

# Honouring the Past, Touching the Future: Twenty-Two Years of Aboriginal Teacher Education in the Yukon

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**Abstract:** Recommendations for a Yukon First Nations focused teacher education program date back to 1972; however, this was not acted on until 1989 with the establishment of the Yukon Native Teacher Education Program (YNTEP). Though a ground-breaking initiative in First Nations' education in the Yukon, YNTEP is not unique. It is one of many small Aboriginal teacher training programs established in various Canadian locations since the 1960s, as community-based teacher training opportunities reflecting local needs in largely Aboriginal communities. This article provides a detailed history of YNTEP set within the historical context of Aboriginal teacher education in western and northern Canada and in relation to the historical and political context of the Yukon at the time of YNTEP's founding. This includes a short history of public education as it pertains to Yukon First Nations—from mission schools to public schools to post-secondary training and education. I argue that YNTEP, as the first degree program in the Yukon specifically for students of First Nations ancestry, is one of the first tangible realizations of early land claims commitments and that the establishment of this program is a credit to two fronts: unwavering Yukon First Nations leadership, and forward-thinking government officials and educators of the time who recognized that the continuing colonization processes in public school education would not change without the influence of Yukon First Nations educators.

It is often said that when it comes to initiating a new idea, timing is everything. There are some who feel that new ideas and change require a critical mass of support, and others who suggest that new ideas take hold out of necessity. However, when it comes to challenging deeply held assumptions, those ideas with epistemological roots, timing, and a strong public support base are not always enough. Oftentimes, new ideas, those considered to be controversial, are initiated through forward-thinking and unwavering commitment.

The Yukon Native Teacher Education Program (YNTEP) is one of these examples. It was certainly a program considered long overdue by some, but it also had many skeptics and critics. It likely had one chance at success, and it needed to be a program of excellent quality. Its purpose: to train teachers of First Nations ancestry for predominately elementary-grade classrooms in Yukon schools in the hope that these teachers would make significant differences in the lives of First Nations children, while also benefitting all children with their presence. YNTEP would be equal to southern teacher education programs *and* it would be restricted to students of First Nations ancestry at a time during particularly strained racial tension in the Yukon.

This article is a tribute to the First Nations leaders, Yukon government political leaders, early supporters, partner institutions, and faculty who helped make this program possible, and to the early graduates who led the way as the first locally trained teachers of First Nations ancestry. This article also recognizes the tenacity of Yukon First Nations leaders who insisted that a fully credited First Nations teacher education program was possible for the Yukon. Many of these same leaders would later support the opening of YNTEP to Yukoners of any cultural and racial background so that, as students and as colleagues, these teachers would work together toward a common vision.

This article begins with a brief summary of the historical and political context of the Yukon at the time of YNTEP's founding. This is followed by an overview of early policy documents on education by national Aboriginal organizations outlining the position of Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education. A summary of early initiatives in Aboriginal teacher education in Canada is provided to illustrate their significance as unique community-based teacher training opportunities reflecting local needs in largely Aboriginal communities, and which served as models in the creation of YNTEP. This is followed by a short history of public education as it pertains to Yukon First Nations—from mission schools to public schools, the opening of Yukon College, and leading to the establishment of YNTEP as the first degree program offered in the Yukon specifically for students of First Nations ancestry. I conclude with some reflections on education as a response to the intent of the land claims process.

YNTEP was established in 1989 at a time when the Yukon land claims process had begun but progress was slow, and while there was still a great deal of misinformation, apprehension, and mistrust about the potential impacts of these agreements. In this context it is important to recall earlier historical events such as the 1898 Klondike Gold Rush, the 1942 construction of the Alaska Highway, and the opening of new mines in the 1950s and

1960s—which all, in various ways, swept Yukon First Nation peoples aside in the absence of formal treaty protection. In 1972, a delegation of Yukon First Nations leaders presented a report entitled *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* to the Trudeau federal government in Ottawa. Negotiations began between the Government of Canada and Yukon First Nations with reluctance, perhaps on all sides, to recognize the Yukon land claims process as a tripartite process of Yukon First Nations, federal, and territorial interests. This would change in 1985 with the first territorial election of a New Democratic Party (minority) government, which was committed to endorsing land claims, and which supported and sometimes initiated opportunities that reflected the interests and desires of Yukon First Nations.

In retrospect, YNTEP was one of those opportunities, and though for many years recommendations were made for a First Nations teacher education program, the actual realization of YNTEP as a program of study happened quickly and with little initial involvement of Yukon First Nations. There are conflicting opinions on why this happened: one being that enthusiastic individuals did not take the time to ensure as much First Nations involvement as possible (S. Shadow, personal communication, April 23, 2008); the other, that a funding opportunity came along that required quick action and that this funding had been available to First Nations for training programs, had not been accessed, and was about to lapse (P. McDonald, personal communications April 4, 2008; S. Alwarid, personal communication, April 15, 2008). Despite this difference in opinion, YNTEP has become respected throughout Yukon First Nations communities as an important achievement.

*A note on terminology:* “Aboriginal people(s)” is used in this paper as a general reference to First Peoples and include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit of Canada. The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) defines this term as organic political and cultural bodies that stem from the original peoples of North America, not to collections of individuals united by so-called “racial” characteristics.

“Yukon First Nations” references Yukon First Nations recognized as beneficiaries of the Yukon land claims agreements.

“Métis” is defined by the Métis National Council as a person who self-identifies as Métis, is of historic Métis Nation ancestry, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, and is accepted by the Métis Nation. The Métis distinction is not used in the Yukon to describe a person of mixed European and Yukon First Nations ancestry.

