Chapter 4

The Evolution of Mi’kmaw Education
Charting the challenges, the failures and the successes

Traditional Mi’kmaw Education
In the past, traditional Mi’kmaw education was all about learning the skills for survival and community living. Parents, Elders, extended family members and other community experts taught young people the skills they needed. Rather than sit in a classroom, the Mi’kmaw learned as they went. Education was a continuous process taking place wherever and whenever needed.

Children were taught according to their future roles as adult men and women. Men were taught to hunt, fish and provide for the community. Handcrafted tools such as bows, arrows, lances, arrowheads, fish traps, wood frames, axes and canoes were made with great skill and precision. Women were taught to prepare and preserve food, prepare materials, make all clothing, set up camps, and care for children. All Mi’kmaw children were given an in-depth knowledge of the natural environment.

The Role of Elders in Mi’kmaw Education
Elders played an important role in traditional Mi’kmaw education. Elders were—and still are—seen as the “keepers of the culture.” They keep alive the Mi’kmaw stories, legends, cultural beliefs, spirituality, language, history, and traditions from generation to generation.

Mi’kmaw Elders are teachers, philosophers, linguists, historians, healers, judges, counselors—all these and more. They are living embodiments of Mi’kmaw tradition and culture. Elders are keepers of the spiritual knowledge that has kept the culture alive through thousands of years. Their knowledge of ceremonies and traditional activities, of laws and rules set down by the Creator, enables the Mi’kmaw people to live as a Nation.

Not all Elders are seniors, and not all old people are Elders. Some are quite young. But Elders have gifts of insight and understanding, as well as communications skills to pass on the collective wisdom of generations that have gone before.

Elders do not hoard their knowledge. Their most important task is to pass their knowledge on, so that the culture of their people can continue. The Elders share their cultural knowledge through action, example and oral traditions.
These may be stories, jokes, games or other shared activities. When listeners hear the stories and teachings of the Elders, they feel the pain, the joy, the victories and defeats of their people. They reach out to one another across time. Past, present and future become one.

**The European Influence on Mi'kmaw Education**

With European contact came a new language and a new way to record history by writing it down. The Europeans also brought with them new systems of land ownership, trade, education, and organized religions. Many European missionaries felt it was their job to “educate” the Mi'kmak in the modern ways and encouraged them to build churches and schools. The writings of the early missionaries provide us with most of the written history of the time.

In 1605, the French settlers in Nova Scotia began to work to convert the Mi'kmak to Christianity by giving them religious instruction. They continued with this religious education until the first school was built in Le Havre in 1633 for Mi'kmak and French students. When teaching the Mi'kmak, the missionaries focused on the teachings of the Roman Catholic church. In 1610, Chief Membertou and his family were the first Mi'kmak baptized into the Catholic faith. Today, the majority of Nova Scotia Mi'kmak are Catholic.

Religious education by the French continued until 1710 when control of “Acadie” changed from France to England. The English were not as interested in educating the Mi’kmak as they were in keeping them under control and confining them to small areas of land. During the decades leading up to Confederation in 1867, the English showed very little interest in educating the Mi’kmak.

**The Mi'kmaw Educator**

While the writings of the missionaries tell us about their efforts to educate the Mi’kmak, it is important to understand that the Mi’kmak had much to teach the newcomers in return. Without knowledge of the natural environment, survival in the “new world” would have been next to impossible for those early settlers. Having survived in this region for millennia, the Mi’kmak were the experts on the natural environment. The writings of the early missionaries document some of this information and express admiration for the vast knowledge of the Mi’kmak.

**The Role of the Federal Government**

During the 1800s, the Mi’kmak lost even more control of their culture. The British North America Act of 1867 and the Indian Act of 1876 stated that First Nations were wards of the Federal Government. These Acts moved control over First Nations life far away from the local community. Now, the federal
government was responsible for Indian education. This marked the beginning of the Indian day-school system in Canada.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s a number of one-room schools were built in Mi'kmaw communities. The schools were built in recognition of the federal government's commitment to providing First Nations with an education. Unfortunately, the subjects taught in these schools did not reflect Mi'kmaw culture. Furthermore, there was no instruction in the Mi'kmaw language. The federal government did little to keep these schools going and few Mi'kmaw were interested in attending them.

