MNO-BIMAADZIWIN, A GOOD LIFE.

Transcription of panel discussion with Verna Kirkness, Dr. Lorna Williams, Tory Fisher moderated by Tanya Lukin-Linklater. Opening remarks with Chief Marianna Couchie and closing reflections by National Chief Shawn Atleo.

Presented by the Assembly of First Nations & Nipissing Nation.

A panel discussion of First Nation educators taking stock, presenting promising approaches and offering insights on advancing education in First Nation communities. 
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MARIANNA COUCHIE
My name is Marianna Couchie and I am Chief of Nipissing First Nation. I am so pleased to see the turn out and [I am] looking forward to a positive constructive conversation about what can happen with this new opportunity, Indian Control of Indian Education.

I was so proud to hear Blair singing. Blair is one of our graduates, he came to this [Nipissing Secondary] school, he learned his language, he learned about the drum and he is a good drummer. Meegwech Blair. I am really proud of you. He went off to university and got his Native Language teaching certificate from Nipissing University.

Peter Beaucage is a well respected elder in our community and I was really pleased when Peter agreed to do the prayer for us this evening.

I want to thank the National Chief for coming back to Nipissing [Nation], this is not his first visit here – you are welcome here in our territory.

And to our distinguished panel here this evening, Lorna Williams from British Columbia, Verna Kirkness who was part of that very first policy paper, Indian Control of Indian Education and of course another one of our graduates who is going to graduate from Nipissing University very soon - Tory Fisher. It’s so nice to see these people go on and then be willing to come back home and to help out. Tanya Lukin-Linklater who is going to be our moderator.

I am really excited about tonight and tomorrow and it’s just great – glad to see so many people from the community, from the school and from other First Nation communities. I am happy. You’re all welcome here.

TANYA LUKIN-LINKLATER
I want to say thank you to Chief Marianna Couchie, I had planned to introduce her but it is only fitting that she welcome you all initially. I’d also like to thank Elder Peter Beaucage and Blair Beaucage for that beautiful song – it’s a wonderful way to open. What Chief Marianna Couchie didn’t mention to you is that she is a three term Chief and she is one of the first in her community to achieve and complete her post-secondary education and she has dedicated thirty (30) years of her career to education and is now a community leader. Thank you for the welcome Chief Couchie.

Welcome to all of you to Mno-Bimaadiziwin, a panel discussion – First Nations educators taking stock, presenting promising approaches and offering insights on advancing First Nation education in First Nations communities. This event was jointly organized by Nipissing First Nation and the Assembly of First Nations and we’re pleased to have participants in the room and the online audience viewing the live-stream[now archived at http://flash.nipissingu.ca/videos/Bimaadiziwin.html].

My name is Tanya Lukin-Linklater, I am currently the Director of the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives at Nipissing University. I was asked to moderate the panel and I am delighted to be here.

I’d like to briefly introduce the honoured guests who have travelled to Nipissing First Nation to be in this event, including National Chief Shawn Atleo – we’re quite honoured to have him here. As well as Verna Kirkness, Dr. Lorna Williams and Tory Fisher who is a community member. I am going to invite each of the panelists to consider the topic by taking stock, taking a look at their own experiences in aboriginal education or consider their thoughts as we all move together towards First Nations education.

We are going to open with the three panelists who are going to speak for a short while and I am going to introduce each of them. We will then open it up to questions from the audience and as well via Twitter from those who are viewing online.

I will begin with Verna Kirkness. Verna is a lifelong advocate for local control and adequate funding for First Nations education. Among her many accomplishments she was instrumental in developing the National Indian Brotherhoods landmark policy on Indian Control of Indian Education. She is Cree from Fisher River First Nation in Manitoba and has worked in this field for nearly sixty years. I want to welcome Verna and turn it over to you.

VERNA KIRKNESS
I don’t know how I could have worked for sixty (60) years and I am only fifty eight (58). I would like to thank Chief Marianna Couchie for the invitation to visit the Nipissing First Nation territory. I am honoured to be here, to be in your land and to have met so many of your people. I had a grand tour of east and west to see how huge the territory is here, it’s really a pleasure and I would like to acknowledge the elder Peter for the
prayer and for the song by Blair – that is very nice. This is probably the basis of Indian control, doing things the right way. Mno-Bimaadiziwin, I'll say it the way we say it in Cree, I keep trying to change these Ojibway's to talk properly – I'm outnumbered here I better be careful.

Mno-bimaadiziwin, how can …to live a good life and before I do that, I'd like to acknowledge the AFN [Assembly of First Nations] also for the partnership you have with this [Nipissing] Nation and inviting us to be here Shawn and Laurie.

It's - what did someone describe me as when I came in…what did they say I was? Anyway, I said, “No I'm an archive”.

I have been around a long time and I'm actually very proud of the fact that I had a hand in this policy on Indian Control of Indian Education. I carry this around. This is my bible and I saw somebody else here -Muriel also has her bible today. Now I hope that everybody has had an opportunity to read Indian Control of Indian Education. It was the beginning, it was the start and we have to remember people like [late] George Manuel who was the National Chief at the time for his perseverance and his hard work to get the policy through – the same kind of work that [National Chief] Shawn Atleo is doing now at this other phase of taking control, or making our lives better.

When we did the policy of Indian Control of Indian Education – I think you know all know the history of what led to this Indian Control of Indian Education policy. It started with Trudeau's White Paper where he was going to remove the special status of Indians. This is first time, I think that the people of this country rallied together to speak against that policy. And so all the different provinces and territories wrote what they called at that time position papers and they expressed what they wanted in education, health, community development and economic development and treaties and what have you -so all of them did that. When that was completed, it had an impact. I know people say in our province that Wahlung had an impact on the direction that everything went in Manitoba following our position paper.