## Identifying the Need

Eber Hampton (1995) states that “no aspect of a culture is more vital to its integrity than its means of education” (p. 7). In recognition of this critical role and the means by which public education plays a significant part in maintaining Euro-Canadian hegemony, Aboriginal leaders had, for some time, demanded control of the public education of Aboriginal children and a redesign of current teacher education. The National Indian Brotherhood (NIB), in its 1972 position paper *Indian Control of Indian Education*, made education their major response to the assimilationist policy articulated in the 1969 federal White Paper on Indian policy. *Indian Control of Indian Education* represented significant awareness of how poorly Canadian schools served Aboriginal students, hence the need for Aboriginal teachers and, further, highlighted the importance of who controls education for Aboriginal peoples. The need for Aboriginal teachers was identified in every subsequent Assembly of First Nations (AFN) position paper on education, including the 1998 document *Tradition and Education: Toward a Vision of Our Future*, which repeated the call for Aboriginal teachers, administrators, counsellors, and education directors, and the provision of cross-cultural training in all Canadian teacher education programs. The 1996 *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP) identified Aboriginal teachers as “the first line of change in the education of Aboriginal children and youth” and noted some important gains in this area, including a 1991 estimate of 8,075 Aboriginal teachers and paraprofessionals employed in schools across Canada (Canada, RCAP, Vol. 3, p. 491). The commission recommended expanding Aboriginal teacher training programs to include secondary level teachers, and establishing community-based teacher education programs at universities that did not already have a program in place. The commission also recognized that lack of stable funding was as major a concern for many existing community-based teacher education programs (ibid).

The call for Aboriginal teacher education had been formally requested on several occasions by First Nations leaders in the Yukon. The document *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* outlines the need for relevant post-secondary opportunities in the North, as the following illustrates:

At the present time the Yukon Education [sic] system is designed to get students ready to go outside to University [sic]. Very few of our students feel this is necessary. We feel that there should be a University in the Yukon. This would include an information service where Indian students could find out about other education opportunities. There must be local control of schools. (CYI, 1977, p. 21)

A resolution from the first education conference held by Yukon First Nations at Coudert Residence, Whitehorse, in January 1972 was also included in this document. It addressed fourteen recommendations to improve the education of Yukon First Nations children. The following recommendation referred to teacher training:

Natives [sic] must be encouraged and helped in every possible way to look for and to get employment as teachers, counselors, and possibly teacher's aides, in the Yukon Educational system...  
(p. 66)

Some advances were made following this conference, including the hiring of Aboriginal people in communities to work as remedial tutors in rural schools. Great hopes were also placed on seven students of First Nations ancestry who registered in a teacher education program offered through the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 1978. Unfortunately, only one was able to complete the program. Some attribute their lack of success, in part, to the challenges these students faced when required to complete two years of the four year program in Vancouver at UBC, along with lack of personal and academic supports. These would become important considerations in the design of YNTEP (B. Aubichon, personal communication, April 8, 2010).

In 1987 an important community consultation on education took place in all Yukon communities. The Kwiya Commission (1987) was unusual in two ways: two of three commissioners were of First Nations ancestry and it held targeted meetings with Yukon First Nations. The commission was determined not to be prescriptive, instead offering general recommendations that the commissioners felt would support and channel many of the interests identified in the community consultation meetings. Piers McDonald, minister of the Yukon Department of Education at the time, describes the importance of this exercise:

A lot of what we learned was from the process rather than the [Kwiya] report. We started to hear things said over and over again in various communities about how to make change. Getting First Nations' teachers in the classroom was pretty much a common frame. (P. McDonald personal communication, April 4, 2008)

The decision to offer a teacher education program reflecting the needs and aspirations of Yukon First Nations was made in April 1989 after the tabling of the Kwiya Report. Though it was a major groundbreaking initiative in First Nations' education in the Yukon, it was not a unique idea. Since the

1960s, several successful Aboriginal teacher training initiatives—commonly referred to as TEPs (Teacher Education Programs)—were already well underway in various locations in Canada.

### **Aboriginal Teacher Education in Canada**

No complete history or inventory of Aboriginal teacher education programs exists; however, over the years, individuals have undertaken surveys. A.J. More, in a 1980 survey, determined there were seventeen Aboriginal teacher education programs in Canada (1981b). Lawrence, in 1985, surveyed twenty-one programs with a specific mandate in Aboriginal teacher education. They observed that the programs all varied in their structure. Lawrence's survey also determined that there were a total of 369 graduates of Aboriginal ancestry with degrees in education and 725 with certificates during the period of 1968–1985. Enrolment would increase in the late 1980s when the Standard A diploma requirement for teacher certification was changed to a Bachelor of Education.

More (1980) also determined three types of Aboriginal teacher education programs that existed at the time, ranging from programs designed to westernize Aboriginal students to programs that significantly reflected Aboriginal interests. These types are summarized as follows:

- orientation and support: mainstream programs but with orientation and supports available to First Nations' students;
- significantly altered: regular teacher education courses with the inclusion of First Nations studies, increased practica time, and a significant number of courses offered off-campus;
- community-based programs: program control rests predominately at the community level, with local influence on course content and program design. Courses are taught by local and First Nations' instructors and entrance requirements may be more flexible. (p. 34)

In a 1990 survey, Deanna Nyce concluded that TEP programs continued to reflect characteristics similar to what More found a decade earlier. They also faced common misconceptions—for example, assumptions that programs did not meet university standards or that adapted entrance requirements compromised student academic success. She found that these programs faced funding issues, particularly the lack of provincial support, and they struggled to meet the demand for Aboriginal educators. A 2008 self-study of TEPs associated with the University of Regina determined that

the programs have generally kept to their original structure; they continue to battle the same assumptions and have the same concerns about funding and demand (AKEP, 2008).

