# Heightening Awareness and Strengthening Relationships: Implications of Public Policy for Aboriginal Students, Communities and Teachers

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This paper presents a qualitative analysis of an innovative project that brought together two school boards, principals, teachers, an Aboriginal Education and Research Centre, the respective Aboriginal communities and a team of researchers in the Province of Ontario in Canada. The data are the result of seven community forums held across the coterminous Catholic (separate) and public school districts where the community and the educators discussed public educational policies related to Aboriginal education. Using grounded theory analysis, the researchers identified three areas of concern: Aboriginal students' cultural authenticity, teachers' professional capacities and improving relationships. Coming from the voices of the Aboriginal community was the idea that each of the three areas further teachers' understanding of Aboriginal students' needs and preferences. We conclude with a discussion how educational policy and different ways of thinking can affect teacher education practices and the identities of teachers themselves.

Aboriginal[1] students attending publicly-funded and provincially-governed schools in Ontario, Canada, have traditionally under-achieved in comparison to the mainstream students in terms of academic achievement (Robertson, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2003). This reality at least partially contributes to the high levels of poverty and the socioeconomic and socio-historic marginalization of Aboriginal peoples across Ontario and Canada (Freiler, 2008). Given that almost

[1]Readers should not be deceived into believing that the use of the all-inclusive word "Aboriginal" signifies or implies any form of generic, one-size-fits-all approach to the realities of Aboriginal academic achievement in Ontario schools. On the contrary it must be recognized that the Anishnabe, Haudenosaunee, Inuit, Métis, Mushkeygo and Nishnawbe-Aski peoples that call Ontario home are highly diverse in their cultures, languages, values, beliefs, histories, contemporary realities and aspirations. If publicly funded education of Aboriginal peoples is to evolve to the point where it serves Aboriginal individuals, families, communities and nations it will depend on teachers, principals, Boards of Education and Faculties of Education engaging with Aboriginal peoples in a meaningful and respectful way that builds localized responses to academic achievement for the betterment of Anishnabe, Haudenosaunee, Inuit, Métis, Mushkeygo and Nishnawbe-Aski children and youth. Likewise the distinction of non-aboriginal does not accurately reflect the diversity within that community and may incorrectly establish a binary within the minds of the reader. This chapter acknowledges that colonization is not a reality of Aboriginal peoples alone. Instead, colonization continues in contemporary times and limits all peoples.

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50% of Aboriginal peoples in Ontario 15 years of age and older have less than a secondary school diploma (Aboriginal Education Office, 2007), it is fair to suggest that public educational institutions have not supported Aboriginal peoples as they regain the primacy of their cultures, languages and knowledge systems that were severely threatened by colonization (DeGagne, 2008).

In attempt to reconcile the achievement gap for Aboriginal students and to more meaningfully engage them in public schooling practices and curriculum, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) created policy documents related to Aboriginal education that are currently being implemented across the province. These documents declare the injustices of colonial educational practices suffered by Aboriginal peoples and articulate a series of goals and strategies for public school teachers, schools and school boards to provide Aboriginal students with a more contextually relevant and culturally-supportive educational experience. Among the policy initiatives, the OME proposes that Aboriginal students voluntarily self-identify themselves in order for teachers and schools to better distinguish their unique needs and offer culturally-sensitive classroom programming for the over 50,000 Aboriginal students enrolled in Ontario public schools.