It was the brain wave of the national organization called, NIB [National Indian Brotherhood] at the time to put together the education positions of all the papers. So at the time this was written, I was the education director for Manitoba - that's how I got involved, I was not working at the national office at the time. So when that happened, we all came together like a committee - one or two people from each of the provinces and do you know what we found? The positions were so clear. It was so clear - parental responsibility and local control. We were tired of being under Indian Affairs and it was time for our people to take direction. Parental responsibility and local control. And we pulled out all of the things we were talking about – responsibility; the responsibility was for our people, our bands to run our own education. The responsibility as what was written in the treaties for the monies to still flow from the government. We talked about programs, cultural programs. I always talked about – we can't be pigeon holing and putting a band aid all the time – the provincial programs adding something here of ours, a little bit here of our history and a little bit of this and that.

We must try and build an education based on our culture, our customs and our beliefs and so on. So I think that's the ideal. We talked about programs not unlike what we're still doing today, and we talked about teachers – training teachers. I started teaching in 1954 and at that time it was said there were only about twenty Aboriginal teachers in Canada. How many do we have today? Thousands. Four or five thousand – I don't know the number but we have many teachers today and a lot of it was born out of this - people started to get active, universities got into the picture and started teacher training programs and so forth. We wanted teachers, we wanted counsellors, and we wanted better facilities. So all of those things and all of those things we've been talking about all along. You know that we have to – that's the way we control education. And we've had problems all along the way as all of you have noticed. And a lot of problems were related to funding.

After that I went to work for the National Indian Brotherhood and I went a lot of places in this country and I held workshops in communities on reserves for two to three days at a time. What are you going to do with a new education system? How are you going to build that ideal education? What is it you want for your children? And I'll tell you it was astounding what people knew and wanted. So all this talk about that we don't know what we want – we know! And a lot of it comes from every single person, elders and parents and grandmothers and everyone contributed to that.

In a lot of cases what I've always talked about is legislation. One of the things we did after we had this Indian Control of Indian Education [policy paper] – we're still under the Indian Act. And the Indian Act says the Minister can enter into agreements with provinces, territories, churches, charitable organizations – I forget who else but not Indian bands. And that to me is the reason why they [Indian Affairs] still can arbitrarily you know do things – give us inadequate funds, not enough money for languages or not support the things that we want to do. So I think that, this is why we should have had legislation. I know we made an effort and I can't go into that right now. But we know we need legislation, we know that's the only way control will happen in our communities, we know that that's the way funding can happen and that's what we're about today. That's what the National Chief and the Chiefs of today are fighting for. We need legislation. Not the kind of the Minister of Indian Affairs or Aboriginal Affairs - not the Act they put out that all of us said no, no. But the one where he is promising the funding, the control – this is what we have to go after. We have to try to make sure that we're doing that because when we think of legislation today – I was saying this to National Chief, I oversimplify things I think but I also think they're workable. I always say all we need in the legislation is for the Minister to agree to hand over education to the bands just the same way it's written for provinces, territories, and so forth and hand it over because then bands can do whatever they want.

There are bands in this country that have done a lot of things. When you look around there are models of excellence out there, we have done a good job in a lot of our schools. And they've done it different ways, some are doing it like a
very involved in the development of this - but it doesn't matter as long as it starts from the band and the band decides. There are bands that are working with the province and its working well because they feel they have a true partnership. So sometimes I hear people are afraid to get into the provincial system or get to be sold out to the province - I don't think so when the bands are so strong.

I just hope that we don't miss this opportunity that the National Chief is working on now and company - to come forward and hold the Minister to that promise of 1.9 billion dollars and monies for languages and control. The real word. I heard the Minister myself when he made the announcement and he said that he is working himself out of a job. And we all clapped. So we don't need that, Shawn can be our Minister - no I'm just kidding. I'll stop for now.

TANYA LUKIN-LINKLATER
Thank you very much for those initial comments. I really appreciate that. And that history and context as well for Indian Control of Indian Education.

I'd like to introduce Lorna Williams who, Dr. Lorna Williams who will be our next speaker on the panel. She is from the Lil'wat First Nation of Mount Currie, BC [British Columbia]. She is recently retired from university and she's been a lifelong educator from the community level to the provincial level. She began advocating at the K-12 education level and moved into university education. And it should be noted that it is now mandatory for every teacher candidate in BC [British Columbia] to enroll in a course on Aboriginal education prior to them graduating with their BEd [Bachelor of Education]. So I just want to welcome Dr. Lorna Williams and ask her to speak on the panel now.

LORNA WILLIAMS
[Speaks Lil'wat] Thank you very much for letting me lay my language on this ground and welcoming me to be a part of your gathering here. I'd like to thank all of those who made that possible. I thought that - I was unclear about what it was that I would say tonight – I was just so thrilled to come, to participate, to be part of this and I thought about Indian Control of Indian Education and what that has meant to us.

And whereas I didn't have much to do with the policy development, I was a young energetic woman in my community in 1973 when the paper was newly posed. A group of grade six students in my village were going to be schooled in our own ways, as Lil’wat. They were all speakers of our language. They all spent time on the land. And so they were a very strong force.

And that's how we began our school. Mount Currie became the second band controlled school in Canada. The first one was in Alberta.

We began the school by visiting every family in my community and as a young person I was the one who was sent to interview families and to ask each family, “We have now an opportunity to design a school and to deliver schooling and education in the way that we feel we need - and so what does that mean to you? What will that look like?” And that was a very important part of what we learned.

What the parents said was we want our children to be strong in who they are, we want them to know their history - our history, as well as other peoples history. They said we want our children to be able to live and speak in more than one language because that's the way we have always been. They said we want our children to have choices and to be the drivers of their own destinies. And they said that it was important for our community to be on a healing journey because education has been the instrument that has been used to try to destroy who we are, what we believe, our values. It has attempted to destroy our relationship with our land. It has attempted to destroy our relationship with our ancestors, our descendants and each other. Because that's what a western oriented school does - it separates people from the generation before, in that way it controls. And so we had a big job.

It has taken us all of these years to try to figure out how to balance what it means to be an educated Lil’wat person - just as I know that you have spent countless years to determine what it means to be an educated Anishinabe.

