

**Interview with Yukon Government Department of Education:  
First Nations Programs and Partnershis Unit**

Ashley Cummings  
March 2020

Holistic education is a vital key to creating critical thinkers. Ashley Cummings, the Indigenous Research Assistant with The Arctic Institute for Community-Based Research (AICBR), recently sat down with Tammy Stoneman and Flora Asp, both consultants for the First Nations Programs and Partnerships Unit for the education department of the Yukon Government. Together, we discussed the ways students and teachers are supported in their learning journeys in Yukon.

Tammy and Flora spoke passionately about their positions in education. From facilitating blanket exercises, to teacher orientations, to re-working curriculum and creating programs, the most important theme became clear: keeping the content local and culturally-relevant. With Yukon's 14 First Nations (11 of them being self-governing), there are communities working alongside Tammy and Flora to ensure that this theme prevails.

Beginning with blanket exercises, Ashley was fortunate enough to participate in one of these sobering experiences. A blanket exercise is an interactive program that teaches Indigenous history in Canada. In her First Nations Studies 12 class several years ago, she was able to witness the ways colonization has impacted Yukon First Nations specifically. Being of Inuk heritage, it was an important experience to understand the history in Yukon. "Blanket exercises are constantly updated and localized," said Flora. "We're always adjusting it for each community." Having witnessed blanket exercises in several different First Nations, Ashley admired the localization of each experience.

As we continued in discussion, we quickly began focusing on teachers. New teachers, from Yukon and beyond, participate in the New Teacher Orientation with Tammy and Flora each year. It is a two-day professional development with new teachers that focus on Indigenous ways

of knowing and doing, with different sessions for teachers to participate in. Elders and knowledge-keepers come to assist in preparing the teachers before they begin, with everything from archery and history to beading and cooking. This is to help new educators realize how to engage students in learning and reflection with First Nations components in the curriculum. At the end of their experience, teachers prepare presentations to showcase their knowledge gained throughout the orientation.

Adjusting curriculum would seem to be a daunting task. However, with the help of curriculum working groups (comprised of local First Nation governments, elders, knowledge-keepers, teachers, and principals), Tammy and Flora are able to ensure that the curriculum is easily adaptable to each local First Nation and their traditions. These individuals are invited to these working groups and they are able to participate in ensuring their community's education for youth is true to their culture and their ways of knowing and doing.

Finally, with many programs and projects on the horizon, the opportunities for local content are vast. Tammy has been field-testing a residential school and reconciliation unit that will be implemented in the 2020-2021 school year. All in all, there are projects from fish camps to science units, residential schools and reconciliation to First Nation engagement in curriculum adjustments and more. Yukon education is constantly being adapted to include First Nations knowledge that is relevant to each community.

Our discussion with Tammy and Flora was an enriching experience that highlighted the work that is being done to ensure Yukon's children are being well-informed on the beautiful and tragic histories for Indigenous people in Canada. Regardless of the topic, the holistic local knowledge is being included and our children are able to see their knowledge grow in their surroundings. Children are our future and they are truly being held up by their respective communities.