Sadly, TEPs have received little attention in educational research beyond these few studies, limiting our understanding of the impacts of these programs on both Aboriginal education and public education.

### **Aboriginal Teacher Education Programs**

The following is an incomplete history of Aboriginal teacher education programs and limited to those still continuing in western or northern Canada today. Several of these programs, such as the Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP) and the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP), were directly influential in the design of YNTEP. The history of these programs is important for those unfamiliar with the early efforts to create community-based teacher training opportunities, outside of the traditional teacher-training models, to address the need for Aboriginal teachers and to address the shortcomings of the traditional university-based programs. This is also a history of the partnerships that were made between Aboriginal organizations and insightful post-secondary institutions that recognized their responsibility to respond to unique community needs. YNTEP is a reflection of and a contributor to this legacy.

The community-based, university-credited Aboriginal TEPs began some years after the start of the early local teacher-aid initiatives. Though a few TEPs were created prior to the tabling of *Indian Control of Indian Education* in 1972, more began to emerge when financial support for employment and training initiatives was provided through federal funding agreements (E. Lawton, personal communication, May 28, 2008). These projects were short-term and developed to meet regional conditions and needs. As was common with other employment and training projects, the TEP programs were developed in isolation from one another and with similar year to year funding commitments often from a variety of sources. These programs were designed for Aboriginal students with enrolment either restricted to students of Aboriginal ancestry or with a limited number of seats for non-Aboriginal students, and they were supported through partnerships with the Aboriginal community.

The following section is organized chronologically within each identified region, starting with any early locally developed programs, some which pre-date partnerships with post-secondary institutions and what we now call TEPs.



*Northwest Canada (Northwest Territories, Western and Eastern Arctic, Nunavut, Northern Quebec)*

The Northwest Territories (NWT) was the first to sponsor a community-based teacher education program, initially established in Yellowknife in 1968 as a one-year diploma program focused on teacher aides. When it was relocated to Fort Smith in 1969, it became a two-year teacher training diploma program and was affiliated with the University of Alberta (Lawrence, 1985). The program emphasized methods of teaching English as a second language (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996). In 1977, the Fort Smith program became Aurora College Teacher Education program (ACTEP) and partnered with the University of Saskatchewan. The program was expanded in 1996 to include a degree stream, which is still offered at the Thebacha Campus in Fort Smith. Aurora College continues to offer a three-year education diploma on a rotational basis in communities around the NWT. The diploma leads to a Northwest Territories teaching certificate qualifying graduates to teach kindergarten to grade nine in the NWT. This program serves as the longest standing community-based teacher education program. Long-time educator in TEPs, Orest Murawsky, states that the NWT program established the model in community-based teacher education that was soon followed in other regions (O. Murawsky, personal communication, June, 2008). While it may serve as a model for providing teacher education in northern communities where none had existed before, it was unlike many of the Aboriginal TEP programs that followed. As Lawrence (1985) notes, the Aboriginal community had no formal input in the program.

In northern Quebec, a somewhat different approach, referred to as a field-based program for training Aboriginal teacher aides, was developed in the early 1960s. According to Girard (1972), it became an influential model that expanded to serve small remote communities across the eastern Arctic. It began as classroom-based apprenticeships for Inuit teaching assistants. The apprenticeships evolved in 1967 to include short teacher-training courses, which drew from students' experiences and promoted teacher development through practical classroom assignments. These students continued to work as aides for several years and attended summer courses. Some eventually took full responsibility as teachers in primary grade classrooms. While the Inuit teaching assistants and teachers who undertook this training had limited public education opportunities as children, achieving as high as grade six or seven, they were considered essential teachers in the northern Quebec public school system. These schools promoted Inuktitut as the language of instruction in the primary years, as well as the inclusion of some



cultural content. The participation of Inuit teachers was seen as important in representing schools as an extension of a community (ibid).

In 1979, a two-year program similar to the locally-developed NWT program was offered in Frobisher Bay (now Iqaluit). It was originally known as the Eastern Arctic Teacher Education Program (EATEP) (Girard, 1972, p. 224). The program partnered with McGill University in 1981 and the name later changed to Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP) (Strategy for Teacher Education in the Northwest Territories, 1998). In the early 1980s, the program expanded to include teaching assistant training (Darnell & Hoëm, p. 224). It also expanded from on-campus programming to include community-based programs, with delivery to remote communities following a classroom-based apprenticeship modelled on the early programs in northern Quebec. This expansion was supported by funding from the Donner Foundation (ibid, p. 225). Some NTEP students completed their degrees through a combination of off- and on-campus coursework. This program has made significant contributions to the teaching population of the Eastern Arctic (now Nunavut) and Western Arctic, achieving 14 percent of the teaching force by 1992 (p. 226).

### *Manitoba*

In Manitoba, under the Indian and Métis Project for Action in Careers through Teacher Education (IMPACTE), a two-year teacher education program for treaty and non-treaty First Nations students was established in 1971 (Robertson & Loughton, 1976). At the same time, a second program, known as the Program for the Education of Native Teachers (PENT), also began as an apprenticeship teacher training program modelled in a similar way to IMPACTE, where students could do an extended, paid teacher-aide internship in schools with teacher training courses offered over summers. PENT was recognized by the Association of Teacher Educators in 1983 for innovative teacher-education programming (ibid).

In 1974, IMPACTE expanded its offering to small First Nations communities in northern Manitoba under the Northern Education Project (Robertson & Loughton). In that same year, the University of Brandon took over the administration of IMPACTE, PENT, and a third teacher training program offered in Winnipeg known as the Winnipeg Centre Project. All three eventually formed the foundation for the Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Program (ibid). The University of Brandon continues to offer community-based teacher education programs for First Nations and long-standing residents of northern Manitoba.