Everywhere I have traveled in the world speaking with Indigenous people, I’ve asked them what is the word that describes teaching and learning? What is the word in your language that describes education? In most places there is no such word. The closest that people have is, to be a whole, good human being. And so my question for this next stage in our quest to reclaim our right to inculcate the next generation is to ask - so what does that mean today? To grow good whole human beings? What does that mean? What do we have to contend with in the structures that exist today?

That is our job to figure out what that means because our children, in order to fight the racism that they meet on a daily basis when they leave our communities, in order for our children to figure out and to know how to cope with the damage that is being done to our lands, the water and the air -
they are going to need to know how to live and what it means to be whole, to know and to live in ceremony, to know and to live and to be able to communicate with the land, the animals, the water and the plants because those are our sources of knowledge. They continue to be. And we need to speak those languages in order to be able to take our responsibility, to be the beings that grow from this earth.

I spent the day today visiting your villages, and I spent some time here visiting your school and I want to tell you it gives me great hope and a great deal of gratitude to know that there are people who are working towards that. I saw very healthy, young people and sometimes we forget to look at our accomplishments. And I want to tell you that when I go home I’m going to tell them about the school that I visited in Nipissing, so thank you very much.

TANYA LUKIN-LINKLATER
Thank you very much Dr. Lorna Williams. I’m going to introduce Tory Fisher. Tory Fisher is here to my left and he is from Nipissing First Nation as Chief Marianna Couachie mentioned. He is a graduate of Nbingis Secondary School where this event is being held this evening and a graduate from Nipissing University with a Bachelor of Arts in Native Studies and he is currently completing his Bachelor of Education degree and is firmly committed to his community and culture. I want to welcome Tory to share and contribute some of his thoughts about Aboriginal education.

TORY FISHER
Mii gwech [introduces self in Ojibway]. Before I started I wanted to acknowledge you in our Ojibway language for I believe the more we use it, we won't lose it. I am very honoured to be here and sitting among these great people and I want to thank everyone for coming out.

Over the next ten minutes or less I wanted to talk about the promising approaches to First Nations education for which I believe our time is now to take action on our own individual education. As well I want to talk about the insights on advancing First Nations communities for which I believe that education is key to sustaining First Nations languages and cultures. I have heard time and time again and we have heard it here, that is we need to learn our language and our culture. You need to know who you are as Anishnabe. My cousin Blair and I came across this one quote that was so powerful and it was by Steve Wood from Northern Cree, “If you believe in yourself who you are where you come from your culture and more importantly your language, it will take you to places you have never even dreamed of. Keep doing the good thing and good things will happen”.

Let me tell you, Blair and I have been places we have never even dreamed of. Blair is now an Ojibway language teacher here at Nbingis High School and if you asked him six years ago and for those of you Nipissing people out here, he would probably just say, “boa - not even”. And as far as myself, I graduated college and I have two university degrees and I am in the process of obtaining my education degree and my mom questioned whether I was going to graduate high school on the day of graduation day. She had me thinking and I was pretty scared. But aside from Blair and I’s personal experiences, I feel that as I move forward in my education I learned to believe in myself and who I was through culture and language. As we move forward in our own education system, we can begin to have students beginning to believe in themselves by knowing exactly who they are as Anishnabemwin or any First
Nation they come from. As I said earlier, I believe that we are still very fortunate to have what we have left in our communities. For the future generations to come, I would like to see our language and our culture help students believe in themselves by knowing exactly who they are. Meegwech.

TANYA LUKN-INKLINKATER
Thank you very much Tory. I'd like to begin by starting with a question to the panel and some of you had raised this issue of parental involvement or community member involvement or engaging with community and so the question is, Recognizing that we can only truly achieve First Nation control if we truly get our communities engaged, what are the best strategies to engage parents and community members? I'd like to put that out to the panel.

VERN KIRKNESS
You know that's the ideal and that's what we hoped for back in '72. Because if you get the parents more involved with the school - some of our parents have not very good impression of school from the residential school experiences - but to try to change that and see what school is like. I haven't been working closely with schools anymore but I do hear that it's still a challenge. The parents are sort of involved in a way by being school committees or advisory committees or by being boards, but sometimes it ends there. And to me we still have to go further to bring the parents in. I remember a long time ago before this Indian Control of Indian Education [policy] even came in and I was a principal at my school, and I want to emphasize that it was a three room school on my reserve and I was the principal - one of the things I used to do is have parent nights where the parents came in and we did talk a bit about education. And I did talk a lot of Cree to the people - they spoke in Cree. And they came out and one of the things I did, which I thought was a good idea, was we had a box, a question box and I knew that some people might not want to ask their questions but I said you could just slip your questions in this box. But I put some questions there earlier like about attendance and about discipline and so we had a good discussion about those things. But they liked coming to the school and we'd have lunch after and have a nice gathering together. And I did that again at Norway House where I was a principal of a twelve room school and the same thing, it was a Cree community and I think I would have to say that I would like to see more happen. Because when they are more involved the parents come in, not just on parent day and come and look at the report cards or something but to try and find another way to bring them in and be comfortable in the school. I know some places are doing some things you know but I think on the whole we have not really arrived at that particular point of having the parents, the grandparents even. I do know that sometimes they have grandparents day now - that's a really big thing being there with their grandchildren. The grandchildren are just so delighted to have their grandmothers and grandfathers there and then they all eat together - just different things like that bring the people together. So that's all I want to contribute to that point.

LORNA WILLIAMS
I worked, as I said I started my education career, my teaching career in my home community and then later I worked in a very large urban school district in Vancouver. And everywhere I have been what I've noticed is when the school opens the doors, is warm, is welcoming, is informative, engaging, accepting - students come and they like to come. Parents come and they like to come.

It's when as educators we learn that we're not the only expert in the lives of children and that school is not the only place to learn. And so it's how much we can break down some of these walls and the barriers that education has placed, that we do become much more engaging as a structure. I don't think it's that complicated. We as educators need to look at ourselves, what we've learned about schooling and the role and the function of parents and community.

