

# *Reimagining the School Calendar for Anishnaabe Schools: A Modest Proposal*

GREGORY WILSON  
*Keewatin Patricia District School Board*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper, after a quick review of the Anishnaabe creation story, proposes a new way of structuring the education calendar for band run schools located within Anishnaabe communities. The proposal is based on using the traditional calendar of the Anishnaabe, and organizing the school calendar to copy the structure of the moon cycle used to track time within Anishnaabe communities. This suggestion is then examined to determine how it might affect other components of education such as curriculum, assessment and even teaching certification and professional development. The paper ends stating that it would not be feasible to integrate for all grades at one time, but that it would be prudent to scaffold into schools over time.

**Keywords:** Indigenous knowledge, instructional effectiveness, school year, elementary secondary education

**RESUMÉ:** Après un bref rappel de l'histoire de la création des Anishnaabe, une nouvelle façon de structurer le calendrier des cours des écoles dirigées par les bandes des Anishnaabe, est proposée. Cette proposition s'appuie sur le calendrier traditionnel des Anishnaabe et organise le calendrier scolaire par rapport au cycle lunaire que les Anishnaabe emploient pour calculer l'heure. Ensuite, on analyse le contenu pour savoir si ce calendrier peut porter préjudice à d'autres parties de l'enseignement telles que les programmes, les évaluations, voire les diplômes d'enseignement et l'évolution professionnelle. A la fin, il est révélé qu'il ne serait pas possible d'intégrer tous les niveaux en même temps et qu'il serait plus raisonnable de le faire au fil du temps.

**Mots-clés:** connaissance autochtone, efficacité pédagogique, année scolaire, enseignement dans le primaire et le secondaire.

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation committee, in its Calls to Action document, writes that one thing that must be completed within education is that different jurisdictions need to be

“[d]eveloping culturally appropriate curricula.” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, pg 2). While this is an action that has been recommended by First Nation groups for over forty years (Canada, 2010), placing a set of culturally appropriate expectations or outcomes within the framework of an institution that is built on the biases and beliefs of a dominant culture will have trouble bringing about the planned changes.

One way to overcome the institutional biases built within the current educational system is to examine and modify the manner in which the different curricula would be delivered within the schools, including examining the calendar system used within schools across Canada.

The use of a European calendar within the school system is one aspect that is not discussed very often and yet has a very powerful and intrinsic effect on student learning. The Anishnaabe had a calendar system that connected them to the land, that ensured their survival as a healthy and successful people (<http://www.anishinaabemdaa.com/moons.htm>). To ensure that a First Nation school within an Anishnaabe community can be successful, even details such as developing a school calendar based on the traditional Anishnaabe calendar must be considered, so that all aspects of the school system are built on traditional teachings and values of the Anishnaabe community.

Elders have traditionally taught that all teachings can be walked back to a community’s, or First Nation’s, creation story (Cavanagh, 2005). This practice ensures that all practices and actions of an individual or community can be rooted in the ideals and values of the community’s creation story. This allows for the understanding of an individual to know how to walk along a good path, by following the teachings that are embedded within the basic teachings of the community.

Within the Anishnaabe communities of southern Ontario the creation story can be found described in the writings of Basil Johnston, who retells the story of Sky Woman and how she fell to earth (2005). When she first landed all there was on earth was water and she needed to live on the back of a turtle, upon which she placed soil, which she then turned into Turtle Island. Turtle Island is what the Anishnaabe (along with other First Nation communities) call North America, based on this creation story of Sky Woman.

However, this is not the end of the importance of the creation story, or the role of the turtle within its telling. The turtle also has an important role in the development of the calendar used by the Anishnaabe. The shell of turtles in the areas inhabited by the

Anishnaabe have markings that were used as a way to follow their calendar. There are 13 squares on the outside ring of turtles' shells. This ring of squares was used to follow the 13 different moons in the calendar. Inside of this ring there were 28 smaller squares. These squares were used to track the 28 days between each moon in the calendar (Pheasant, 2014).

Therefore, the thirteen moons, with twenty-eight days between each moon, creates a calendar that is three hundred sixty four days long. This calendar is very close in length to the western calendar, which has been set up, and refined, based on the scientific measurements developed over the last two-thousand years. The Anishnaabe calendar was created without the same instruments, and yet is within twenty-four days of being the same length, was developed based on observation, not just of the moon, but also the gifts nature provides to help the community during the year.