Given the emergence of the policy documents and their potential impact upon the landscape of Aboriginal education for teachers, students and Aboriginal communities, two large urban-based school boards in Ontario, Canada, participated in an innovative program intended to heighten mainstream teachers' awareness of Aboriginal students' cultural, social and epistemic understandings in order to improve the relationships between teachers, Aboriginal students and Aboriginal communities. As a result, the school boards hosted the Aboriginal community in a series of consultations. The boards of education recognized the general sense of distrust that exists between many Aboriginal communities and public school teachers, owing mainly to the legacies of exploitation whereby Eurocentric interests suppressed and betrayed Aboriginal peoples' sociocultural and linguistic traditions (Patrick, 2008). The two public school boards participated in this unique research project because they recognized the importance of transparent communication practices and mutually-supportive relationships between teachers, schools and Aboriginal communities (Wotherspoon, 2007). To their credit, they perceived the genuine disconnect between the intentions of educational policy to improve the learning of all students regardless of their cultural background, and its actual implementation for Aboriginal children across Ontario. By meaningfully engaging with Aboriginal communities, these school boards and their respective teachers approached Aboriginal parents in a context that was conducive to Aboriginal paradigms (Spence, White & Maxim, 2007; White, Spence & Maxim, 2005). Similar to other fields, such as health and law, the mainstream educators participated in this unique endeavor underscored the necessity to offer comprehensive and accessible community-based forums as a means of sustaining dialogue between the policy objectives and proposed school-based and teacher-driven practices, while listening to the concerns of the people who are most effected by the OME policy (see Hunnisett & Sault, 1990; LeMaster & Connell, 1994; May & Moran, 1995; Ross & Ross, 1992).

**Background**

There are two policy documents that recognize Aboriginal students' unique learning needs and the factors that contribute to their engagement in mainstream school cultures. The 2007 *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (hereafter the *Framework*) discusses Aboriginal students' epistemic and sociocultural traditions in light of the historical injustices that have had multi-generational consequences (Castellano et al., 2000; Hill & George, 1996). The *Framework* calls upon school teachers, principals and school boards' senior administrators to become more informed of Aboriginal students' traditions and to provide more culturally-responsive learning environments (p. 7). By becoming more aware of Aboriginal students' cultural traditions and history, teachers will be better equipped to represent Aboriginal students in classroom and school-wide practices. According to the *Framework*, these strategies will translate into a heightened sense of student engagement and in turn close the achievement gap between Aboriginal and mainstream students. The *Framework* in fact complements the literature that suggests that publicly funded schools have a key role in terms of establishing inclusive communities as a result of their dual function as both a civic and learning institution (Canadian Association for Community Living, 2005).

A second policy document, *Building Bridges to Success for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Students* (2007) focuses on school board policy development for voluntary and confidential Aboriginal student self-identification. Aboriginal self-identification is justified on the grounds that teachers can center their attention on those areas related to literacy and numeracy where Aboriginal students excel and struggle; in turn, teachers and schools will be better positioned to develop curriculum-focused programs, interventions and resources to improve Aboriginal students chances for academic success.

In response to these policy initiatives, two school boards hosted a series of public forums to honor the voices of the Aboriginal community, to better inform teachers of Aboriginal students' needs and to assist classroom teachers to work more successfully with Aboriginal learners (Mooney, 2000). By bringing issues related to educational policy to the community, the intent was to use the forums as a means to positively affect the relationship between mainstream teachers, government policy, Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal students (Lawrence & Gibson, 2007). Community forums that are tailored to exchange information and sustain dialogue can also assist in reducing the suspicion that many Aboriginal communities have for formal educational practices and policies that have traditionally used standardized test results (as biased instruments based on Eurocentric curriculum) to report on the lack of Aboriginal student achievement in public schools (Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, 2005). The predictable low scores further problematize and pathologize Aboriginal children (Bishop & Glynn, 1999) and situate the "deficit" within Aboriginal peoples not with schools. Consider, for example, that like the predicament for Native American students in the United States of America, perhaps a similar and equally dubious predicament can be applied to Aboriginal students in Ontario:

> Perhaps the greatest danger facing Indian education at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the push for outcomes assessment, state and national standards, and the associated increased use of high-stakes testing in all facets of education. (Reyhner & Eder, 2004, p.11)

By evoking the capacities of the Aboriginal communities and teachers in response to the OME's initiatives, then the possible implementation of such policies can be conducted in a respectful spirit and thereby reduce the historic misunderstandings between Aboriginal learners and mainstream teachers that have had adverse effects to say the least (Cornell & Kalt, 1992).

