

EDUCATION AS EXPERIENCED BY MÉTIS

by Isabelle Impey

The Métis experience education quite differently from non-aboriginal people. Our equivocal status within the Constitution of Canada and the legislation of the Province of Saskatchewan has created differences in the treatment we receive in education as compared to that of First Nations, as well. The Gabriel Dumont Institute was created by the Métis as part of a strategy to combat the educational problems our people face - most notably that of institutional racism.

The Institute's programs have been designed with a number of special features in order to ensure accessibility and appropriateness. The features are:

- * Gabriel Dumont Institute programs are, for the most part, **community-based**. In essence, this means that courses leading to diplomas, normally attainable only by attending classes on the campuses of universities and colleges, are offered in towns and urban centres across Saskatchewan. Students are encouraged to live in their own communities, to maintain political awareness and to become bi-cultural citizens.
- * Most Institute programs offer a **preparatory phase** which includes upgrading in skills related to the specific program. This may include preparation in reading, writing and mathematics. In this way, students whose previous academic history or literacy skills have not been strong, or whose studies have been interrupted, may gain access to training that they would not qualify for through mainstream institutions.
- * Gabriel Dumont Institute programs offer a **Métis Studies** component to enable students to grow in the knowledge and pride of their heritage and cultural identity.

* Gabriel Dumont Institute programs provide a **comprehensive system of support** to students. Community-based programs include access to counselling which is available for both group and individual counselling. Other forms of counselling may include assisting students in the procurement of housing, child care, income maintenance, personal financial planning, tutorials, recreation and employment. Referral to specialized services, such as family counselling can also be arranged. Students of the Institute have a sense of not being cast into a large institute without any support.

* The Institute includes, if at all possible, an **applied practicum phase** in each of its programs to provide the students with direct experience in their area of study.

Combined, these features provide a learning environment that is effective.

They support commitment, promote learning and clear paths to success. We have delivered over 25 varieties of certificate, diploma and degree programs and graduated over 1,500 students. The Institute has an 85% success rate.

Ninety percent of our graduates find employment. The disparaging observation is that our labour force is underpaid and, in many cases, living below the poverty level. We designed and currently operate the Community Training Residence for women, the first of its kind in Saskatchewan. We address other needs by conducting projects in curriculum development, employment equity, literacy and community development. We are reaching toward the future by developing a CD-ROM disk on the Métis culture which will be distributed worldwide in French and English.

As of September 16, we have been attempting to do all of this and more with a skeletal staff. Due to a near devastating deficit, we are working towards improving our situation with staff doing the work of two or three. This cannot last. Not only are we contending with the effects of our shortage of personnel and with increased demands on us, but we must also be prepared for the deficit reduction plans of the provincial and federal governments. With this in mind, we are concerned that our future funding will be lowered significantly, placing our programming in peril. No doubt, you have heard this before. Indeed, we must all tighten our belts during these fiscally restrained times. However, at what cost to the education of our people?

The formal education of Métis children is fraught with challenges and barriers. When young people enter the education system they are presented with curriculum that is inappropriate. Schools in northern and southern Métis communities are underfunded. Retention is low, resulting in low literacy rates. Many succeed by overcoming these barriers, sometimes at the cost of their cultural development, other times at great financial costs to the families. When Métis enter university they are faced with a system that does not financially support. If our students can graduate, they leave with nearly \$35,000 loans. In some cases, those with dependents leave with even greater debts. You may say, "this is no different from other graduates." But it is, because our students

then face employment barriers too. They have great difficulties finding employment that is appropriate for their training and that which pays for the level of training and experience they have. And believe me, our people have the expertise to bring to the labour force. But we are not getting hired into top positions and we are not getting paid salaries we are due. For example, the school system in Saskatchewan considers graduates from the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program to be of the outmost quality. Our students readily find employment within the schools because of their education expertise. Schools will hire our graduates instead of utilizing culturally appropriate curriculum materials. In other words, our graduates are employed as cultural experts. However, they are not paid as experts. They are paid on the lowest scale because they are new teachers. But they are the experts. The schools are saving money at the cost of the Métis labour force and Métis families. The hopes and dreams of Métis graduates become deflated and another cycle of poverty begins. All we ask is that our graduates and other Métis employees receive fair wages for the expertise they bring with them and the work they do.