The thirteen moons which the Anishnaabe used as a base to their calendar had very specific roles as each month is based on an activity or teaching to help ensure the community's survival, or helping it to thrive, based on the time of the month. This closely follows the ideas developed within the Anishnaabe creation story when the animals and plants agree how to help man just before he is created (Johnston, 2005). The calendar developed by the Anishnaabe is a map that provides the community with the necessary guides to remind them how nature, whether it is the plants or the animals, are helping them during a specific time of year.

This is seen very clearly with the Sugar Moon, which is the season from late February until late March (Pheasant, 2014). In Anishnaabe territory this is when the sap starts to run within the maple trees found in the many forests in the area. The Anishnaabe knew that this sap can be used as a food, to provide sugar and other nutrients that were hard to find through the winter. The running of the sap was also a sign, along with the lengthening of the days, that winter was coming to an end, with spring soon to follow. With this knowledge a variety of teachings were developed that were passed from generation to generation to help ensure the survival of the community, by using the sap, and its sugar, as a critical point of measurement within the year.

There are similar concepts and teachings throughout each of the thirteen moons that make up the Anishnaabe calendar. Each moon is recognized by the unique identifiers of the season and the teachings that are based on those identifiers. In this way the calendar allows for an easy method of keeping track of the time of

year, but also allows for the quick identification of the different qualities within nature that are brought about during that specific time of year.

This method of time keeping is embedded with the teachings and understandings of the land that the Anishnaabe used to survive and thrive within the environment in which they lived. Its use and the understanding of the teachings found within it were essential to yearly schedules that were developed by the different communities to ensure that they would endure. Therefore, to guarantee that the youth of the Anishnaabe community fully understand the importance of this calendar and its teachings, to ensure the community has control of its education system (Chiefs of Ontario, 2012) it would be appropriate for schools that are on Anishnaabe territory to use the traditional calendar as a base from which to develop the calendar used by the school.

The school year calendar that is used within most, if not all, band run schools in Anishnaabe territory is based on the Gregorian calendar, with most of them mirroring calendars developed by local public school boards. This means that short holidays, found during the school year, are based on Christian days of observance, such as Easter or Christmas. There is usually also a two month break for summer, which was originally placed in the calendar so children could help with the family farm. Having a school within a First Nation community follow this calendar is antiquated at best, colonization at worst.

Using the calendar of the thirteen moons, it would be possible to set up a calendar that respects the unique identifiers of each season, yet would still meet the requirements of central regulatory bodies, such as the required number of days of classroom instruction.

Instead of having students attend school for five days per week for forty weeks between Labour Day, at the beginning of September, and the end of June, having students attend school using a more appropriate, traditional calendar would allow the community to differentiate itself from the education system found outside of its borders. By using the thirteen moon calendar, Anishnaabe communities could set up their school year by having students attend school for three weeks out of every four weeks during each of the moons in the calendar. Therefore, for each moon, students would attend the first three weeks, for five days a week, but then get one week off at the end of the four week period, after which when the new moon started they would attend for three weeks, and then get one week off. This cycle would repeat for each of the thirteen moons. This way a band-run school's calendar

would follow the traditional cycle of the calendar followed by the Anishnaabe, yet students would still meet the requirement found in most jurisdictions of attending one hundred eighty-five instructional days each year. As each of the thirteen months based on the moons has the potential for fifteen instructional days, there are a potential of one hundred ninety five instructional days each year. These extra ten days provide a school's administration with flexibility to schedule professional development days or to allow the school to observe yearly holidays, such as Aboriginal Day, or other cultural celebrations.

By removing the forced restrictions of the western education calendar system, a band run school would then have the opportunity to examine and reinvigorate delivery of its programming to the students, using the calendar system as a guide for integrating local curriculum as suggested by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), and other improvements.