**Method, data collection and participants**

Seven Aboriginal community forums were conducted across two large coterminous school districts in southern Ontario. The two school districts have a total of approximately 59,000 students enrolled in their elementary (K-8) and secondary (9–12) schools. Their jurisdictions include 11 municipalities in Ontario with a population of nearly 500,000 residents and spanning approximately 1,600 square kilometers. Informational flyers indicating the times and locations for each community forum (offered in November and December 2008) were distributed to all students enrolled in these school districts. In addition public service announcements appeared on the local cable television station and on radio as well. Of special interest was the spontaneous community promotion through various online social utilities. Each forum was conducted according to a similar agenda: a general welcome by school board officials, an introduction of OME and Aboriginal Research Centre staff, the respective teachers and teacher-consultants, a presentation of the respective documents by the OME representatives, a drumming ceremony, dinner, small group discussion and opportunities for community members to record their observations and concerns of the documents and their respective discussions. The forums were purposely scheduled within 30 days of each other in order to provide community members with adequate time to consult and sustain discussion (Brascoupe & Mann, 2001).

The attendees at each community forum had the opportunity to write their reflections, observations, questions or comments on notes in response to five questions:

(1) Before the Forum tonight how aware were you of the Ministry of Education's Aboriginal education initiatives?
(2) What resources (material or people) would you like to see made available to teachers, schools and a school board to improve your child's learning experience?
(3) What types of programs would you like to see implemented in the schools and by the school boards?
(4) What concerns do you have about how this data will be used by the school boards, the OME and by standardized testing?
(5) Other questions or concerns?

The data were collated and professionally transcribed.

A community forum was hosted in each of the regions serviced by the school boards. We ensured that the site of each forum represented the boards' geographical regions in order to get a representative sample from each community. This approach was reflective of Stake's (2000) notions of inter-cultural and experientially-oriented approach to local community responsiveness. In total, 170 people attended the community forums. The highest number of persons attending one forum was 45, and the lowest was 10.

**Data analysis, findings and observations**

In the tradition of grounded theory, the responses that were grounded in the data conceptualized the direction of the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory is a systemized process of distinguishing an inductive discussion about the relationships that emerge from the data (Charmaz, 1983; Jacelon & O'Dell, 2005). The research team investigated these relationships cyclically, as initial codes were collapsed into more abstract categories and eventually into theory. Through constant comparison, categories were compared for common themes and relationships (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The respective properties of each category were identified (Glaser, 2005; Chesler, 1987). The selective coding process distinguished key categories considered to be fundamental to the conceptual framework that the grounded theory is founded upon (Cherubini, 2007). As Strauss (1987) explains, the categories are woven throughout the data, provide a link between themes and their properties and move the theory forward as the data analysis proceeds.

Three categories emerging from the data: "Aboriginal cultural authenticity," "teachers' professional capacities," and "improving relationships." The excerpts cited throughout the paper are considered representative responses of the community's voices. The references that follow the participants' contributions indicate the session where the statement was recorded.

**Aboriginal cultural authenticity**

Grounded in the data was community members' perception that Aboriginal self-identification policies related to public education are superficial means of recognizing the identity and diversity of Aboriginal students in Ontario. Community members cited time and again the need for public school teachers to provide curricular resources that one participant described as, "factual Native history books and resources [instead of] interpretations" (Session A; from hereon Sn _). The community reiterated throughout the course of the forums that school children and youth have to be privy to "history books that reflect the history of all Aboriginal people of Canada and Ontario" (Sn B). The community considered it imperative that the request for Aboriginal peoples to self-identify be complemented by what some individuals described as authentic "education about political issues [such as] land claims and residential schools" delivered to all mainstream teachers and students (Sn B). The mainstream curriculum, according to the community, would be enriched by, "Native studies courses [that]

offered at a wider range of high schools" (Sn D). The community expressed their perspective that a self-identification policy would be more credible if it was accompanied by curriculum support and other initiatives to ensure "accurate curriculum," the proper "teaching of Aboriginal studies," and more "Aboriginal teachers" in public schools who could provide culturally-authentic pedagogy (Sn B). Attendees were concerned about the relative unavailability of Aboriginal "storytelling, music, performances [and] Native books by authors available to all school levels" (Sn C). Emerging from the data was the pervasive sense that Aboriginal community members wanted OME policy initiatives to be substantiated by culturally-authentic teaching practices in mainstream schools.

