



first peoples and education

An account from the Third Hemispheric Encounter of Indigenous Educators

By Deborah Moore and Gary Fenn

As the sun slowly rises from behind the Temple of the Great Jaguar, 34 people gather around a stone circle in the centre of a plaza that is surrounded by two pyramid structures and a marketplace complex built over 1,400 years ago by the Mayan peoples. As the Mayan elder offers thanks to the Creator, he proceeds


through a traditional ceremony that recognizes his many ancestors and offers blessings to those in attendance.

The Third Hemispheric Encounter of Indigenous Educators took place in November at Tikal National Park in Petén, Guatemala. Tikal, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is one of the largest archaeological sites

and urban centres of the pre-Columbian Maya civilization. Located in an isolated jungle area in northern Guatemala, Tikal's natural beauty and ever-present wildlife contributed wonderfully to the overall experience of the encounter. However, despite that fabulous experience and the natural

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beauty of the area, reminders of Guatemala's unstable political situation, poor socio-economic status and geological fragility were ever present. For example, aftershocks from a major earthquake were seriously impacting areas further to the south during the encounter; most of the travellers we met en route to and from Guatemala were members of missionary groups providing aid services. Newspaper articles during the encounter reported on the recent murder of eight protesters by government militia. Despite these harsh realities, any concerns we had about being in Guatemala were quickly erased by the warmth and genuineness of the Guatemalan people.

Attending the encounter were representatives from education organizations, schools and indigenous groups to talk about the many challenges that First Peoples face when it comes to education. Representatives came from Ontario, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Argentina, Suriname, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru and Guatemala. The goal was to share strategies and ideas that would improve education opportunities for First Peoples while preserving their language and heritage.

There were many shared programs and approaches that had yielded success for some First Peoples groups in

the Western Hemisphere. Some of the more popular examples included the use of language nests in Mexico, the recognition of public universities for First Peoples in Colombia, the elimination of standardized testing in British Columbia and the development of working groups such as the OSSTF/FEESO First Nations, Inuit and Métis (FNIM) Advisory Work Group in Ontario. The British Columbia delegates also provided much enjoyed opportunities for participants to try their hand at making traditional Haida crafts such as red cedar bracelets and felt-and-button wall hangings. Delegates delivered their presentations in many different dialects and interpretive services were provided.

In addition to sharing effective strategies, participants discussed some of the roadblocks preventing them from moving forward and achieving their goals. Not surprisingly, the most commonly presented obstacle was government underfunding. One example, provided by the Guatemalan delegates, included a commitment from their government—with the support of other nations in the hemisphere, mainly the United States—to provide \$12-billion to improve the quality of education. However, when the recession hit, less than \$1-billion of that commitment materialized. In addition to underfunding, all delegates reported staggering

levels of funding disparity between First Peoples and the remaining population. With respect to language preservation, a major stumbling block was the vastness of linguistic diversity in most countries. For example, in Guatemala alone there are 22 First Peoples linguistic groups. Training teachers and developing curriculum that captures both the linguistic and cultural diversity of each group were viewed as paramount to preservation, yet nearly impossible to put into action due to lack of funding and resources.

Poverty among First Peoples was also reported to be a common roadblock. For example, in Guatemala 52 per cent of Mayan children reportedly live in poverty while another 22 per cent live in extreme poverty. Poverty contributes to a host of additional socio-economic conditions, including underage pregnancy and school dropout. In Guatemala, there are currently 22,000 cases of pregnant girls between the ages of eight and 10, and school dropout by Grade 3 is typical among Mayan children.

Canada is not immune to these challenges. When the Canadian experience was compared to those from other participating nations, the similarities were shocking. The following UNESCO quotation spoke volumes as to the urgency for economic and educational

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reform for First Peoples throughout the Western Hemisphere: "For a person to break free from the effects of poverty they require no less than 10 consecutive years of education."

In addition to the marathon delegate presentations, participants had an opportunity to witness many aspects of Mayan culture and the challenges that Mayan peoples face when it comes to the preservation of their languages and culture. An example of the challenges was presented in the form of a presentation of the Rabinal Achi, a traditional and ancient theatre, music and dance production that has been proclaimed by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Despite the recognition from UNESCO, the government of Guatemala has not provided any support or funding for this Masterpiece of Humanity, and has recently forced the group to pay taxes, which threatens their ability to continue the production and which, in turn, may result in its being lost to the world forever.

Beyond the formal agenda and presentations, we had the amazing opportunity to develop friendships and hear about the lives of the other delegates. Through broken English and sometimes with the help of translators, painfully personal stories of survival, unbelievable loss, courage and hope were shared. Those stories, powerful and paralyzing in their honesty, and the faces of the people who shared them will be remembered always. Also committed to memory was the lasting impression of a rarely seen passion and solidarity, evidenced in the words, actions and gestures of each participant. There is perhaps no greater force for change than people inspired by common experience, loss and suffering. We were deeply honoured to be participants at the encounter. ☺

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