Creativity is meaningful in  
Aboriginal lives.**

**“Creative works by individuals have always been highly valued among the Native American People. One of the reasons people take pride in their songs, poetry, their bead work, their designs, and the portrayal of their visions, is because they allow us to envision the possibility of things not normally seen or experienced.”**

*“The Sacred Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life”, P. Beck, A. Walter, N. Francisco, Navajo Community College Press, 1990 Northland Publishing, page 61 (1)*

**We are the Stars which sing.**

**We sing with our light**

**We are the birds of fire**

**We fly over the sky**

**Our light is a voice**

**We make a road**

**For the spirit to pass over us**



**“They (children) are extremely quick to learn whether it be musically writing a new song, learning new chords, drumming or creating character...  
Their communication skills improved enormously.”**

Laura Bird, Art Can Circle, September 2007 Newsletter, (2)



## WHAT'S HAPPENING TODAY?

The demographics of the Aboriginal population of Canada indicate that improvements in enrollment and retention in school is imperative. There are three reasons why we should be concerned.

1. "Canadian census data for Aboriginal populations aged 15 plus indicate that, in 2001, 48.1% had less than high school graduation (a decrease from 52.6% in 1996 data) and 9.9% had high school graduation only, compared to 8.6% in 1996."
2. "The high rate of lone parent families has increased from one-third in 1996 to over 35.4% in 2001 for Aboriginal people under the age of 15.

*"Best Practices in Increasing Aboriginal Postsecondary Enrolment Rates", R.A. Malatest and Associates, The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), May 2002, pg 11, (3)*

## Young Aboriginals are faced with Poverty, Learning Disabilities, Social Isolation, and Family Problems



*Framework for Justice Statistics and Analysis", Statistics Canada, Nov. 2004, pg.6 (4)*

**We have a complicated web of issues we are struggling with-alcohol and drugs, gambling, sexual abuse, family violence and the full-spectrum or residential-school-survivor issues...."**

*"Mapping the Healing Experience of Canadian Aboriginal Communities", Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit, Cat.No: Js42-105/2002E, ISBN: No.: 0-662-32088-3, pg 38, (5)*

## In the past, learning education was a negative experience...

Historically, the residential school system lay the groundwork for disconnection of Aboriginals in public education. School was a negative experience, which did little to reinforce Aboriginal culture and history. "A major theme of a federal government report was that many of the problems encountered in Aboriginal communities today-loss of pride and spirituality, violence, and alcoholism can be traced back to that experience."(6)

**"When an Educational policy actively disassembles a culture it is not surprising that the likelihood of self-harm increases. The indigenous people living in B.C. alone reflects an overall (Youth) suicide rate 3-5 times higher than that for the country as a whole." (7)**

*"Best Practices in Increasing Aboriginal Postsecondary Enrolment Rates", R.A. Malatest and Associates, The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), May 2002 (6)*

*"Cultural Continuity as a Hedge Against Suicide In Canada's First Nations", M. Chandler, C. Lalonde, Transcultural Psychiatry, 35,1998, pg 8 (7)*

**"Any demonstration of individual superiority is avoided because it is seen as demonstrating the inferiority of others. A competitive classroom atmosphere therefore produces conflict in First Nations students who are disposed to learn cooperatively in groups rather than competitively as individuals."**

*"Aboriginal Education in Quesnel Now: Cultural Genocide in Canada Then" D. Lukiv, U.B.C., Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education, Fall 2000, Vol. 2, No. 2, pg 1 (8)*

## “The Arts” Reintegrates, Reaches Out, and Resolves

*“The Arts” in schools make a difference!*

“The Arts” draws upon a range of learning styles, allowing children to access learning. Fetal alcohol, dyslexia, adhd, special learning kids process information differently and the arts allow children to learn by offering different entry points. Hands-on projects worked because they were very often very different from the text based assignments of conven-

tional classroom work. This type of project gave at-risk students opportunities to succeed by addressing different learning styles and modalities.

*“Walking Tall In The Hall” A Mapping Review of Arts Smarts Projects in Aboriginal Settings Across Canada, B. Stevenson, 2006, pg 20 (9)*

In Saskatoon, an integrated arts curriculum embraced a holistic approach to reach inner city kids with great success. Composed primarily of students with Aboriginal ancestry it incorporates cultural traditions into its curriculum including Native dance, spirituality, art and cross-cultural learning. The school is holistic in its approach dealing with learning as defined by western culture, but also Aboriginal culture, and social issues such as sexuality and trauma. The success of this school is the sense of connectedness that evolves when learning is not just rote, but encompasses mind, body and soul.

**By reintegrating the historical way of teaching with the use of an Aboriginal Artist, through story telling and creative works, children are given the opportunity to embrace a culturally significant way of learning**

“..Aboriginal students related well to the Aboriginal Artist who came to work in the schools and suggested that positive role modeling was an important part of the student’s exploration of the arts.”

“The artist became a trusted teacher and mentor and was a positive role model to reinforce the (Aboriginal students) sense of identity and belonging in a good way.”

