

K–12 Arts Education:

**First Nations, Métis and Inuit
Focus Groups—
Themes and Findings in Arts Education**

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K–12 Arts Education: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Focus Groups— Themes and Findings in Arts Education

PART 1: BACKGROUND

Alberta Education has initiated a plan for the review and revision of the fine arts programs in Alberta. As part of the review process, focus groups were held with a variety of stakeholders. These focus groups included the First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) peoples within Alberta. The purpose of consulting with the various focus groups was to gain a rich diversity of perspectives to inform the development of a *Draft K–12 Arts Education Curriculum Framework*.

Alberta’s Commission on Learning report, *Every child learns. Every child succeeds*, recommended that Alberta Education improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth by ensuring that “First Nations and Métis are directly involved in the development of curriculum and learning resources for and about Aboriginal peoples in all subject areas.” (Recommendation No. 39, p. 10)

In 2002, Alberta Learning published the *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*, which established “Alberta Learning’s commitment to enhance educational opportunities for Aboriginal learners in the province, and to develop an ongoing dialogue with Aboriginal communities and other education stakeholders.” (p. 1)

- “Through the Framework, the Government of Alberta is committed to working with Aboriginal peoples, federal and municipal governments, industry and other interested parties to (1) improve individual and community well-being and self-reliance....” (p. 3)
- “The *Native Education Policy Review* recognized that First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples are not special interest groups in Canada. They are unique constitutional and governance entities, whose place in Canada is unlike that of any other peoples because of their original occupancy of Canada, their treaty rights, and Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* that recognizes and affirms the “existing Aboriginal and treaty rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada”.” (p. 4)
- One of the long-term expected outcomes of the Review is to “foster a greater appreciation and understanding by all Albertans of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples.” (p. 5)
- “The Policy Framework is designed to be a living document.... It is also anticipated that the Policy Framework will help guide planning and evaluation of Aboriginal learner programming.” (p. 8)
- One goal of the Policy Framework is to “respect and follow protocols during collaborative initiatives and consultation activities with First Nations, Métis or Inuit peoples.” (p. 13)

- Another goal is to create a highly responsive and responsible ministry by developing and supporting “ministry structures and practices that foster optimal working relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities including parents and education authorities” (p. 13)
- A highly responsive and responsible ministry also includes raising “awareness, understanding and respect of First Nations, Métis and Inuit worldviews among ministry staff and all Albertans.” (p. 14)
- In working toward the Policy Framework goals, Alberta Learning commits to be transparent, inclusive, innovative, learner-centered and equity-focused, responsive, collaborative and results-oriented. “First Nations, Métis and Inuit community knowledge will be sought in the development of Early Childhood Services to Grade 12 curriculum, post-secondary programs and teaching resources.” (p. 15)
- In conclusion, “the Policy Framework is intended to help guide the Ministry’s future activities on First Nations, Métis and Inuit education policy development, strategy implementation and program evaluation. The Policy Framework’s success will be dependent on the continued commitment of all individuals, organizations and communities involved in Aboriginal education.” (pp. 28–29)

“Art is the heartbeat of our people. It’s not something that’s outside of us.” This statement by a First Nations teacher clearly illustrates how FNMI peoples feel about the arts. Participants voiced that, for many FNMI students, it is the arts that keeps them in school.

PART 2: CONSULTATION OVERVIEW

Demographics

Participants included both on- and off-reserve representatives from the Treaty 6, 7 and 8 regions and Métis settlement school boards. There was representation from K–12 art, drama, music and dance teachers including both college and university instructors. Non-FNMI artists and educators, who work primarily with large FNMI populations in both the urban and rural areas, also were included.

One of the distinct features of the focus groups was the inclusion of many renowned FNMI artists who were not necessarily involved with the schools. The result was well-rounded representation from a variety of arts disciplines including visual artists, dancers, musicians and dramatists.

Methodology

Consultation Dates and Places

October 16, 2008 – St. Paul, Alberta

October 21, 2008 – Peace River, Alberta

October 24, 2008 – Edmonton, Alberta

October 28, 2008 – Calgary, Alberta

Consultation Participants

Of the total 49 participants:

- 28 were female
- 21 were male

(9 of the 49 participants were traditional Elders from the various FNMI communities—male and female).