TANYA LUKN-INKLINKATER
The question is, why has the effort taken forty years for First Nations to achieve control of education and what critical capacity do we need to take real steps forward now?

LORNA WILLIAMS
I think that if you go across the country, people have been doing the very best that they can and I don't think we've stalled. I don't think we've waited, people have been doing things. But as I said at the beginning of my talk, that education in any culture, in any language, in any land on this planet - education is the combat field for the minds and the hearts and the souls of the people. It's the most powerful institution in any society and so it isn't any, it shouldn't be any surprise that a controlling government does not want to give up any ground because as soon - and I've seen this happen time and time again - that as soon as a community is getting, is producing strong, good, healthy young people - it's time to shut it down. That's what we're up against. But we've never quit and people love their children and so they'll keep trying.

It's no surprise that every policy in this country that has exerted control over us, it's been done through education. It's been done through education, you know the other stuff they spend a lot of time on land, health but it's always education that is the driver. And so it's really important that we assume our rightful place in taking, in exerting some determination about how our children will live and what they'll learn.

VERN KIRKNESS
You say it's taken forty years, let's not forget that in the forty years we have done a lot, a lot has happened. Think of pre-Indian Control of Indian Education, we were all under the Indian Affairs branch, Indian Affairs education. We hear a lot of talk and it sounds as if Indian Affairs was still running the programs, this is from the government side - that things would be better. But when we started this work, the statistic was
ninety percent of our students were dropping out of school and we’ve made a big leap now to what is it they say now thirty five percent? I’m never very good at statistics but we’ve made great strides and a lot of it has come from having high schools on our reserves just like you have here.

Things have happened, we have done - our people have done a lot of things in spite of the government, in spite of the obstacles, in spite of the lack of support. I remember a very successful program in Manitoba where we were teaching in the Native language in a number of the communities and how does the government deal with that? They stop the funding when something is going good. That’s the kind of power they’ve had. So one of the reasons - this is what I eluded to earlier is that, we’re under the Indian Act [and] not a legislation that gives control to the bands to our own people – that’s one.

Second one, why? Because we haven’t had adequate funds. [Do] you know the government pays a higher fee to a Native student that’s going to provincial or public school and we get at least one third (1/3) or two thirds (2/3) of that amount, if that. We’re underfunded even in that way. We can’t have the resource teachers we want, we can’t have any number of things. And the government had a cap on funding, like they said two percent (2%) a year and inflation is even higher than that.

So with this new promise, this announcement they said they’d up it to four point five percent (4.5%) and get more in line, let’s say our people are getting seven thousand dollars ($7000) a student now it could go up to much higher on that – again don’t quote me on these figures but something like that (fifteen or sixteen or seventeen thousand (15-16-17 000) I mean it could make a big difference. A lot of people - one community I’ll tell you about one in Manitoba they got so annoyed, it’s a band school, with lack of funding so the chief of that school said you can have your education back, you can run this school again, we don’t want it because we don’t have enough funds. And the funny thing that happened was Indian Affairs came back to them and said you can’t do that. And so they started negotiating and those people get, they did negotiate and they were getting, what did they say Laurie? Sixteen thousand dollars ($16 000) per student right now today for the last little while to run their school. So now they can pay their teachers adequately, they could add resources they need in the school and its really flourishing so money isn’t everything but it really helps a lot.

And I marvel when I see things like here and other places how well they’re doing in spite of the limitations that are placed on us. So if we could get the legislation and this statutory funding in place, I think we’re on to the next level you’re [motions to Lorna] talking about. We can carry on and do more things and give our people a better education. We don’t want an inferior education. We don’t even want an equal education to the provinces. We want a better education. That’s what we say.

TANYA LUKIN-LINKLATER
We have a question, “There is so much diversity among First Nations, how can this be respected when we’re considering moving forward around First Nation Education?

VERNA KIRKNESS
That’s a challenge. Sometimes I look back on it, I think things are more complicated now than they were in ’72, in the 70’s. There’s so many more groups and so many more – I think it’s a difficult task but I think this all goes back to our culture, our culture of working together – cooperation rather than competition.

Back to our seven teachings of humbleness and love and respect – all of those things, I think we have to rise above our personal - rise above everything and look at the bigger cause. There is something that is for all of our people and is going to benefit all of our people. I know we’re bound to have... we’re human beings and you know the diversity will be there, but I don’t think there is a magic way to do it except to try to be communicative and share. It’s all of these values that we have, we share but to look higher for everybody, not just our own village, not just our own community but what’s going to help us as a Nation of Nations.

LORNA WILLIAMS
Mono-lingualism and mono-culturalism is something that we all need to be concerned about because that’s something that we all are needing to contend with in this day and age of technology and because English exerts its power over every part of this world. In British Columbia where we have probably the greatest diversity of languages it needs to not be seen as a problem or a challenge but as a richness. Just like any part of earth, it’s the diversity that’s healthy. It’s the diversity that makes the land healthy and rich and productive. Mono-culturalism in agriculture has always destroyed the earth. It’s the same with us.

When I was a child growing up in my village I was surrounded by people who had never been to school and every one of them spoke several languages. They had no problem communicating with people who came to our village no matter where they came from -somebody could intervene. Diversity shouldn’t be
seen as a challenge or a problem, our people always knew how to live with it and we can continue if only we’re brave enough and courageous enough to learn those lessons and to continue to maintain them today.

TANYA LUKIN-LINKLATER
Thank you Lorna and Tory, I’d like to open it up to the floor and the audience as well as the audience online to send in a question via Twitter.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
My question is where you feel the future is for early childhood education? They’re sending to children to school earlier and earlier. The future for early childhood education and elementary in urban centres, there is not aboriginal education offered at public or catholic school systems and they’re being sent to school at such a young age, it’s earlier and earlier.

Education starts at home and in the community and I’m wondering what the vision is of these young impressionable beings and the vision of the future for them?