The Mi'kmaw were soon to be victims of an even more destructive method of education—the residential school. While people in the federal government thought residential schools would be a positive experience, they turned out to be one of the most detrimental experiences of the Mi'kmaw culture.

The federal government ran the residential schools in partnership with various religious organizations in Canada until April 1, 1969 when the government took over full responsibility for the school system. More than 100,000 children attended these schools over the years.

In Nova Scotia, the federal government ran the Shubenacadie Residential School in partnership with the Roman Catholic Church from Feb 5, 1930 until June 26, 1966. Government agents and the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) took Mi'kmaw children from their homes across Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and transported them to the school—sometimes without the consent or knowledge of their families. Approximately 1000 Mi'kmaw children

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Residential Schools—A Detrimental Experience

According to the Indian Act, the federal government was obliged to provide the Mi'kmaw with an education. The government also wanted to help integrate First Nations people into Canadian society. Between the 1930s and the 1960s, residential schools were opened in every province of Canada except New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

attended the Shubenacadie Residential School. They were separated from their families, their communities, their language and their culture. In some cases, Mi'kmaw parents were promised a better education for their children and voluntarily sent them.

In recent years, individuals have come forward to tell of the physical and sexual abuse they experienced in residential schools. This is a tragic legacy for many former students. Mi'kmaw families still feel the effects of the Shubenacadie Residential School. Physical and substance (drugs/alcohol) abuse still present problems in today's First Nations communities, and many children and grandchildren of the residential school survivors suffer the ongoing legacy of the abuse they suffered there.

It was not until 1998, that the Canadian Government offered a Statement of Reconciliation that acknowledged its role in the development and administration of residential schools and the harm that was done by their action. The following is an excerpt from the Statement of Reconciliation offered to Canadian First Nations by the Prime Minister.

"Sadly, our history with respect to the treatment of Aboriginal people is not something in which we take pride. Attitudes of racial and cultural superiority led to a suppression of Aboriginal culture and values. As a country, we are burdened by past actions that resulted in weakening the identity of Aboriginal peoples, suppressing their languages and cultures, and outlawing spiritual practices. We must recognize the impact of these actions on the once self-sustaining nations that were disaggregated, disrupted, limited or even destroyed by the dispossession of traditional territory, by the relocation of Aboriginal people, and by some provisions of the Indian Act. We must acknowledge that the result of these actions was the erosion of the political, economic and social systems of Aboriginal people and nations.

Against the backdrop of these historical legacies, it is a remarkable tribute to the strength and endurance of Aboriginal people.
that they have maintained their historic diversity and identity. The Government of Canada today formally expresses to all Aboriginal people in Canada. “Our profound regret for past actions of the federal government, which have contributed to these difficult pages in the history of our relationship together.”

One aspect of our relationship with Aboriginal people over this period that requires particular attention is the Residential School system. This system separated many children from their families and communities and prevented them from speaking their own languages and from learning about their heritage and cultures. In the worst cases, it left legacies of personal pain and distress that continue to reverberate in Aboriginal communities to this day. Tragically, some children were the victims of physical and sexual abuse.

The Government of Canada acknowledges the role it played in the development and administration of these schools. Particularly to those individuals who experienced the tragedy of sexual and physical abuse at residential schools, and who have carried this burden believing that in some way they must be responsible, we wish to emphasize that what you experienced was not your fault and should never have happened. To those of you who suffered this tragedy at residential schools, we are deeply sorry.”

The late Rita Joe, a Mi’kmaw poet, wrote this poem about her experiences at the Shubenacadie Residential School:

I lost My Talk
I lost my talk
The talk you took away,
When I was a little girl
At Shubenacadie School.

You snatched it away:
I speak like you
I think like you
I create like you
The scrambled ballad, about my world.

Two ways I talk
Both ways I say,
Your way is more powerful.

So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So I can teach you about me.

Integrated Education
Throughout the Residential School era, there were also small Indian day schools throughout the province. In 1946, the Indian Act was reviewed and amended resulting in the closure of these local Indian day schools. Mi’kmaw students were integrated into the public school system. After the Shubenacadie School closed in 1966, many Mi’kmaw youth began to attend the public schools throughout the province. The provincial schools received funding (money) directly from the federal government to educate Mi’kmaw students.

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