

# Group graduates from early childhood education program 'grounded in a Mi'kmaw worldview'

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## EXCERPTS

After 18 months of learning how to care for children in their First Nation communities through a culturally competent lens, a group of women recently celebrated their graduation from a Mi'kmaw early childhood education pilot program at the Nova Scotia Community College.

The 13 Mi'kmaq women who participated in the Poqji-kina'masulti'kw tel-kina'mujik mijua'ji'jk program had their formal graduation ceremony on Oct. 24, in the midst of Mi'kmaq History Month.

"Our ceremony was very nice and it was done in the traditional sense that instead of receiving money or other gifts, we received quilts that were handmade by elders in our community," said Stephanie Tuplin, one of the graduates.

"I appreciated that and I appreciated that a lot of the faculty and a lot of the (people) that helped us get through the schooling process were able to attend."

Ann Sylliboy, of Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, said they wanted to send off the students "with as much good energy and thoughts and prayers" at the ceremony as they did when they started the program in February 2019.

The program was designed by Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, an organization that represents the educational interests of 12 Mi'kmaw communities in Nova Scotia, in partnership with NSCC to reflect the unique culture, language and community needs of Mi'kmaq children in the province.

"Our directors of education ... realized they needed early childhood educators and they wanted those early childhood educators to be grounded in a Mi'kmaw worldview," said Sylliboy.

Nik Phillips, who is the director of early education at the Millbrook Early Education Centre, taught the workplace pilot program, which saw students working full-time in an early childhood education setting whilst also taking classes.

He said the "vast majority" of the program followed the same curriculum as standard early childhood education programs in Nova Scotia and "still met all of the provincial requirements," but nearly all of the courses taught in the program were "Indigenized."

For example, Phillips said students were exposed to Mi'kmaq legends and how they could be taught to children, traditional medicines and plants, as well as incorporating water into lesson plans, an element "that's so sacred to our culture."

"Students also had the ability to specifically take nursery rhymes and we translated nursery rhymes so that they were in Mi'kmaq ... And we went back to traditional songs and rhythms and we had the students make their own 12-inch hand drums," he added.

According to Phillips, the students were able to develop cultural competency and "identity for themselves and where they belong in the context of their Indigenous ways" in a program that was "designed by us, for us, which is for the betterment of our communities."

He said the graduates of the "beautiful" program are now able to apply a Mi'kmaq lens in early childhood education in the seven out of 13 Mi'kmaq communities in the province that they're from, including in the Eskasoni, Membertou and Acadia First Nations.

"The fact of the matter is that mainstream and Indigenous communities are the same in some aspects, but we're very different," said Phillips.

"And our children are exposed to a lot of other things and a lot of other things that we carry, in terms of language and culture, intergenerational trauma, residential school aspects that are there and the poverty rates that are different in our communities."

Graduate Carrie Sylliboy said she enjoyed the program and was able to learn the Mi'kmaq language "along with the children" she taught.

"I would love to see more programs like this. It would be so beneficial for everybody to have the opportunity to learn the way we learned and to be proud of who you are," she said.

Tuplin, on the other hand, said she learned about “native medicines, our ancestors and their ways and how we can bring that into any everyday setting,” adding she believes the program “was actually able to heal some of the trauma that the people within the course were feeling.”

Currently, NSCC is undertaking a similar pilot project using the same curriculum in Wagmatcook with another cohort of students, but they’re not putting it to test in a workplace setting as students did in the first rendition of the program.

Phillips said there’s “a lot of conversation” about how to take the Poqji-kina’masulti’kw tel-kina’ mujik mijua’ji’jk pilot program and to “create a reality out of it” at NSCC.

When asked if Nova Scotia could benefit from more programs taught with a Mi’kmaw framework, Sylliboy said, “The world is our oyster.”

“For programming, I can’t see where you wouldn’t be able to apply Mi’kmaq ways of thinking, ways of knowing to a program. And I challenge different schools to start looking at this. I hope that this is just the first step for the beginning,” she added.

**Region:** Nova Scotia [3]

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