In order for Aboriginal students to self-identify, the voices of the community suggested that Aboriginal youth need to be able to first identify with the culture of their classrooms and schools. Teachers, thus, need to provide learning environments that are more culturally-authentic in terms of incorporating "Native language teachings [and] the Thanksgiving address in Mohawk, Cayuga, and Seneca" (Sn A). The community recognized the importance of, as one participant stated, "Having Aboriginal languages taught by Aboriginal people" (Sn A), so that Aboriginal students could better identify with their respective sociolinguistic traditions. Equally clear was the community's request for "cultural programs centering on language, arts, and stories" (Sn B). Expressing their belief on behalf of others at a community forum that was particularly well-attended, one attendee stated, "I would like to see a program brought forward for Aboriginal students where they can get in touch with their cultural roots" (Sn C). The community expressed an acute awareness of the difficulties that Aboriginal students experience in public schools in terms of identifying with well-intentioned teachers who generally practice more traditional learning models and deliver a mainstream curriculum. The community observed that these teachers often interact with Aboriginal students from a misinformed and under-educated perspective (and in most cases, at no fault of their own). Consistently throughout the community forums attendees stressed the need for not only "classes with Aboriginal content" as the curricular emphasis, but for culturally-authentic "support services in each of the schools" to provide Aboriginal students with similar resources and supports that are available to the mainstream population (Sn D).

In a similar vein, community participants emphasized that in order for Aboriginal youth to properly identify with their sociocultural and epistemic traditions, the teachers need to appreciate the importance of their having access to culturally-authentic spiritual guidance in public schools. Consistent throughout the community forums, participants voiced the necessity to equip schools with, as one individual succinctly stated, "Elders for our youth" (Sn F). Through the teachings of "the Elders and traditional people" (Sn E), the community emphasized that Aboriginal youth could be more connected to their ancestral and spiritual histories and feel more affirmed and comfortable in their identity. Participants considered Elders as the means to teach Aboriginal youth that their "history is living" (Sn A) and that it has a critical role in the manner in which Aboriginal students perceive themselves as Aboriginal peoples and as students in Eurocentric

educational institutions. These institutional norms related to formal education have not historically respected Aboriginal students' cultural authenticity and in fact have created rather adverse consequences in terms of how Aboriginal students identify with mainstream public school teachers and classrooms. Having access to the Elders and traditional peoples, Aboriginal youth can learn from a most authentic perspective about "the history of what happened to their parents and grandparents…for the purpose of knowing where they came from" (Sn F). Grounded in the data was the strong impression that Aboriginal identity need to be meaningfully included within the mainstream teaching practices in order for teachers to better relate to Aboriginal students.

**Teachers' professional capacities**

Just as community members advocated for cultural authenticity to foster Aboriginal students' sense of identity in light of the OME's policies, so too it was suggested that professional development for teachers needed to be formalized in order for them to better understand Aboriginal students' sociocultural traditions and epistemic preferences. Typical of other suggestions, some participants called for "teacher-sensitivity training" (Sn C) in various professional development initiatives to heighten the awareness of Aboriginal traditions as well as differences that exist across the various territories represented by their students. These suggestions included teachers' "respect for cultural protocol" (Sn B) and implied that teachers and administrators should honor students' absences for "cultural leaves [such as] the longhouse ceremony without the student being seen as truant or being penalized in any way" (Sn A). The community believed that if the OME's policies were going to further Aboriginal students' sense of identification for who they are in relation to their public school experiences, then teachers themselves have to become knowledgeable about Aboriginal "experiences which identify the ways of harmonious living with all [Aboriginal] relations" (Sn E). Participants were adamant that the objectives of the self-identification policy had to represent more than stratifying data on provincial external standardized tests to identify Aboriginal students' strengths and weaknesses in literacy and numeracy. In many instances the community suggested that teachers' knowledge of Aboriginal learning preferences had to translate into teaching strategies that honored Aboriginal student identity. One community member's testimony of a classroom experience where the mainstream teacher's presumed ignorance served to perpetuate racial prejudice was especially convincing:

> During my years of schooling I have only self-identified once. Reason being: a teacher centered me out and started asking questions about my culture. The class had a mini-discussion about how it is not fair that Indians get to hunt and fish for free without a license, and that they do not have to pay any taxes. (Sn F).