As the calendar would be based on the moons of the traditional Anishnaabe calendar, it would be reasonable to develop a curriculum that is based on the teachings of each of these months. A community, or communities potentially working together, would be able to develop programming and expectations from within language arts, social studies, math, physical education and other subjects that would be based on the concepts of ideas of the teachings associated with each month's specific moon. As First Nation education was traditionally cross-curricular, it would also provide the developer of these new programs with an opportunity to connect the expectations found within the different subjects, to allow for a natural delivery of cross-curricular programming. This would provide students with an opportunity to learn the material in a way that connects their understanding with the environment in which they live (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009). This method is in contrast to the western education system used within most First Nation schools, which deliver isolated content of each of the subjects students learn within artificial time based silos. A school calendar and curriculum that follows the patterns of the land and community teachings will only help First Nations students make the necessary connections between the academic understanding of the curriculum, as well as identify with, and own, the teachings of the community.

First Nation education systems traditionally were based on concept based learning, and gave time for the teacher to teach the individual student the way that suited them best. Essentially, it was differentiated instruction before it was known as differentiated

instruction. A calendar system that focuses exclusively on a set number of teachings, and their related outcomes, for a short intensive period of time, would allow the teacher working within the system to find ways to reach each individual student based on where they are in their understanding of those teachings. Having the school calendar aligned with the curriculum would limit the need of teacher long range planning as each month would have the curriculum already set. This would allow teachers working within the system to collaboratively develop best practices for reaching students in different ways, as they would be guaranteed to be teaching the same content at the same time. When planning, teachers would be able to look to the teachings found during that month's moon, on which the curriculum is based, to find unique approaches to delivering the content. It would also allow them to consider a wider variety of ways of displaying the knowledge created, as the teachings would provide guidance towards how an individual would show understanding of the teaching.

The curriculum, then, becomes rooted to the community and the history and environment that surrounds the community (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). This ensures that what is enacted within the classroom is connected to the student's understanding of the world, so that the ideas of Lave and Wenger (2009), and their concept of situated learning, is developed from the very first days of school. As the curriculum for all subjects is connected to teachings of that month's moon, every minute of the school day creates deeper connections and understanding for the student, while also ensuring that ideas taught in one subject are connected and have relationships with concepts taught within other subjects. This creation of a cross curricular program, that lasts for each year that the student is within the school, connects the school to traditional cultural methods of teaching, instead of depending on the western method of separating each subject.

Then, as the student moves from one grade to the next (or really it would just be from one year to the next as there would not be a large artificial barrier of time between learning periods) when the student learns about the teachings of a moon for the second year, the teachings contain more depth and context, as the students' relationship with the world has changed, has deepened since the last year. The curriculum has developed into a natural spiral (Maurial, 1999; Bruner 1966; Dewey, 1997; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998), as teachers and students return yearly to examine the ideas and teachings in a different way, but still, connected to a specific moon.

By developing a spiral curriculum that provides deeper ideas about the teachings of the moon each year also provides a natural opportunity for teachers within the school to develop professional learning communities. As the teachers are responsible for being familiar with the teachings of the moon and how they integrate into all the subjects, from language to social studies and mathematics, it makes it easier for teachers to codevelop lessons that build on each other over subsequent years. This shared expertise brings the staff together into a stronger community, as they work and build ideas together that can be used for all of the students of the school. As they work on building lessons they will also be able to share ideas about how to differentiate the curriculum as well as integrating methods of assessment that are cross curricular as well as culturally appropriate.

The use of assessment within a school system like this would have to re-conceptualized due to the new ideas within the curriculum. These concepts, based on the teachings of the community, as well as the pedagogy, would mandate a new definition of student success as the focus of the education system would move away from the idea of economic sustainability (Davis, 2009), the backbone of the western education system. Instead, success would be measured based on the values and ideas of the understandings embedded within the teachings of each moon. These values would inform the idea of success that would be needed to frame the assessments that would be used each year as students are presented with deeper understanding of, and how to use the knowledge (Barnhardt & Kawagely, 2005), as well as the different lessons from each subject.

Technology is a key consideration within most classrooms found within the schools of the western education model in order to provide students an opportunity to showcase their work in various ways. In most of these situations the idea of technology is limited to being digital. While there is nothing wrong with there being some opportunity for students in this new system to use digital technologies, the definition of technology must be expanded to ensure that community based technologies are included and embedded in daily practices in this program (Wilson, 2015). The technologies of the community, from traditional ceremonies to cultural technologies, such as communication devices and tools, would provide opportunities for hands on learning for students to connect the teachings of that month's moon to their own daily life. It would also ensure that the teachings and lessons are accessible to a wider variety of students, including those who are hands on learners.