LORNA WILLIAMS
I don’t know what the vision is.
I have always been very concerned about this idea of earlier the better - the earlier that our children learn the values that are promoted by school the better they’ll do, the earlier that our children will learn a language the better they’ll do, the earlier that we can remove the children from their families the better they will do. It’s an area that - because people love their children they want their children to have as many and any advantage possible, people then will buy into early childhood.

A real concern of mine in British Columbia is that Early Childhood Education training and Early Childhood policies do not have very much indigenous knowledge embedded in them and it’s an area that we have not been able to change. It’s a concern of mine that because of the policies that guide Early Childhood Education parents, cultural holders, language teachers - cannot participate in those programs. It’s a real concern of mine that very little is being done to ensure that our cultural knowledge, our cultural wisdom, our languages are part of those programs. Yet when I look at some of the language immersion programs for really young children, and I see in those programs there are often fluent speakers – older speakers in the communities in British Columbia anyway. It isn’t just the language. Yes the children are learning the language and it’s wonderful to hear them and to witness that. But they are learning how we relate to one another as human beings and it’s their spirits that blossom and bloom.

Its language yes but it’s the way of relating that’s also part of that relationship. And I would hope that that’s something that we would work towards is to have those same kinds of relationships in early childhood education rather than the values that guide it currently.

TANYA LUKIN-LINKLATER
What should new First Nations teachers do to support First Nation Control Education over the next forty years?

VERNA KIRKNESS
The same thing old First Nations teachers do.

LORNA WILLIAMS
In our time we still had people who lived on the land and who had the values, we’ve had forty years now of young people learning other values. I’m not saying that they don’t hold our values but it’s become much more distant.

I was having tea with a young person thirty (30) years old, she was very successful in high school, she’s gone to college, she’s attending university and she’s had several careers already like many young people today. She was sitting there and she said, Lorna I’m the product of what the school system wanted, what the government wanted and what the church wanted. She said I know very little about who I am. I have everything I need, I spend my time figuring out what to do next with my finger nails, what to wear – you know all young people go through that it’s true. But she said I realize I don’t know very much about my history, and about who I am.

And so, this young teacher – learn who you are, learn the worlds from which you came and learn the beauty and the wisdom of our people. It’s really hard what we face because our knowledge and our wisdom has been devalued and not held to be very important and so it’s really important that we do whatever we can to continue to share that knowledge and we’re able to do it now through the tools that we have.

I think for any of us, that’s what our work is cut out to do - who are we? What have we been? And who do we continue to want to be?

VERNA KIRKNESS
I’d like to say to the person that asked the question, excuse me for being flippant - I just had to say that just as a joke. But yes I think that we’re trained in the universities and you don’t always learn the things that are going to be important to your people. I think there’s some unlearning that you have to do and there’s some re-learning you have to do - and you do that on the job when you get into the schools. You can make sure you connect with the parents, the elders and know the community. It doesn’t matter if it’s your community and you’ve been away for awhile. Speak your language as much as you can to the older people and gain the respect of everybody there and the children alike.

There are things that a young teacher has to do.
There are many teachers that come to our schools, some of them that are not Native and they come to the school and the same things rings true – you have to learn your community. You can’t sit in your teacherage and escape every weekend and not spend time with the community. Whether you’re Native or non-Native, you’ve got to be part of the community.

That is the reason way back in the 70’s why we called for in Indian Control of Indian Education - training our own teachers and fortunately we have been able to do that through various universities in Canada; but again it’s not total. But at least we’ve been able to include courses for our teachers on methodologies and on our history and on our cultures and teaching our languages so they can go out a little more
prepared than if you’d went to a teacher education program that didn’t do those things. There’s a number of things to consider and it’s a really good question and I hope that people take it to heart. I want to mention this to everybody; people that go to teacher education are not really required in most universities to take a course on indigenous people, aboriginal people. I started working at the University of British Columbia in 1980 and we started talking there about getting a course, a mandatory course for all teachers to take at least one course on aboriginal people and we never got it through. But you know what? About two years ago it finally happened - can you imagine that? In 2011!

But see how long it takes to get something to happen that will benefit us? So there are considerations for teachers.

TORY FISHER
As we move forward in our education and it’s something that I’ve heard over and over again is we have to visit our elders, visit our language speakers and pick up those things that we’ve lost. For me being younger, we have a very pivotal role in the next coming years in picking up our culture and language. I think that going to visit our elders and learning our cultures and our languages we sometimes - as young educators we’re afraid to seek that extra help in learning those things and I think that it’s okay to not be afraid and to make your mistakes as you go along and learn from them and learn from our elders.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
It’s not a question, it’s an additional remark. Indspire has a mentorship program for new teachers to First Nations schools. I just learned about it last fall and I’m in it now, I’m one of the mentors. I’m mentoring a young lady in a Quebec school, she was French and because I have a lot of French language I am able to converse with her. So I thought that was really cool but it’s all across Canada.

TANYA LUKIN-LINKLATER
Thank you for that comment. It’s really important to be aware of the resources that are available, that are out there. It sounds like a really exciting program at Indspire for mentorship of Aboriginal teachers.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
Good evening, my name is George Couchie. I just retired from the Ontario Provincial Police after thirty three (33) years of policing.

Back in 1970 in Ontario we went to self-government with policing and the reason we went to self-government was so that we would have more of an attachment to our community, we would have more understanding and we would understand our people. They hired quite a few aboriginal officers throughout Ontario.

Before I retired I went to the superintendent and said, when we look back from 1970 - have we lowered the rates of suicide in our community? Have we lowered the drug rate? Have we lowered the murdered or missing women rate in Ontario? She said no to everything. And we really haven’t.

We became a product not of Aboriginal people but of society, of the Ontario Provincial Police or the police services that we were working for. We fell into their mode instead of learning about our culture. If it wasn’t for a few years ago when some Aboriginal officers in the Ontario Provincial Police decided to learn about their culture and learn about their communities and that really pushed the OPP to really have an understanding about why our communities are so broken. And we’re still broken today.