. *“Walking Tall In The Hall” A Mapping Review of ArtsSmarts Projectect in Aboriginal Settings Across Canada,,B. Stevenson, 2006, pg 20 (10)*

### *It’s Not Just Traditional Arts... It’s Not Just In The Schools*

Modern urban creative expression through Hip Hop is being embraced by Aboriginal Youth. Created in the Bronx to build self-esteem and a sense of belonging, an unique brand of hip hop is influencing urban Aboriginals.

**“It’s an empowerment method for our people. The first step is being involved, you’re empowering yourself. As soon as you get that power... you have the ability to empower your community in a whole range of different ways.”**

*“Movement Music: Hip Hop and Aboriginal Youth Activism, Derek Edenshaw, pg 1 (11)*

The arts draws upon a range of learning styles, allowing all kids to access learning. Fetal alcohol, dyslexia, adhd, special learning kids process information differently, and the arts allow children to learn by offering different entry points that are specific to them engaging them physically, mentally, and emotionally.

“Hands- on projects worked because they were often very different from the text based assignments of conventional classroom work. This type of project gave ‘at-risk’ students opportunities to succeed by addressing different learning styles and modalities.”

**Through art changes in the community happen. At Signal Hill Elementary School, drumming heard throughout the community, brought community members into the school to state their support for teaching of traditional songs... several community members volunteered to join the students.**

*“Walking Tall in the Hall” A Mapping Review of Arts Smarts Projects in Aboriginal Settings Across Canada, B. Stevenson, 2006, Page 22, (12)*

## Footnotes

1. "The Sacred Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life", P. Beck, A. Walter, N. Francisco, Navajo Community College Press, 1990 Northland Publishing, page 61 (1)
2. Laura Bird, Art Can Circle, September 2007 Newsletter (2)
3. "Best Practices in Increasing Aboriginal Postsecondary Enrolment Rates", R.A. Malatest and Associates, The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), May 2002, pg. 11 (3)
4. "Framework for Justice Statistics and Analysis", Statistics Canada, Nov. 2004, pg.6 (4)
5. "Mapping the Healing Experience of Canadian Aboriginal Communities", Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit, Cat.No: Js42-105/2002E, ISBN: No.: 0-662-32088-3, pg 38 (5)
6. Best Practices in Increasing Aboriginal Postsecondary Enrolment Rates", R.A. Malatest and Associates, The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), May 2002 (6)

7. "Cultural Continuity as a Hedge Against Suicide in Canada's First Nations", M. Chandler, C. Lalonde, UBC, Transcultural Psychiatry, 35, 1998, pg 8 (7)
8. "Aboriginal Education in Quesnel Now: Cultural Genocide in Canada Then" D. Lukiv, U.B.C., Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education, Fall 2000, Vol. 2, No. 2, pg 1 (8)
9. "Walking Tall in the Hall" A Mapping Review of Arts Smarts Projects in Aboriginal Settings Across Canada, B. Stevenson, 2006, Page 20 (9)
10. "Walking Tall in the Hall" A Mapping Review of Arts Smarts Projects in Aboriginal Settings Across Canada, B. Stevenson, 2006, pg 20 (10)
11. "Movement Music: Hip Hop and Aboriginal Youth Activism, Derek Edenshaw, pg 1 (11)
12. "Walking Tall In The Hall" A Mapping Review of Arts Smarts Projects in Aboriginal Settings Across Canada, B. Stevenson, 2006, pg 20 (12)

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5. "Mapping the Healing Experience of Canadian Aboriginal Communities", Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit, Cat.No: Js42-105/2002E, ISBN: No.: 0-662-32088-3,
6. "Sharing Our Success: Ten Case Studies in Aboriginal Schooling", The Advancement for Excellence In Education, 2004
7. "Surviving Time: The Persistence of Identity in this culture and that.", M. Chandler, UBC, Culture and Psychology, 6 (2), 209-231
8. "The Sacred Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life", P. Beck, A. Walter, N. Francisco, Navajo Community College Press, 1990 Northland Publishing, page 61
9. "Walking Tall in the Hall" A Mapping Review of Arts Smarts Projects in Aboriginal Settings Across Canada, B. Stevenson, 2006, Page 22

## Websites

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- [www.eastern.edu/publications](http://www.eastern.edu/publications): "Aboriginal Education In Quesnel Now, Cultural Genocide in Canada Then".
- [www.artcancircle.ca](http://www.artcancircle.ca): Art Can Circle, Sept. 2007 Newsletter
- <http://research2.csci.educ.ubc.ca/indigenation/mwalu.htm>: Movement Music, "Hip Hop and Aboriginal Youth Activism"
- [www.cmec.ca](http://www.cmec.ca): The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada
- [http://www.cihir-irsc.gc.ca/e/documents/SRW\\_e.pdf](http://www.cihir-irsc.gc.ca/e/documents/SRW_e.pdf): Report on the Workshop on Suicide-Related Research
- [www.artsmarts.ca](http://www.artsmarts.ca) : "Walking Tall In the Hall"
- [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnihb/index.htm](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnihb/index.htm) : "First Nations and Inuit Health Branch"
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- [www.4worlds@uleth.ca](http://www.4worlds@uleth.ca) : "A Clear and Present Danger: Pathways Toward Ending Aboriginal Family Violence and Abuse"



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