The Traditional Education Ways of the Mi'kmaq People

Long before the arrival of the Europeans to North America, the Mi'kmaq people lived and travelled throughout the river valley on their way to and from the coast in what is now known as the Bedford-Sackville area. After the settlement of Sackville by Europeans, the Mi'kmaq came to refer to Sackville as *Aloosalawakade,* meaning the place of the measles.

The Mi'kmaq emphasized an approach to instruction that relied on looking, listening and learning. Instruction was suffused with their deeply ingrained spirituality, and their tendency to relate the material and personal in their lives to the spirits and the unseen.

In childhood, proper behavior was instilled largely by indirect and non-coercive means. In games in which the young joined and watched their elders, and in the evenings after meals, storytelling was used constantly to draw out lessons buried in daytime activities and to transfer other forms of knowledge from one generation to the next.

Among Mi'kmaq societies there was a powerful imperative to avoid imposing one's will on another individual. This respect for autonomy was extended to young children, permitting them great scope for self-expression.

Youngsters were learning many things in addition to proper behavior that would prove vital to their success as adults. For example, what appeared to be play and recreation were often means of guiding the children's

occupational interests and honing skills that would be needed to make their way economically when they became adults.

At puberty, instruction usually became both more formal and more challenging. Common elements in education included the shaping of behaviour by positive example in the home, the provision of guidance towards desired forms of behavior through the use of games, and a heavy reliance on the use of stories for educational purposes; as the child neared early adulthood, the utilization of more formal and ritualized ceremonies to impart rite-of-passage lessons with due seriousness.

Perhaps the most important feature of their educational system was its lack of an institutional structure and the absence of coercion and routine. It made as little sense for a Mi'kmaq child to distinguish between play and education as it did for him or her to discriminate between humans and other beings, or between this world and the world of the spirits.

The same could not be said of the values, objectives, techniques, and attitudes of 'teachers' who would come in the seventeenth century to the eastern shores of North America to 'school' the Aboriginal peoples, and again in the 1900's with the Shubenacadie Residential School.

An archive photo of the Shubenacadie Residential School. It is one of two former residential schools that will be designated as a national historic site. (Nova Scotia Museum)