This integration of new forms of pedagogy, assessment, concept based learning environments as well as the base teachings that inform all of the subjects would also require an examination of the teacher certification process that would be used to ensure expert teachers are hired to deliver the content. The levels of expertise that are used within most teacher certification processes are tied to the teachings and understandings of the western education system with no consideration for the teachings and values of Anishnaabe communities. Therefore, a new model of properly recognizing the teachings and understandings of the Anishnaabe communities would need to be developed in order to provide those individuals who have knowledge of the traditional teachings an understanding of how to deliver them within a formal learning environment.

If there are teachers that would like to obtain the necessary certification, but do not have the necessary experience, professional development programs would need to be created to provide that opportunity. Other training would have to be developed to ensure that teachers within the school have an opportunity to provide a model of lifelong learning. Therefore, a system of pre-service and in-service training would need to be thought out and developed to ensure that teachers, administrators and other participants have an opportunity to share their skills and improve them within this system.

Developing a new education system is not something that can be done easily or quickly. There are many different issues that have not been raised here, the most obvious one being the money needed to develop these new resources and opportunities. That being said, there are programs similar to this that have already been started in some communities, and using their success as a model, provides opportunity for something like this to start in a positive manner.

Instead of trying to integrate all of the ideas listed here for all grades right at the start, to ensure that resources are available it might make more sense to start with programming at a kindergarten level to provide space and time to ensure the answers to some of the questions posed here are answered. Once ideas have been provided, as well as other resources obtained, then it would be possible to start to expanding and developing curriculum and teaching guides for future grades. Then, once curriculum for enough grades have been developed, along with the required pedagogies, technologies and assessments to support them, then it would be appropriate to start examining how to frame and provide

REIMAGINING THE SCHOOL CALENDAR FOR ANISHNAABE SCHOOLS 142  
professional development for those individuals working within this system.

This article is intended to provoke conversation by providing an initial idea. History shows repeatedly the issues First Nations across Canada have encountered within western education systems. Therefore, this is just a suggestion for how the Anishnaabe may be able to frame and control their own education system, to ensure they have true jurisdiction.

#### REFERENCES

Barnhardt, R., & Kawagely, A. O. (2005). Indigenous knowledge systems and Alaska ways of knowing. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 36(1), 8-23.

Brayboy, B. M. J., & Maughan, E. (2009). Indigenous knowledges and the story of the bean. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(1), 1-21.

Bruner, J. (1966). *The process of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Canada. Parliament. Senate. Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples. Proceedings. (Issue No. 7, June 1, 2010). 40<sup>th</sup> Parliament, 3<sup>rd</sup> Session. (Online). Available: [http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/SEN/Committee/403/abor/07eva-e.htm?comm\\_id=1&Language=E&Parl=40&Ses=3](http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/SEN/Committee/403/abor/07eva-e.htm?comm_id=1&Language=E&Parl=40&Ses=3)

Chiefs of Ontario. (2012). Our children our future our vision: First nation jurisdiction over first nation education in ontario. Retrieved from: <http://www.chiefs-of-ontario.org/sites/default/files/files/OCOFOV%20Education%20Report%202012.pdf>

Davis, W. (2009). *The wayfinders: Why ancient wisdom matters in the modern world*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, Inc.

Dewey, J. (1997). *Experience and education*. New York: Touchstone.

Johnston, B. (2005). *Ojibway Heritage*. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (2009). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Maurial, M. (2009). Indigenous knowledge and schooling: A continuum between conflict and dialogue. In L. M. Semali, & J. L. Kincheloe (Eds.), *What is indigenous knowledge: Voices from the academy* (pp. 59-78). New York: Falmer Press.

Pheasant, K. (2014). *Thirteen moons and the turtle*. Retrieved from: <http://www.anishinaabemdaa.com/moons.htm>

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Truth and reconciliation commission of Canada: Calls to action*. Retrieved

from:  
[http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Call\\_s\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Call_s_to_Action_English2.pdf)

Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Wilson, G. (2015). *Oh Canada: Citizenship on first nation land*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses @ University of Calgary.

**Address for Correspondence**

Gregory Wilson, Site 218, Box 5, RR #2  
Dryden, ON P8N 2Y5  
gregory\_j\_wilson@hotmail.com