Because of the loans and these low paying positions, Métis employees are living below the poverty level. With the payments and the day-to-day costs of living, academically educated Métis students can expect to wait twenty years

before they have enough to put a down payment on a house. If you consider the four years in university and then another fourteen to save, you have twenty years. And then, of course, another debt is assumed through mortgage payments. Dreams to save for their children's education are just that - dreams. This has to change!

In our own institutions, we can make decisions about Métis education, but always within the confines of inadequate funding. We do not even have wage parity with other education institutions. What does this have to do with education? Well, when you are a little kid thinking about what to be when you grow up and you see such a disparaging picture, you got to wonder what the point is of finishing high-school and what the point is in going on to post-secondary education when you are faced with an alienating system and debts that will take you nearly twenty years to recover from.

The barriers are numerous. They are locked into institutional systems and they are racist. Among some of the worst are those within the Public Service Commission. Why are they the worst? Because they are public, they are supposed to serve us and they purport to be making changes. Well, the changes are not strong enough. Métis are not in decision-making positions within the public sector labour force. The Gabriel Dumont Institute is designated the sole deliverer of cross-cultural interaction and anti-racism

education programming by the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan's Minister of Education. The Institute has not been approached by the Crown Corporations to work with them to combat racism or to help them improve their employment equity. We have been approached by the Saskatchewan Indian and Métis Affairs Secretariat to train trainers for the Public Sector but they insist we use a package designed by non-Métis with no consultation with the Institute. We are not impressed.

The effects of institutional racism are far reaching and sometimes go unnoticed to some. When erroneous statements are made about the Métis it creates attitudes and beliefs about our people and organizations that are unfounded. It puts false ideas into peoples' minds and destroys their trust in us. Actions, such as those taken by media and government personnel to discredit the Métis, have resulted in harmful attitudes about the Institute. Small institutions like ours cannot afford racist activities like these.

Many government departments have been guilty of institutional racism. With the recent difficulties facing our political body, several departments have held Métis education hostage in order to force our politicians into submission. Funding has been held back, constricting structures are being hoisted upon us and we are being treated as a non-profit non-government organization rather than a full-scale education institution capable of delivering certificate, diploma

and degree programs. We are treated like the poor cousins of the Government and other institutions but we have the highest success rate. However, it is true, we are poor - we are poor because we are the lowest paid even if we have the best success rate of all the education institutions attempting to service the Métis.

Whether this is a conspiracy or inept management on the side of government departments, you can decide. The activities, which have resulted in disruptions, are made with concern though because no one wants GDI to go down, they just want it to be mainstream, non-Métis. We have been told such things as "Oh, you're not the Métis Nation; you don't want to be tainted with the same brush." Well, guess what?! We are part of the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan and we are proud of it. This is not just a money thing. This is a territorial dispute, a jurisdictional conflict, a struggle over control and cultural confrontation. It is not a coincidence that within one month of the Métis citizens' declaration of Métis Nationhood these disruptions began. We saw this same thing happen to the First Nations when they declared Nationhood in the 1980s. It worked for the government then because they got the system in place that they wanted. We do not want to submit to the pressures and machinating policies attempt by this government. We do not want to end up with an Indian Affairs structure.

The racism we are enduring is not unexpected but it was avoidable. The activities of the recent past has gravely affected Métis education. Our students and staff are anxiety ridden. When they see attacks on their institutions, they worry and their studies suffer. They want to dream about their education but their dreams are turning into nightmares.