At the beginning of each session, proper protocol was honoured by offering tobacco and asking an Elder from the area to begin with a word of prayer and a blessing in his or her own language. The consultations were facilitated through both small and large group discussion, including a talking circle in which each participant had the opportunity to express concerns and ideas through personal narrative. The following discussion questions were asked and each prompted rich and deep reflection from each participant within the focus group.

Discussion Questions

1. Who nurtured your creativity? How was your creativity nurtured?
2. Who mentored the artist in you? How were you mentored?
3. Why are the arts important to the future of Aboriginal communities?
4. Why are the arts important to Aboriginal youth?
5. What is your role/responsibility in the future of arts education?
6. What do you want your grandchildren to be learning in arts education in school?
7. What do you want all children to be learning in arts education in school?
8. What are the common threads across the arts?
9. What are the “big ideas” that unite the arts?

PART 3: KEY FINDINGS OF THE CONSULTATIONS

The following is a collection of the recurring themes that permeated consultation discussions.

1. The Rationale for Arts Education for FNMI Students

A. Arts education helps students discover their *identity* and *culture*

One of the effects of the Indian residential school experience is that many FNMI communities have struggled with the issue of identity. For example, one FNMI participant pointed out that when you lose your identity, you also lose your soul. In terms of arts education, many participants felt that the art and the artist are one in the same. Therefore, the loss of art equates to a loss of self. One FNMI participant

poignantly shared, “Arts helped me discover who I am. I was no longer ashamed of my Aboriginal ancestry.” Participants felt that art empowers FNMI students to be themselves. There also was agreement that arts education can be a powerful medium for FNMI students attending both on- and off-reserve schools to learn about their identity. One FNMI focus group participant stated, “If we’re grounded in who we are, then we can engage in dialogue.”

Many of the FNMI focus group participants agreed that arts education enhances meaningful connections with the Creator, ancestors, Elders, stories, history, land and, most importantly, the inner self. According to one FNMI artist and teacher, “Art is a continuum or transfer of knowledge, wisdom and storytelling ... it is a journey of discovery ... it’s like holding hands ... and connecting with grandparents.” This connection is vital to ensuring that both identity and culture are maintained.

B. Arts education makes *healing and well-being* possible

A common agreement among all of the various FNMI focus group participants was that they wanted their children and grandchildren to lead happy, healthy and productive lives. Yet, many FNMI communities struggle with similar social issues; e.g., addictions, suicide, gangs, crime.

Many of the focus group participants expressed the importance of healing the spirit within. One FNMI Elder shared, “Why do people get in conflict with the law? One, there is a loss of identity. Two, there is a loss of pride. Three, there is a disconnection with spirituality. Art is an expression of the spirit ... of who we are. When you awaken the artist in a person, you awaken the spirit.” Another focus group participant shared, “My music is healing.” While another added, “Music touches the heart and soul. It is healing.”

Participants identified the prominent role of the arts in the healing process for FNMI communities. They strongly believed that the arts touch the heart and soul of students, and they identified arts education as a powerful force in promoting well-being for FNMI students. According to an FNMI participant, it was music that awakened his soul. “In junior high I discovered singing and performing. Before that I lived in a very repressive household. I discovered that part of my soul was missing.”

C. Arts education provides a positive outlet for *expression*

Participants affirmed that one of the best ways to see the beauty of FNMI culture is through the arts. As one FNMI focus group participant said, “I want my grandchildren to understand how art is an expression of who we are in connection to our world in the midst of change.”

The FNMI consultations revealed that FNMI students “must experience art” in order to find, develop and express their own voice.

Many of the FNMI focus group participants expressed how the arts provide a safe environment for FNMI students to express themselves. One focus group participant pointed out that, “Youth are in gangs because of a need to belong. Arts provide a positive outlet for expression.”

FNMI participants voiced that the inclusion of “Aboriginal art would add to the richness of Alberta culture and that all Alberta students would benefit from exposure to FNMI art and artists.”