### *British Columbia*

The Native Indian Teacher Education Program (NITEP) was established in 1974 in affiliation with the University of British Columbia. NITEP provides a combination of two-year, community-based programs at one of four possible community sites, which leads to an on-campus experience (NITEP at UBC) to complete the degree. Community sites or field centres contribute arts and science electives, some education courses, and student teaching opportunities as part of the program. Field centres are created through a partnership with a hosting First Nation and local community campuses.

### *Saskatchewan (University of Saskatchewan)*

In 1961, prior to the establishment of any Aboriginal community-based TEPs, Father Andre Renaud of the University of Saskatchewan began what may have been a first in cross-cultural teacher education programs. The intention of the Indian and Northern Education Program (INEP) was to train teachers for teaching positions in First Nations communities (Nyce, 1990). Darnell & Hoëm describe the program as follows:

It was designed with the goal of familiarizing new teachers with the cultural nuances and values of Native societies while providing practical knowledge about how to cope with life and teach in small, isolated school sites ... the Saskatoon program had a mixture of Native and non-Native students. The tradition started in Saskatoon in the 1960s and continues today in the programs of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. (1996, p. 223)

The Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP) was also established at the University of Saskatchewan but over a decade later than the INEP program. It began in 1972 as a two-and-a-half year program leading to a Standard A certificate and later became a four-year Bachelor of Education in both elementary and secondary education. The program is funded through a joint contribution agreement between the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (ISSP) and the University of Saskatchewan. ITEP was developed with the support of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians through the Indian Cultural College (Lawrence, 1985). It continues today as a campus-based program in the College of Education.

The Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) began as a Standard A certification program in 1980 and later became a Bachelor of Education program. It is offered through the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and designed for students of Métis heritage and

non-status Aboriginal students. SUNTEP has centres in Saskatoon, Prince Albert, and Regina and is accredited by the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina (Lawrence, 1985; Nyce, 1990). Brian Aubichon, the first director of YNTEP, was previously employed by the Gabriel Dumont Institute as director of SUNTEP (Saskatoon) from 1983–1986. He is also a graduate of ITEP.

#### *Saskatchewan (University of Regina)*

The Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP) began in 1977 through sponsorship of the Northern School Board (later called the Northern Lights School Board) and in partnership with the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan (Tymchak, 2006). NORTEP was eventually recognized by the Board of Teacher Education and Certification and supported by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (*ibid*). Prior to this, the Northern School Board created a school-based training for First Nations teacher aides and native language instructors. Ernie Lawton and Dr. Michael Tymchak, who both later became involved in the establishment of YNTEP, were key players in the early years of NORTEP (B. Aubichon, personal communication, April 7, 2011). NORTEP began as a school-based program with students spending half their time in their home communities under guidance of a classroom teacher, and half the year in LaRonge at the NORTEP Centre completing university credited courses (Tymchak, 2006). Over the years, the NORTEP Centre expanded its course offerings to include other post-secondary programming and became NORPAC (Northern Professional Access College).

The University of Regina has also supported a number of TEP programs including, since 1980, the Regina campus of the Saskatchewan Urban Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP), the Yukon Native Teacher Education Program (YNTEP) since 1989 at Yukon College, and the Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP) since 2007 at Iqaluit. The University of Regina, in partnership since 1976 with the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (now the First Nations University of Canada), has also been a key supporter of post-secondary education for Aboriginal students in a variety of disciplines.

#### **Contributions of TEPs**

Aboriginal teacher education programs are significant in themselves in a number of ways. The early programs, in particular, were the first post-secondary educational programming catering specifically to Aboriginal students (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). Lack of financial support

available to students made accessing these programs a major challenge despite a 1956 law which held the federal government responsible for the financial support of post-secondary education for Aboriginal students. It was not until 1977 that a program was created to make these funds accessible to students (ibid). TEPs were early test cases in making post-secondary education financially accessible to Aboriginal people. TEP programs were in many cases the first post-secondary programming offered in a northern, Aboriginal community. The success of these programs would create opportunities for other community-based educational and training programs to evolve.

The strength of the community-based teacher education model lies in the partnerships that are created to support the TEPs, the sponsoring universities, teachers' associations, local school boards or departments of education, and Aboriginal communities. This collaboration makes it possible to create unique structures and program curriculum, including Aboriginal content in the coursework, additional student support, increased practicum experiences, and community involvement. TEP graduates become important collaborators and supporters of their programs as powerful role models in their communities—as co-operating teachers, program instructors, and directors; and as curriculum developers and leaders in education. TEPs inspire and support the development of other TEPs not simply as programs to be replicated but as programs that can reflect the educational needs of a specific community and the students it serves. Teacher education remains a profession of considerable interest to Aboriginal students not only because of the employment potential in Aboriginal communities but because of the potent position public education can play to negate a cultural world view or to assist in reclaiming it.

### **Education in the Yukon**

Public education for Aboriginal children in the Yukon followed a path similar to that experienced by First Nations across Canada—from church-sponsored day schools and church-operated residential schools, to schools under direct federal administration. Due to the absence of formal treaties in the Yukon, and due to the territory's small population, education for Yukon First Nations students became a responsibility of the Government of Yukon in 1964 under the federal-territorial General Tuition Agreement, with the expressed intention of providing the same educational opportunities to Yukon First Nations students as granted to all Yukon school-age children (Department of Education, 2007). Whether administration of the education of Yukon First Nations students was provided by religious organizations, the federal government, or the government of the Yukon, the general experience

and intent of public education in the Yukon varied little. Yukon historian Ken Coates summarizes the public education experiences of Yukon First Nations students as follows:

The territorial schools proved to be almost as unfriendly as the residential institutions. Imported non-Native teachers had little understanding of the cultural and historical situation of Native people in the Yukon Territory and seldom stayed long enough to learn. They also carried with them the rigid and hostile North American stereotypes about Aboriginal people, and often allowed these attitudes to affect their work in the classroom. The school curriculum, moreover, was as culturally insensitive as the missionaries' offerings. Native languages were not taught and culture was not taught, nor was there any systematic description of Yukon history. (Coates, 1991, p. 206)

Public education was not an experience that many students of First Nations ancestry found appealing or relevant, and for some left bitter and demoralizing memories. Residential schools also took young people away from the training and guidance their families and community would have provided. Coates refers to this as an educational experience of *betwixt and between*; that is, an education that failed to provide adequate skills to take part in either a Western economy or a land-based northern economy. There would be little in the way of training opportunities to bridge this gap.