Hopefully the teachers don’t fall in the same circumstances that the young police officers have of being a product of what society wanted and not of what we should learn - especially in our communities and in our schools – the seven grandfather teachings about love and respect.

I asked one of the teachers one time, who teaches those things in our schools now? And they said well it is not up to us to teach about love and respect that should come from our homes but our problem is that our homes are not teaching that either. So it’s how do aboriginal people take that upon ourselves to learn about our seven grandfather teachings and start teaching our children about that before they get to school? Everybody says that it’s just common sense that they should be doing that but common sense and common action are two different things. Common sense could be out here and common action could be out here. Your doctor probably tells you to eat proper and start to exercise, stop smoking - but forty (40) percent of all doctors are overweight. So common sense and common action are two different things and how do we bring those two together especially with our communities - correcting our communities same is in Nipissing here. We have so many kids who are hooked onto Oxycotin, drugs and things like that. We are a broken community. We really need to start to learn especially in our homes about those simple things like we talked about, the seven grandfather teachings.

Hopefully the young teachers go from their heart and not as we police officers have fallen into being a product of what the police world wants us to be. And that was my comment, thank you.

MARIANNA COUCHIE
George you have neglected to say what an important role that you play in educating the Ontario Provincial Police officers and the police forces about who we are as Native people. George is an excellent role model and he works with one of our community members, Carol Guppy and they do marvellous training, sensitivity training. And you forgot to say that George so I just wanted to add that as well.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
Hi. Good evening. My name is Robin and I come from Bear Island, Lake Temagami. I graduated from the Bachelor of Education program last year and I am currently working in education right now at Nipissing First Nation.

Part of what I am thinking about right now with First Nation education is that our westernized education system is also struggling. Some of the research I did last year from a
European educator, Sir Ken Robinson he described that the westernized education system is built upon industrialized revolution [and] so that in itself is causing some problems as far as social, economic issues and environmental issues for the future of everyone. So in that sense we need to change our education system to be able to have innovative thinkers to do what we need to do with these global issues that are coming forward.

I would argue our education system is built upon the Indian Act and we are also confined within the western education system. So we are faced with two very hard issues to deal. I think part of our problem is structural, it is like trying to fit a circle in a square. That is one way I try to bring some simplicity to it.

But I think that the area going forward is one of how do we create innovative thinkers to go forward and deal with the social issues, environmental issues and global issues that are coming not only for our people but all people as a whole? Curriculum development? How do we in our educational system create/develop curriculum that also incorporates our inherited culture and identity within the confines of a westernized structural system? I think that’s one of our most challenging things and I would like to do some research around that but I was just wondering what are your thoughts on that?

Thank you.

LORNA WILLIAMS

I began my career in education in my home community asking the question about what is learning and teaching and what is education to our people - because our ways were not written down anywhere and we didn’t talk about them as being this is our way. So nobody could say to me, this is the way it is. I spent a good deal of my time as we were developing the school and as I was learning to be a teacher – trying to figure that out. I spent maybe another twenty years trying to understand what happens to people when they become distanced from their language and their cultural foundation and then through that; kind of learned the role through the grandparent, aunt, uncle and siblings as a teaching unit, as a teaching force - to try to understand what that function is. So then I took all of what I have learned in this last part of my professional career to see if it’s possible to take our knowledge system, our processes of teaching and learning and to build them into university - and the university is the gatekeeper of western knowledge. They’re the ones who say don’t go any further as Verna knows very well the university uses because that’s not how we go about teaching and learning. Time is an area of control. The western education system is very, very wedded to social stratification and status building. Grading is something in the school system and especially at university they are wedded to because they need status building and stratification to make their structure work. So by simply, and it’s very simple to say: no I will not do the grading system the way that you do and, I won’t adhere to the time. What they said to me was no student will come to your class because they need a grade in order to be able to compete with other students for scholarships and for jobs. In that class I always had fifty (50) or more students.

The whole course was designed around Lil’wat principles of teaching and learning and some of those principles are to learn about Kamucwkalha. That concept in my society – and I know that you must have a word similar in your language, is when a group of people come together to experience something, to work together, to struggle together, to achieve a goal - there comes a moment in time when an energy flows and people work together. It isn’t that everybody thinks as one. It’s that everybody thinks and honours their own thinking and contributes it to the good of the whole. That concept is really important to humanity, to anybody and if you can build that concept and achieving that in any group - then you can get somewhere because creativity flows and it’s to its greatest.

Innovation flows to the best of the community, it’s not harmful. Another concept is Celhcelh and it means that every person knows what their gifts are and contributes it to the whole. We’re not all the same. There was a question earlier about diversity - we function the best when we each bring our best to any situation. There were many more of those that I built into the course and then I invited people from the communities to work with the students - I encouraged them to not think like a teacher, to not think like a professor from the university but, to bring the richness of their own wisdom to their work with the students. And the students struggled because they couldn’t - they had to learn to function in a different way. They had to learn that in our world we don’t ask questions in a way that we’re made to ask questions in a way that we were doing together. And what the students - no matter where they came from would say to me - they waited all week to be able to come to our learning community and that it was good for their knowledge. It was good their spirits. It was good for their hearts and I know that those people who have been involved in those courses are making a difference no matter where they go.

There were also people who came to those courses, our own people who had been separated and sent to be adopted by families outside and even though many of them came from very loving families - in these courses they got back in touch with figuring out how to reattach to their roots.
All of those kinds of things can happen. They can happen in an institution when there is a will in the institution itself and, when there are people who are willing. As I watched our elders, wisdom keepers, knowledge keepers they’ve never ever waned as far as I know in their willingness to keep on trying even when they have been treated disrespectfully and when people have abused and used their knowledge.

Our people because of who we are, we are always willing to share and to share our knowledge and wisdom. It’s how well can others listen and hear what we have to teach.

