

UNDERSTANDING THE RULES OF CULTURE

By Lexi Charlie, an Aboriginal Education Co-ordinator in Cowichan Valley (SD 79). Excerpted with permission from *Teacher*, newsmagazine of the BC Teachers' Federation, Nov/Dec 2000

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Every child, regardless of ethnic origin, comes to school with a culture. Children are developing their own cultural identity with each experience in the school and community. To write this article, I asked myself how I, as a Penelakut Aboriginal teacher, might help you to better understand how culture influences the behaviour of Aboriginal students. I shall focus on dispelling three myths that affect the education of Aboriginal students:

- Aboriginal parents don't care about their child's education.
- Aboriginal students are quiet and passive learners.
- An oral culture is an illiterate culture.

At first glance, these may seem like harsh statements. Set in context, they reflect the sincere concerns of teachers coping with, but not necessarily understanding, the impact of Aboriginal parents choosing to raise their children by cultural rules... Behaviours we see in the classroom may not mean what we think they mean, as they are coming from a different cultural perspective. Aboriginal parents are strongly influenced by the principle of guidance without interference. The belief is that children must make their own choices in everything: from homework to attending school, eating habits to choice of friends. Children are responsible for their own learning by watching and absorbing what they see...

Knowing this, how can teachers honour the cultural rule of noninterference? One strategy is not to ask parents direct questions like, "*How can we help*



Johnny?", expecting them to contribute advice or recommendations. Instead, speak out loud about some of the factors that must be considered in coming up with a strategy to meet the student's needs, just as if you were reviewing for your own benefit. Pose the issues themselves, without offering a direct solution. Welcome the long silences. They give parents time to sort through their ideas. Train yourself to become a good listener instead of the talker. You will reach a solution, but perhaps not the one you expected.

The solution that will enlist the support of the Aboriginal parents is the solution in which they are contributing to the decision of the child, not one where they are making the decision for the child.

Aboriginal students are often labeled "*unresponsive*", "*passive*" or "*quiet*". This behaviour stems from the survival technique of thinking things through before actually trying them. In a hunter-gatherer society, stress and danger were always present. Today, in schools, the terrain is the classroom, not the forest. Aboriginal students unfamiliar with a subject feel stressed and in danger, and in keeping with their culture, they retreat into positions of careful observation. Aboriginal peoples value silence as a skill, and being silent is not an empty activity. Teachers have complained to me that Aboriginal students are disrespectful: "*When you talk to them, they won't look you in the eye.*" The truth is the opposite of the perception. When elders speak to us, we are taught not to make eye contact. This is a sign of respect. Aboriginal people have only recently started to write down their language, stories and songs. Traditionally, we were an oral society, and we still are today.

Western society has had an attitude that oral cultures are inferior and even illiterate. And yet, for generation after generation, Aboriginal children have learned the history and rules of belief and behaviour of their people through oral legends,

stories, songs and prayers. Children learned that the more one listened, the more there was revealed and learned. The oral culture, as it requires interaction, created a close, connected community—strengthened tribal identity and continuity.

When an Aboriginal child or parent does something that puzzles you and causes you to stereotype, try to react differently. Remember, Aboriginal people, like you, are living within their culture and sometimes we don't realize that the rules and attitudes we accept and live by are even there. Like you, we assume that all people naturally think that way.

**DEADLINE ALERT!
GAMING GRANT APPLICATIONS
JUNE 30, 2010**

PACs and DPACs are reminded to submit their applications for Direct Access Funding Grants for 2010-2011 by June 30, 2010. Every PAC that applies by June 30 will receive a Direct Access Grant of \$20 per student based on the student enrollment in the school as of September 2009. The funds (restored to 2009/2010 levels on March 8) will be paid into the PAC's Gaming Account by September 30, 2010. DPAC's that apply by June 30 will receive \$2500. Funds must be used to benefit students by enhancing extracurricular opportunities. Grant funds must remain under the



management and control of the PAC or DPAC that receives them.

For complete information on applying for your PAC or DPAC Gaming Grant visit the Ministry of Housing and Social Development website: <http://www.hsd.gov.bc.ca/gaming/grants/index.htm>

PAC and DPAC Grants - Overview

Eligibility	Parent Advisory Councils and District Parent Advisory Councils. Details provided in Section 3 of "Community Gaming Grant - Guidelines" (including PAC/DPAC grants) http://www.hsd.gov.bc.ca/gaming/grants/docs/guide-cgg.pdf
Grant Amount	PAC: \$20 per student DPAC: \$2,500 per year
Application	One application per year. Submit online or by mail.
Application Period	April 1 - June 30
Processing Fee	None
Processing Time	Grants will be paid as soon as possible in September, no later than September 30.