The only educational institution in the Yukon beyond high school was not established until 1963. It began as the Whitehorse Vocational and Technical Training Centre and was renamed the Yukon Vocational and Technical Training Centre in 1965 (Senkpiel, 1997). It offered limited programming in trades and basic upgrading for adults, eventually offering inter-provincial journeyman certification training. The vocational school provided some important training opportunities of interest to Yukon First Nations although statistics were not kept on student demographics. Students with aspirations for a university education had to leave the territory. Many attended the University of Alaska in the 1960s and 1970s, as they qualified for Alaska resident student fees. The few First Nations students eligible for university studies generally found the transition to large cities and university campuses a major obstacle to their success and few completed their programs. For example, just two teachers of First Nations ancestry qualified to teach in Yukon schools in the 1980s, and only one was born in the Yukon. The lack of First Nations teachers went unnoticed for some time.

A teacher education program in the Yukon was first attempted in 1978 and was lauded as an important response to the problem of teacher turnover in the territory (ibid). The Yukon Teacher Education Program (YTEP) offered Yukon residents two possible routes: a one-year degree for applicants with at least two years of post-secondary course work, and a four-year program for those with only a high school diploma. The first and third years of the four-year program were delivered in the Yukon, while the second and fourth years required on-campus coursework at UBC (Yukon Indian News, Jan. 24, 1978, p. 6). The Yukon-based portion of the program was offered in portable classrooms on Nisutlin Drive, located on the east side of Christ the King Elementary School. Of the seven students of Aboriginal ancestry who entered the program, one went on to graduate. The program continued until 1982 and, according to one instructor, ended having met the need for locally trained teachers (Senkpiel, 1998). The UBC courses were converted in 1982 to a two-year liberal arts program known as UBC Programs, and this program formed the backbone of the new Arts and Science Division at Yukon College when it opened in 1988. These courses would also provide many of the elective requirements for YNTEP.

### **Aboriginal Teacher Education in the Yukon**

The political will to support the formation of a teacher education program targeting students of First Nations ancestry came from a Yukon government initiative under Premier Tony Penikett, NDP, 1985–1992, and Minister of Education, Piers McDonald. McDonald would continue on as premier from 1996 to 2002 and maintain the education portfolio. The New Democratic Party, initially elected as a minority government, was committed to including Yukon First Nations in the political and social fabric of the Yukon. Ken Coates describes their commitment as:

a most determined effort to integrate Native concerns with the territory-wide political agenda, offering strong encouragement to the land-claims process, bringing Native leaders into positions of prominence, and making a sincere effort to accommodate aboriginal aspirations. (1991, pp. 241–242)

In 1988, territorial funding had been set aside to support economic development and training initiatives requested by Yukon First Nations. When applications failed to come forward and the funding was about to lapse, Premier Penikett and Minister McDonald saw an opportunity to initiate several educational opportunities. One in particular had been clearly

identified in the community consultations of the Kwiya Commission: the need for Aboriginal teachers in Yukon schools. The other was a need for locally trained social workers, a program which began several years later and was a partnership with the University of Regina (S. Alwarid, personal communication, April 15, 2008).

There was much at stake in public education at the time of the Umbrella Final Agreement. The 1983 agreement made it possible for individual Yukon First Nations to negotiate the transfer of responsibility for public education from the Government of Yukon to individual First Nations. This was underwritten by considerable dissatisfaction expressed by First Nation parents and community members about a school system that was failing Aboriginal students. A new deputy minister of education, Shakir Alwarid, was hired in 1988 to begin the challenging process of making change in what he called “a very constipated” Department of Education (ibid). What Alwarid, Penikett, and McDonald initiated was a teacher education program that would eventually change the face and content of Yukon schools. McDonald recalls that ultimately there was little to lose in taking these steps, despite the tremendous skepticism that such a program could be successful. He recalls an apocryphal experience at a community graduation ceremony that provided him with the conviction to move forward:

In the corner of the gym was the principal and the teachers and they weren't talking to anybody. They were just talking amongst themselves. ... The ceremony starts, an award ceremony. They have an award for best in math, best in science, etc., etc. and these two little kids at the front who are the son and daughter of an RCMP, came and collected all the awards and there was only one award that was given, some best effort made, that was picked up by somebody in the community, by an Aboriginal kid. And then it was over. There was no First Nations entertainment. There was no food. I thought to myself. Why did this community show up for this event? I don't get that. None of the community really got recognized. The principal and the teachers didn't talk to people in the community. ... No wonder the kids aren't graduating. There is a huge disconnect. They start off by wanting to burn down a brand new school, the kids aren't recognized. There is no integration of the teachers in the community. This is a failed system. Almost anything would be better than this. ...That was a big learning experience and I still think about it after all these years. It was, after that point, not just from that one experience but others. I was ready to make change. (P. McDonald personal communication, April 4, 2008)