2. The Goals of Arts Education for FNMI Students

The goals were derived from answers to the FNMI focus group discussion question, “*What do you want your grandchildren and all children to be learning in arts education in school?*”

Goals emerging from these discussions included the following.

A. FNMI students will continue to develop a solid foundation of self

Many of the FNMI focus group participants expressed concern for their children and stated that they did not want their children to forget who they are and where they came from. They stated that the arts are a reflection of who they are and, when students, regardless of their cultural background, see their culture represented in the arts education curriculum, they will inevitably gain a sense of self-worth and develop a positive self-image.

One of the suggestions to obtain this goal was to have FNMI Elders and artists engage with students to ensure that cultural protocols are taught. This involvement would lead to a deeper understanding of the various FNMI ways of knowing, not just for FNMI students but for all Alberta students.

B. FNMI students will experience a variety of art forms and develop a balanced perspective of art forms

Current FNMI artists reflected on the lack of representation of FNMI art and artists in their school experience. As a result, they had to struggle to prove themselves in the arts community. Participants expressed a strong desire to include a more culturally diverse perspective of the arts in a new curriculum. The FNMI focus groups also made it clear that they want their children to be exposed to both traditional and contemporary art. They expressed a desire for their children to continue to be engaged in non-FNMI art forms as well.

C. FNMI students will experience success in the arts and feel empowered to achieve success in other areas

FNMI focus group participants expressed a desire to increase high school completion rates for FNMI students. Focus group participants identified the arts as a powerful retention strategy. They stated that, for many FNMI students, the arts are a lifeline to school. They believed FNMI students developed a sense of pride and personal responsibility through participation in the arts and that students who experienced success in the arts were able to transfer success into other areas of school and life.

3. Recommendations for Arts Education Curriculum Development General Learning Outcomes

The recommendations for general learning outcomes are the result of discussions around the question, “What do we need to do/teach to achieve the goals of arts education?” The following themes emerged.

A. Identity

Participants recommended that examples of FNMI cultural art and artists be represented in the curriculum. They were hopeful that specific elements of FNMI worldviews would be honoured; i.e., history from the FNMI perspective; storytelling from the oral tradition; language shared by fluent speakers; symbolism within nature and universe; traditional singing, drumming and dancing; the role of humour among FNMI peoples; traditional protocol taught by Elders; the creation of art from the FNMI perspective; the teaching of art from a holistic approach.

B. Connections

Participants recommended that a new curriculum enable FNMI students to recognize their unique connection to place, stories, ancestors, themselves and others.

C. Expression

Participants recommended that a new curriculum empower FNMI students to express themselves in both traditional and contemporary art forms.

D. Preservation

Participants recommended that a new curriculum help FNMI students recognize the importance of maintaining and preserving the skills related to historical and traditional art forms. Special emphasis will be given to those art forms that are in jeopardy of being lost; i.e., traditional songs, traditional dancing, traditional fashion and design, quill work, animal hide work.

E. Protocol

Participants recommended that when students learn the arts they recognize and respect the cultural protocols of FNMI communities throughout Alberta. By paying attention to cultural protocols, students will develop the necessary consideration and respect for the sacred aspects of FNMI art.

F. Elders

Participants recommended that all students recognize the value of FNMI Elders. These Elders and/or cultural advisors are considered to be experts in their communities. Their expertise includes creation stories, protocols, language and worldviews. Without the Elders, FNMI ways of knowing cannot be transferred to future generations. Therefore, the Elders are given the recognition and respect they deserve.

PART 4: CONCLUSION

Alberta Education's focused consultations, with a variety of FNMI peoples, resulted in rich discussion on arts education. Participants clearly stated that the arts are integral to FNMI peoples and, in many instances, art is viewed as a powerful tool in shaping FNMI community members, especially youth.

Many of the FNMI focus group participants expressed how honoured they were just to be asked to be a part of these discussions. They thanked Alberta Education for the opportunity to be heard. As a result of the close connection that FNMI peoples have with the arts, they are extremely passionate about keeping the arts alive within Alberta's education system.