

New generation likes grassroots alternative education

by Christina George

A new generation is returning to grass roots education in Tyendinaga and other Aboriginal territories. The Canadian government insisted that First Nations people take part in colonial learning, from the time the Indian Act was introduced in 1876 and people were forced into residential schools.

Over the years, First Nations people have moved forward in terms of education in Canada.

It was a government priority, to pull Aboriginal children away from their homes. Children were taken away from their families for years, all in the name of education. Because of the residential school era, First Nations people have learned to survive over 150 years of systematic oppressive abuse. First Nations people had no choice but to live under the laws of the Indian Act.

Indian and Northern Affairs of Canada provided the funding for education and First Nation reserves eventually had their own education centres. The systematic side effects of residential schools that First Nations people had to deal with from generation to generation prevented a majority of them from finishing high school or continuing on to further their education at a post-secondary level.

As the years and statistics went on this became news. Funding for post-secondary education became available and there was new hope that the next generation would advance in college and universities.

First Nations people can now make their goals a reality through today's modernized education system in Canada.

Currently First Nations people are also finding success through what is known as alternative education. These are also necessary programs that are funded by INAC, but teach with cultural values.

First Nations students are finding that learning the teachings at the grass roots level is empowering.

A variety of programs that focus on a healthy holistic outlook on education.

Traditional values and activities based on culture give First Nations people an educational experience and knowledge that they could not receive in the regular school system.

Individuals who turn to alternative education are breaking free from the system imposed on them generations before.

At least in the schools that are on reserves, the curriculum has improved. There are Native language classes, arts and crafts and socials. The culture can be felt in the buildings themselves.

In Tyendinaga, students who excel within their cultural learning at the elementary level, can now continue on at a secondary level in a system that values them as Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse). Something that would not be given in the same respect at a mainstream high school.

There has been a significant improvement of cultural awareness in the education system on the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory. Mohawk culture-based curriculum is experienced by students from pre-kindergarten all the way to university.

Oake Maracle is a 17 year-old traditional Mohawk student from Tyendinaga. He has always wanted to learn his Mohawk language and has been studying since he was five years old. First attending the Quinte Mohawk elementary school on the territory, he then moved on to Ohahase for alternative high school education.

Ohahase, meaning "new road", is a private high school operated by First Nations Technical Institute, authorized by the Ministry of Education for Ontario to grant secondary school credits.

The Ohahase program says its philosophy of education consists of "providing holistic and respectful learning rooted in the Mohawk language and cultural practices." The high school says it "will facilitate through encouragement, motivation and laughter; will strive for the goals of self-sufficiency and biculturalism."

The goals of Ohahase are to "provide learning opportunities that engage the student as a whole human being-mentally, physically, emotionally, intuitively; to instill in each learner respect for self, for others, for the environment, for (Mohawk) history, culture, language and traditions; to assist learners in reaching an understanding of our Haudenosaunee world view and their place in our world."

Oake Maracle talks about learning there.

"I liked the small classes in Ohahase. There was a five- to- one ratio and more one- on- one contact from instructors. You really get to know your classmates. Ohahase was the best education experience so far, because one of the mandates is for everyone to get right involved, parents too. It's a part of our Mohawk culture. When I was in Quinte Mohawk,

there was the Opening Address in Mohawk every morning for us and the language was always there,” says Maracle.

Maracle is really trying it all out he also went to Kahnawake Mohawk Territory, near Montreal, specifically to do a semester of high school there after doing two years at Ohahase. “Kahnawake is a more mainstream high school but I wanted to be around Mohawk people. I liked it there and I made a lot of friends,” Maracle says.

Maracle is an example of a confident student who values Mohawk culture and has had the privilege to have that with him all the way through his education. He is now taking a Mohawk Adult Immersion program offered through Brock University’s Faculty of Education.

Maracle goes on to say how important it is to keep the Mohawk language alive for the next generations in Tyendinaga. He says that mainstream education would have been the “alternative” route for him and that he has thrived in the holistic Mohawk culture based curriculum.