Alwarid committed fully to creating YNTEP. He brought enthusiasm for the project from his familiarity with the success of NORTEP and awareness of the strong uptake for that program. NORTEP had a student population that included family and multi-generational connections to the program. Alwarid hired Ernie Lawton, who came with considerable experience working with NORTEP and BUNTEP, to develop a program for the Yukon. Lawton worked under the guidance of a review committee, consisting of representatives from Yukon College, the Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN), the Yukon Teachers' Association (YTA), and the Department of Education. Lawton also had an excellent working relationship with the University of Regina through his connection with NORTEP. He recognized that the decision to partner with a university was critical to the program and a significant one for the Review Committee to make. They wanted a partnership that included Yukon First Nations, YTA, and the Department of Education in the design and management of the program. Lawton describes this early exploration for a university partner:

It hadn't been decided that it be the University of Regina to begin with. I had previous experience in dealing with the University of Regina with NORTEP. It seemed the logical place to go. We also went to UBC and NITEP to see if they were interested and Simon Fraser was doing an off campus program at that time at Fort St. John and we thought that might be transferable to the Yukon. There was always a strong connection between the Department of Education in the Yukon and the BC Education in Victoria so we looked at that as well. The only one that could move quickly enough was the University of Regina and that was mainly Mike Tymchak and his experience as a director of NORTEP. He knew exactly what we wanted to do. He had a lot of influence with his board of governors and he was able to convince them to move forward. (personal communication, May 28, 2008)

In the end, the Review Committee was struck by the University of Regina's enthusiasm for the project and proven record in supporting community-based Aboriginal teacher education.

The Review Committee, which grew to include representation by the University of Regina, played an intensive supporting role in the development of the program during its formative years, including hiring the program director, Brian Aubichon—a Métis from Saskatchewan and a graduate of ITEP, former staff member in NORTEP, and long time director of SUNTEP in Saskatoon. Ken Taylor, who was president of the Yukon Teachers' Association

at the time and a Review Committee member, recalls the contributions of the committee as very important work:

First Nations people were going to be taking a giant leap forward [with land claims] and we had a role to play and a responsibility in that process to play. So we did. People would say it was impossible but Ernie [Lawton] put that program together in six months and it was the most amazing thing in my year as president and all that was going on then, to find myself sitting as a member of this Review Committee when it came time to interview the first intake of students. ... For the first three years I felt like this was my baby and I felt like I had a responsibility to help make it fly. It really felt that way and Ernie was a big part of that and Shakir [Alwarid] was a big part of that. People wouldn't think of Shakir as a nurturing person but this was one of his babies and we were partners in this thing. We had to help make it fly. (K. Taylor, personal communication, April 23, 2008)

According to Mark McCullough, the longest-standing faculty advisor in the program, the Review Committee assisted in the design of the program structure and facilitated its development but did not interfere with the selection of course offerings. The course complement was modelled after NORTEP, largely due to lack of lead time and the familiarity of many with this program.

McCullough recalls arriving at Yukon College on the Labour Day weekend, just days before the program began, with a briefcase full of textbooks and copies of course outlines. He was later joined by Dr. Lou Jacquot, a member of the Kluane First Nation, who was employed in Alaska at the time and jumped at the opportunity to return to the Yukon. While Jacquot was asked to consider the position of program director, he felt compelled, despite his lack of teacher education expertise, to take the position of faculty advisor, which would enable him to work closely with students in their development as Yukon First Nations educators. Where he hoped to influence students most was in their development as First Nations role models and community leaders.

While the NORTEP model provided an outstanding foundation to begin with, it was not a good fit for YNTEP in some critical ways, as McCullough outlines:

I am told that the decision to actually do this [program] was made in spring—April, and we were going to start in September, which

I think is one of the reasons we basically imported the NORTEP model, likely completely. There were some really important differences between us and NORTEP that weren't considered, or they may have considered and known about, but, it made for a real messy first two years. At NORTEP, at that time, many students were hired as EAs [educational assistants] to work in the schools. So what they did was they would hire them as full time EAs. They would work in the school for two weeks and then they would come to LaRonge to take classes for two weeks. And, this was the rotation that went on all year. (M. McCullough, personal communication, April 23, 2008)

This arrangement was not favoured by the Review Committee for several reasons. It was critical to the credibility of the program that YNTEP students be seen as teachers in training rather than education assistants. Also, financial support was available to most students of First Nations ancestry through post-secondary funding provided by the federal Department of Indian Affairs, making this element unnecessary. In addition, Elijah Smith, long-time and respected First Nations leader and supporter of the program, made it very clear at the outset that he would not support a watered-down version of teacher education. He did not want a repeat of the Native constable program that failed to produce a recognizable community police force (P. McDonald, personal communication; S. Alwarid, personal communication). His concerns were recorded by Dr. Marlene Taylor and reported in a 1993 review of the program:

I don't want these teachers to have an easy program. I don't want them to have to go back to university for extra training after they are teachers. I want a first-class, professional training for them. Make it hard but make sure it's good. (Taylor, Goulet, Hart, Robottom, Sykes, 1993, p. 2)

YNTEP also did not create the strong links with rural communities that are a key part of the support provided to NORTEP. In Saskatchewan, NORTEP students are interviewed, selected, and recommended to the program by their home community. YNTEP did not begin with this arrangement and did not pursue it in later years.