TANYA LUKN-LINKLATER
I just wanted to say that I was quite honoured to have moderated this panel, we are getting close to the time here. There is one additional question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
Hello. My question is, with the advances in technology and with its integration in the classroom and with culture in mind, how do you see technology in playing a role in trying to preserve the culture? That’s my question, thank you.

VERNA KIRKNESS
I am going to have to pass on that one because I can hardly turn on my computer. I said one time to someone I went to buy an mp3 player or mp4 or whatever they are and I said I don’t know how to download this and he said, ask your grandchild. I do notice one thing with technology - that it’s as important to us [First Nations] as it is to the rest of society. And I am pleased to see computers – keeping up with the times because this is just another way of learning.

TORY FISHER
With the new technology and the integration of it within the classrooms, our ability to increase our own culture and our own languages - we’re able to take another step forward in being able to preserve our culture and our languages. I’ve seen very often, I know here in our community we have language courses and I’ve been very fortunate to tune in on a live stream and watch the language courses take place and as we move forward I would like to - even in my own practice of education is use it in that way. I see it more often from our own people and again not being afraid to use these new technologies and to share among other learners.

LORNA WILLIAMS
Like Verna - technology - I am still quite nervous about it but I try to engage with it. I’m the Chair of a Board from an organization called First Peoples Culture Council and one of things we have used technology is to support and to promote our languages and culture.

Our institution has figured out a way to support communities firstly to archive and document their language – whatever it is that they want to archive and document. That’s been a really important thing for us to do in British Columbia because our speaker groups are so small. We’ve been able to take that archived and documented language and to use that data to the communities to develop curriculum, to develop teacher resources, to develop dictionaries, talking dictionaries and then lately we’ve been helping communities to develop apps in their language. So we have now twelve (12) apps and we are working on five (5) more and our goal is that every language will have one. What we are noticing is that young people are using those apps and they can use it on their iPhones and iPads and computers wherever they are. They can access their language. They can hear speakers use the language. They can hear and they can see the language because it is also written. Last year we developed a chat app. We have developed a keyboard for every language in Canada so that young people can download the alphabet or the orthography for their language and they can use the current tools that they have - the technology tools to be able to communicate and send emails to one another and text messages and tweets to one another in their language.

People are using this tool.

It’s really important that we find active ways that people will live with and continue to grow with their language and their culture. And that’s one of the ways that technology is being used. When I was saying that technology is something that we have to deal with because it promotes mono-lingualism - one of the ways in which it does that is the companies that have developed technology for example promotes only the use in common languages and it doesn’t support our languages and so, we have had to figure out a way to deal with that.

TANYA LUKN-LINKLATER
We’re getting close to the end of our discussion. I want to turn it over to National Chief Shawn Atleo who is a hereditary chief of Ahousaht First Nation on Vancouver Island. He is the two time National chief for the Assembly of First Nations and we are quite honoured to have him here tonight. We are going to ask him to do some closing remarks and reflections.

SHAWN ATLEO
Thank you Tanya - [Greetings in his language], expressing appreciation as has been done by others for being here at Nipissing.

I was just thinking Chief that I believe I was sitting here next to you as far back as the spring of 2009 and already it feels like a tremendous feeling of history in this very spot.

I hope that others would agree that listening to these incredible panelists also suggests that it marks an important moment in our history. Remarkable insights - the presence, the three of you is extremely powerful. I respect, recognize, am thankful for Chief Couchie’s leadership as well - thirty years of leadership with a strong focus on education evidenced by the work that’s happened right here in her home territory. The influence on Nipissing University and that sentiment seems to have arrived here with Tory’s reflection – when you said that it’s our time to act. It’s our time for action. Those are the kinds of sentiments that I’m thankful to have grown up with in my family.

As I was listening, it’s like sitting at your dinner table late at night when I was a kid in my village and we would visit. I remember those visits like they were yesterday. There would be a very noisy stirring of the tea cup, the water had been boiled
on the wood stove or the oil stove and a conversation would happen like this – full of laughter, stories told, richness offered, the generations talking between and amongst themselves and if you’re lucky to be off at the edge like I was today – many of us, you get to glean and you get to not only hear intellectually but you get to feel here [motions to his heart]. What we’ve seen, witnessed has embodied the very best.

I have great feelings of hope about the future based just on what I’ve heard, that this has been a long struggle and this has been a long journey. But not for a moment should we forget, or celebrate like we’ve had doing here today that we’re making progress on this long journey; so in some respects, to be gentle as well on ourselves.

I love listening to the progress of the work that predated Indian Control of Indian Education. In 1970 when I was three or 1973 another date thrown around when I was six, and I remember starting in 72-73 because that’s when my dad took over being a principal in our little school back home. We have to remember that the graduation rate back then was about 14-15% at the K-12 level and around 49% or so, in some parts higher. The indigenous school built with a wing for the elders to gather and a wing for the younger kids to gather and then a dentist chair, like a dentist was right in school.

What a marked contrast from the way it was for so many of our people - to know that this community has helped to encourage Nipissing University to recognize its role in this conversation, to respond to those questions about the power of western learning and its influence and the challenges of indigenous ways of knowing. I believe future generations will look back and this will be a moment that, unlike the advancements in the age of enlightenment when it was said ‘we’ve come to the end of knowledge, there is nothing more to learn anymore – we don’t have to worry’. It was spoken with great emphasis and certainty that there was nothing more to learn. Industrial revolution created a type of learning that created human capital for a market economy whereas indigenous learning is about wholeness, this richness that we’ve seen exemplified here. Perhaps future generations will look at this moment as the age of the indigenous peoples.