Such a lack of awareness as expressed at the forums, often extends into actual pedagogical practice. The forum attendees stressed that for mainstream teachers

to properly address Aboriginal students' learning styles they need to develop the capacities to "understand and identify [Aboriginal youths'] learning styles and have the means to promote learning in a way that creates a craving for more from the student" (Sn A).

Emerging from the data was the strong sense that the Aboriginal community wanted teachers to become aware of Aboriginal epistemologies and to use them in their curricular and extra-curricular practices. For some community members this means the inclusion of "traditional teachings [for Aboriginal students] by actual doing" (Sn E). For others, it means providing "visual learning programs" (Sn A) whereby students can explore knowledge more holistically. In a number of instances participants cited the benefit of mainstream teachers developing the professional capacities to deliver "hands-on teaching [and instructional strategies to enhance] observational knowledge" (Sn D). In doing so, Aboriginal students can better identify with pedagogical practices that will, as one community member described, "Enhance children's experiences" (Sn B). Particularly novel were the suggestions in various community forums that public schools should offer "credit courses that are not based on the traditional Eurocentric measurement of success" (Sn E) that typically further marginalize Aboriginal students through biased epistemic practices. One individual's suggestion, in many ways typical of others, advocated for "cultural training for teachers on a regular basis" (Sn C) to sustain their awareness of how mainstream curricular and content practices have prejudicial implications for Aboriginal student achievement. It was interesting to note the community's hesitation towards a one-time professional development in-service for teachers; instead, they collectively insisted that professional development needs to be sustainable for it to have relevance to teachers' practice and eventually to Aboriginal student learning. One individual stated, "I would like every teacher in the district to learn about Aboriginal culture. This training should [occur] many times at first until all teachers are culturally competent. Then it should be followed up yearly" (Sn A). There were a variety of suggestions on how to develop teachers' professional capacities, ranging from "more professional development" (Sn D) to "more teacher training using only Aboriginal instructors and guest speakers" (Sn F).

In all of the suggestions for enhancing teachers' professional capacities, however, the Aboriginal community expressed their awareness of Eurocentric educational practices that have traditionally favored Western knowledge and epistemologies at the peril of Aboriginal sociocultural and sociolinguistic worldviews (Barsh, 1997; Battiste, 2002). In turn, forum attendees also suggested in a number of different instances that "the best resource is people" and that the hiring of Aboriginal persons as teachers (and school administrators for that matter) would in fact provide what many participants referred to as, "cultural experiences" (Sn B) to enhance both staff and student knowledge. By having what was often referred to as "Aboriginal teachers teaching Aboriginal studies" (Sn D), best practices defined as delivery models that are in tune with Aboriginal students' learning styles can be made available to all teachers. According to participants, even mainstream teacher professional development initiatives,

such as differentiated instruction, would "have an Aboriginal perspective" (Sn A) given the interactive learning techniques of Aboriginal teachers who must themselves be innately familiar with and possibly the products of Aboriginal epistemic traditions and practices. Ultimately, the forum voices resounded with the sentiment that the OME's policies are perceived as non-sustainable if they in fact are not meaningfully inclusive of broader and yet more poignant issues such as developing the professional capacities of classroom teachers and school principals.