In the early years of YNTEP, the financial responsibility for the program rested with the Yukon Department of Education on a cost recovery basis, eventually becoming a separate line item in the territorial government's financial support to Yukon College. Individual student costs were most often

covered by post-secondary funding through the federal Department of Indian Affairs, though some non-status First Nations students received assistance from Advanced Education, students from First Nations communities outside the territory received support from their First Nations, and a few others self-funded. For many years, annual college reports included YNTEP as a separate report item. By virtue of its direct funding relationship with the Department of Education, YNTEP was not considered a Yukon College program. There is a sad irony in this. At the opening ceremony of Yukon College in 1989, Tagish Elder Mrs. Angel Sidney (1988), through a Tlingit story, told of the significance of Yukon College to the students of the Yukon. In the story, *Kaax'achgóok*, who became blind in his later years, was able to find his way home after being blown off course in his boat, a considerable distance from his home. Without any physical reference points to chart his way home, he relied on the position of the sun as his guide. Mrs. Sidney related this story to the importance of providing education in the Yukon for Yukon people, so that they would not meet the same challenges in finding their way home from southern universities. The stand-alone status of YNTEP at Yukon College was seen by some as a sign that the college did not support the program and distrusted its viability as an employment equity program.

This disconnect continued unquestioned until YNTEP faculty pursued union affiliation with the Yukon Teachers' Association, rather than with the newly created college chapter of the Public Service Alliance of Canada. The union was determined that, out of a spirit of solidarity, YNTEP, as college faculty, be included as members and threatened union busting if they did not affiliate (M. McCullough personal communication, April 23, 2008). Despite the appearance of unity in this instance, it would be many more years before YNTEP would be considered a Yukon College program. Professional marginalization continued even when a second degree program, the Bachelor of Social Work, was established under a partnership between Yukon College and the University of Regina. This program differed from YNTEP in several ways. Though it was intended to train Aboriginal students as social workers, it was not a closed program and, from the outset, struggled to recruit Aboriginal students and Aboriginal faculty. It was also administered directly by the dean of the Arts and Science Division.

In some ways, the isolation of YNTEP was due to the way it was structured by the Department of Education as a program that reported to it and was funded by it. Alwarid outlines the reasons for this:

The program was set aside as a separate initiative because we wanted to protect the program because we were afraid that it

would be watered down as part of the overall college grant, that the emphasis would get lost. We wanted to keep it as separate contract. We pulled it off. (S. Alwarid, personal communication, April 15, 2008)

This was solidified by having the YNTEP director report directly to the Department of Education. This arrangement continued for several years and eventually the director reported directly to the college president. This new arrangement would remain in effect until the retirement of the director, when the program was transferred to the Arts and Science Division of Yukon College.

Separation was also apparent in the dual registration procedures. Students registered with the University of Regina for education courses and with Yukon College for electives. University of Regina guidelines and policies applied to their courses and for the first few years YNTEP students paid their fees to Yukon College but at the University of Regina rate. This caused some hardship for students who were self-funded, given that University of Regina fees were considerably higher than those of Yukon College. (M. McCullough, personal communication, April 23, 2008)

### **First Intake**

According to briefing notes prepared by the YNTEP director, student applications for the first intake were received from nearly all communities in the Yukon. Fifteen students of Yukon First Nations ancestry were selected following reference checks and interviews with the members of the Review Committee. The students selected would spend alternating two-week blocks in school placements in their home communities. All students were eligible for Department of Indian Affairs funding for post-secondary education (Aubichon, 1990). Attrition reduced this cohort to twelve in the second year of the program.

Students found the alternating two-week arrangement challenging for several reasons: for those students from communities some distance from Whitehorse, it meant maintaining two homes; it often meant leaving children in care, either in Whitehorse or the student's home community; and it also involved travel, sometimes in difficult winter weather. For all students, the overwhelming challenge came in the general expectations of co-operating teachers that teachers bring to their placement a basic level of theoretical grounding in education. For first-year students, theoretical knowledge or

classroom experience was particularly limited and did not support this level of classroom involvement.

The original course complement included university bridging courses required for all students, regardless of need, and a pre-set slate of electives provided by Yukon College (SERD, 1989). The limited selection of electives was due in part to the few university courses provided by a newly opened Yukon College. Many of the electives were courses offered to all college students but with sections that were specific to YNTEP students. Though YNTEP students paid Yukon College course fees, these closed sections were billed to the program. Having separate course sections for YNTEP caused some suspicion that their content and quality were adapted to meet a lower standard (M. McCullough, personal communication).

The question of the governance structure of YNTEP was re-examined in 1994, in anticipation of the 1995 renegotiation of the contract. At that time, the Council for Yukon Indians (CYI), now Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN), requested transfer of the program to their jurisdiction. This was prompted by a request from the education minister to CYI and the YNTEP Advisory Committee (formerly the Review Committee) in 1993, to open the program to allow a non-First Nations student into the program. The minister's actions were perceived as interference and considerable concern was expressed in the First Nations community. CYI responded that opening the program to non-First Nations students would result in "failure to produce any First Nations teachers" (CYI, 1993). The resolution from the Leadership Board, which consisted of fourteen First Nations chiefs, declared that

the Yukon government [agree] by way of contract the transfer of all budgeted funds for YNTEP to FNEC [First Nations Education Commission] and for the Commission to assume the contractual responsibilities with the University of Regina and Yukon College, and ensuring that all of the existing program parameters and factors for its success are maintained. (CYI Leadership Board Resolution #3, September 15, 1993)

Concern was raised by director Brian Aubichon, in the 1993-1994 Annual Report to the Department of Education, that despite issues of governance of the program,

the credibility of the program rests with the graduates and their abilities in the classroom. The strength of the program is in the ability to operate free from the day to day political dynamics of the program partners ... Continued program success will depend

on the ability to maintain the professional boundaries required to ensure program credibility in the eyes of the students and the education community. (Aubichon, 1994, p. 2)

In the end, the Advisory Committee rejected the Minister's request and eventually the request for governance of the program under CYI was dropped.