We are in the midst of this great change that's emerged, this long dark shadow that’s been cast over our lives that we’re emerging from. People like Tory and others are helping to lead, you’re the change that we’ve been waiting for, you’re the change that we’ve been looking forward to - yourself and Blair. To hear the songs that are being sung and the prayers being spoken reflecting back to us that we’re still here despite the challenges, the great incredible challenges that we’ve overcome and continue to overcome - the resilience that you’ve heard in the words that Dr. Lorna said, “We’ve never given up”. We’ve never given up. Our people continue to stand strong but in a gentle way. I heard that too. Sometimes we feel angry, we feel frustrated in the lack of progress or not being seen. My late grandmother helped reflect that back to me when she listened to the apology back in 2008, just a few short years ago when she said, “Grandson they’re just beginning to see us”. They’re just beginning to see us. Just a few years later, the long time efforts to have that mandatory curriculum in the education system in University of British Columbia is accomplished – a long journey. Or how about having an Indigenous president at Nipissing University who’s right here, Mike DeGagné. I get excited about this moment, about its challenges and really appreciate the reflections the use of technology. I remember I was the first Blackberry owner on my island, Vancouver Island. I brought it home and the elders were saying what is that thing? And so I explained it and they said so just like everything I have up here right? I said, just like that. We can use this. We’ve always been able to use new technology, we’ve always been able to be adaptive. We’re not a static peoples. We’re constantly reflecting and respecting other’s viewpoints.

We know that there have been these powerful influences so questions about how is that we can retain the integrity when we’ve been bombarded. I see our people doing that. It’s happening here at Nipissing notwithstanding that the Indian Act is still a reality. We can say on the one hand - you can’t legislate from the outside, that internal responsibility to quote from Wab that was shared that comes from us. That comes from home. That’s never come from the outside. There’s been efforts - as has been said by Dr. Lorna through the residential school, wasn’t said so explicitly - used as a tool of oppression trying to inculcate, pour something different about who we were not. We have a chance to reverse that.

On the one hand it’s about our responsibility, on the other hand its encouraging the treaty partner to behave differently. It would be so rich for this country to support the over 52 languages to return to thriving – not just barely surviving because that’s the implication right now. Embrace the languages as the rich part of the heritage of this relationship as expressed in treaties like Treaty 3. Let’s afford the opportunity to teach one another so the implications become so powerful, because we will not let go of our responsibility to care for the waters, to care for the environment, to care for the health and well-being of all living things, and to look for harmony and a return to a place of balance in our relationships between one another and the living world around us.

The implications are big when you’ve got 350 million+ Indigenous peoples around the world. It’s about right here at Nipissing. It’s about what happens here, the relationship between institutions like the university as well as the school system and how it is that we invite others who are also treaty partners to walk with us and to embrace the learning of languages - to not leave the teacherrages on the weekend but stay with the community.

My reflections are where Chief Couchie began and that’s, to be excited. Excited because this country is gripped with the recognition that it is absolutely in part about money - money is not the whole answer but we finally have this country recognizing that there is a two to seven thousand (2000-7000) dollar or more gap in what our children receive. Or that we need to support instruction of the young people coming up - in the culture and the language.
That’s what the push has been undertaking for the last forty years but we’ve not been static. We will not remain static. We will continue to push. We will continue to persevere.

I’m very honoured to be a part of this work and in some small way I’ve inherited a passion for education from my parents — both educators. My dad was told by the superintendent when we were living in the central coast by extension through a message, ‘Don’t bother going back home to your village of Ahousaht, they’re killing each other off, they will not even be there in the next twenty years, that community will not be there’. My dad picked us up, moved us home. He was my teacher, my principal. My mom was the substitute teacher. My dad graduated the first group of grade seven kids from that little school. And then went on — we have two schools in my village now. Dad went on to become one of the first to get achieve a doctorate degree from our people from the university of British Columbia. He said to the people of the doctoral thesis, ‘Don’t go easy on me, you give me your toughest that you’ve got to throw at me from your western perspective’. Why? Because he wanted to demonstrate that what they told about us wasn’t true, that we didn’t have the intelligence — that’s what he wanted to do. He was like a fierce warrior.

I want to conclude with that expression of appreciation for the Dr. Lorna Williams’, for Verna Kirkness’, for the Chief Marianna Couchie’s, for the Dr. Richard Atleo’s and so many of you, language teachers who are being asked to stay on for another thirty (30) years and we’re going to support you so that you can develop a whole ream of protégées. But that’s where I want to conclude because like was said earlier, I also feel like a young whipper snapper when it comes to sitting with greatness like this. We are reaching out to Canadians to say this is not just an Indigenous effort. We’re reaching out to Canadians to say look, none of us created or opened those residential schools, no one in this room wrote the Indian Act that has created the legacy that we have inherited today but, upon understanding it becomes our responsibility. Are we prepared to do something about it? It’s our time to act. I reach out to the country and say that doesn’t just extend to the individual learner in a community like this or a family. It extends to the country. It’s time that Verna’s vision of Indian Control of Indian Education was realized.

MARIANNA COUCHIE
This has been a great conversation and a great honour.
Meegwech to all.

Verna J. Kirkness is a lifelong advocate of First Nations education. She played a pivotal role in developing the 1972 landmark policy, Indian Control of Indian Education. Verna is from Fisher River First Nation.

Tory Fisher is from Nipissing First Nation. With a Bachelor of Art’s degree in Native Studies & Social Welfare from Nipissing University, he is currently completing a Bachelor of Education. Tory believes education is key to sustaining First Nations culture and language.

Marianna Couchie leads Nipissing First Nation. In July 2012 she was elected to a third consecutive term as Chief. She is a lifelong advocate of First Nation education.

National Chief Shawn Atleo is a Hereditary Chief from the Ahousaht First Nation. In July 2012, A-in-chut was elected to a second consecutive three-year mandate as National Chief to the Assembly of First Nations.

Tanya Lukin-Linklater originates from the Native Villages of Afognak and Port Lions in Alaska. She has worked in Aboriginal education and arts education. She is currently the Director of Aboriginal Initiatives at Nipissing University.

Archived panel discussion:
http://flash.nipissingu.ca/videos/Bimaadiziwin.html

Panelists:

Dr. Lorna Wanosts’a7 Williams is Lil’wat from the St’at’imc First Nation, she is Professor Emeritus from the University of Victoria where she was Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Education and Linguistics. She is Board Chair of First Peoples Culture Council.