### **Culturally Unique Aspects of YNTEP**

In the early years of YNTEP, Yukon First Nations content was primarily brought to the program by First Nations instructors and the students, who were mature students and generally well-versed in their cultures. Courses focused on the prescribed curriculum but with varying ways to teach it. Aboriginal culture was introduced in several courses, including two Athapaskan language courses, cross-cultural education courses, and several northern and First Nations studies electives. They emulated an approach to cultural inclusion that James Banks (2001) identifies as the additive approach. According to this method, overlooked First Nations' perspectives are added to the prescribed curriculum. Unfortunately, this method fails to recognize the inherent Western biases of the current curriculum, an oversight supported by the message students received in their placements that much of the curriculum is culturally neutral.

This approach was also evident in the published objectives for YNTEP and outlined in Appendix B to the *Formal Agreement for Yukon Native Teacher Education Program* dated March 1990. The provisions of the program are as follows:

1. to provide an educational opportunity in teacher training for people of Native ancestry;
2. to ensure that people of Native ancestry are adequately represented in teacher positions;
3. to provide Native teachers who are sensitive to the educational needs of Native students and who will serve as models for both Native and non-Native students; and
4. to train and graduate students of Native ancestry as fully certified teachers.

These aims suggest a rather passive role for YNTEP in offering any unique programming to Aboriginal students. It suggests a rather reactive role for the graduate as well. Granted, they would be important as role models,



but not necessarily active proponents of change. It is likely that given the controversy around this program at this time, a conservative approach was necessary for the program to be considered successful.

The YNTEP Student Handbook, published in 1996, included further elaboration of these goals with more current emphasis in the 1990s on constructivist, student-centered pedagogy and multiculturalism. YNTEP graduates would have background in the following:

- knowledge of current curriculum instructional methods, assessment, and evaluation techniques;
- knowledge of child development;
- versed in a child-centered approach to teaching and learning;
- willing to utilize a multicultural approach to the classroom with an emphasis on First Nations culture to promote a better understanding of the unique nature of our northern and Canadian society;
- willing to bring one's own family, clan, and community culture into the classroom as an instructional foundation;
- familiar with teaching in both urban and rural settings; and
- experienced in the practice of teaching through extensive student teaching opportunities throughout the program. (YNTEP Student Handbook, 1996)

The emphasis on multiculturalism, reflecting a celebration of differences related to food, dress, stories, and ceremonies, is not surprising in these aims. At the time, this approach was the only means for bringing First Nations' perspectives into the curriculum. As an official policy on racial tolerance, it recognizes difference in reference to culture rather than power and socio-economic status. However, the policy on multiculturalism was an important entry point for YNTEP graduates and an opportunity to include Aboriginal content and pedagogy. Though this did not change fundamental gaps in the academic success of many Yukon First Nations students, it was viewed as a starting point from which further change would evolve. The limitations of this approach and its inherent blind end were not obvious at the time. A growing body of research on the effects of multiculturalism would show that it failed to bridge racial and cultural gaps in Canadian schools and fell remarkably short of addressing the root of racial inequities. Anti-racist education, which requires a deeper understanding of systemic barriers and effects of white racial domination, needed to become a significant part of the YNTEP curriculum.

## Conclusion

As comes along with any new initiative, particularly one associated with an employment equity program created to address an inequity, YNTEP has had to prove itself. As Piers McDonald and Shakir Alwarid realized at the outset of the program, there was really only one opportunity for this program to be accepted, and that was with the first graduates. This first group, and those that followed in the early years, put great effort into being *accepted* as equals—most often as the first and only First Nations teachers on staff in their respective schools. And, while these graduates felt a huge responsibility to maintain white, Western teaching practices, they found creative ways to bring Yukon First Nations culture and history to Yukon classrooms. As the number of graduates increased, and as their individual successes were recognized as important in changing schools for the better, so did the realization and resolve that more could be done in Aboriginal education.

The signing of Yukon land claims agreements and the beginning of self-government also added to a growing realization that with power-sharing structures and joint decision making, greater change was needed in public education if the Yukon was ever to become a place where two cultures could live and work together as equals. The opening of six seats to non-Aboriginal students in 2004 by then education minister, John Edzerza, brought this realization to YNTEP. The challenge at the time and still today, is how to foster collegiality among students whose lives and realities may be very different from each other—some with privilege and some who have endured generational effects of colonization. How can this be done without reinforcing barriers or creating new ones?

Ernie Lawton may have been the perfect role model for YNTEP and for its ongoing challenge: how to bring change to public education when some may not be ready for it or not aware that it is needed. Lawton was described by many interviewed for this article as the person most critical to the actuality of YNTEP. He is described as having a way about him that was calming and sincere. He had a quiet resolve and was a careful listener, but with absolute certainty about the rightness of this program for the Yukon.

I suggest that the graduates of YNTEP have taken up this role in their quiet determination. They model effective ways to work with Aboriginal students, bring missing content to the curriculum, and willingly share their expertise and resources. The program's early graduates helped to make schools comfortable with this new development. This was an absolutely critical beginning in the journey to create schools that are responsive to the

needs of Yukon First Nations people. Those that have followed have built on this foundation.

TEPs began as programs to support successful teacher-training opportunities for students of Aboriginal ancestry to serve in their communities as good role models, and as providers of missing cultural content and pedagogy. Today, TEPs must play a greater role in supporting anti-racist education; in creating an awareness of the racialization of Canadian society and class differences which accepts, and thereby reproduces, inequity as though these were natural occurrences. It makes all the difference when students of white and Aboriginal ancestry explore these topics together.

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Elijah Smith who set very high standards for this program; Dr. Lou Jacquot, YNTEP Faculty Advisor, who insisted that teachers of Aboriginal ancestry must also be leaders; Ernie Lawton, Consultant for YNTEP and later Assistant Deputy Minister, Yukon Department of Education; Sandy Anderson, YNTEP Faculty Advisor; and Ed Stick, YNTEP first graduating class, 1993.

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