**Improving relationships**

The third category grounded in the data sustains the previous two categories and implies that the success of the OME's Aboriginal Education policies will in large part be determined by the extent to which the meaningful engagement of the Aboriginal community improves the relationships between Aboriginal students and teachers. Participants stressed, as one individual stated, that the school boards and classroom teachers have to facilitate "more positive interactions with respect to [Aboriginal peoples'] culture" (Sn A). Reciprocal engagements between Aboriginal communities and educational institutions could highlight for Aboriginal students the significance, for example, of "basket-making, drum-making, Native music and dance" (Sn C), among other traditions, for their formative identity development. The community was, however, skeptical of the school boards' intentions to hold public forums for the purpose of disseminating information and superficially accounting for the opinions of the community. They were suspicious of mainstream intentions to identify and distinguish Aboriginal students in the public reporting of provincial standardized test scores. Many in the communities openly questioned, "Will our children be treated differently?" (Sn E). Throughout each of the community forums, participants' awareness of the historical implications of colonial exploitation was glaringly evident. Characteristic of other comments was this individual's statement: "My concern here is that the government may use this information to take even more away from our people…. I am concerned that this information will somehow be used to hold back Aboriginal success even more than before" (Sn C). Others questioned the OME's motives for Aboriginal self-identification in the first place: "Will the data be used by anyone who could use it against Aboriginals? EQAO [Education Quality and Accountability Office in Ontario] numbers can mean anything" (Sn A). Still others were far more candid in expressing their distrust and suspicion: "I would be concerned with the use of the statistics. Hopefully it would not be used as some sort of tracking method…. Just another statistic [for] discrimination [and] stereotyping" (Sn E). For the community it was of paramount importance that the OME's self-identification policy not be another means of exploiting Aboriginal children and further stigmatizing them as incapable learners. They made clear that such recourses would serve to merely worsen the relationships between teachers, Aboriginal students and Aboriginal communities. Community members voiced their strong concerns with, as one individual stated, "Who [will] have access to the data? How and or will this information be shared [and] used in

conjunction with standardized testing? What's the process to change standardized testing to make it more applicable to Native students?" (Sn D).

To address this sense of mistrust and to foster better relationships, therefore, community members suggested that the schools and teachers' commitment to engage with Aboriginal students and their communities had to include, as one individual stated, "cultural activities to build self-identity and self-confidence" in Aboriginal students (Sn B). This was a key consideration expressed consistently throughout the community forums. By genuinely engaging with Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal parents expected "to have a voice in this process [of self-identification] as it moves forward," and as another individual rhetorically questioned, is "the Aboriginal community going to be engaged to determine the success of the implementation of the framework?" (Sn A). In the absence of such engagement between communities, schools and teachers, participants wondered if the process is pre-determined to perpetuate Aboriginal student marginalization in public education. One individual asked, "Will history repeat itself and [will we have] the same delivery model by different people?" (Sn E). By not engaging with Aboriginal communities, the concern remained that,

> Native kids [will continue to] clique behind their Native identity [even] to the point of exclusion and segregation. I am afraid that this project [self-identification] may provide an opportunity for that to happen. This needs to be beneficial so that Native students can have their space. (Sn A)

The community insisted that the interests of the children have to take precedence over all political and institutional decisions, at the risk of further damaging what the community identified as an already fragile relationship between teachers and Aboriginal students.

Among the most significant questions raised by the Aboriginal communities that strike at the heart of what it means for mainstream teachers to be engaged with Aboriginal learners came from this individual: "Can we live and educate one another without having to be seen separately?" (Sn C). In this context, the community wondered what it takes to be a bi-epistemic educational system wherein the issue is not one of certain cultures being asked to self-identify but rather of offering and honoring culturally-responsive epistemic practices for students in the spirit of nurturing relationships. Implied in this central question is the fundamental element of genuine engagement for Aboriginal community members. Community members are understandably cautious about government initiatives that request Aboriginal peoples to identify and yet have little indication of their willingness to genuinely engage in a mutually-beneficial relationship. Until that time when mainstream educators are willing to challenge what some community members referred to as, "predisposed meanings of education [and] ideas of success" (Sn B), the relationship between mainstream educational institutions, teachers and Aboriginal communities will continue to be marked by suspicion; as a result, this will inhibit the potential for improving relationships. The community voiced

their willingness to "build bridges with solid foundations from the ground up" (Sn E), but needed to know that teachers were making a sincere commitment to engaging with the community. By making a genuine effort to engage with Aboriginal communities, schools and teachers must honor, as one participant explained, that "self-identification is an inward journey [and that the mainstream] should be respectful of one another as to how she/he may wish to be identified" (Sn F). Genuine relationships with the community, as voiced by the membership themselves, can be improved only through culturally-responsive contexts.

**Shifting school culture to close the credibility gap**

What has been described by Aboriginal participants in the seven community forums can only be understood to be the requirements for a holistic educational shift that is system wide. The caveat being that, in order for Aboriginal students to self-identify the Aboriginal community needs to be able to see themselves authentically reflected within the educational experience. Or, as one forum participant observed, only a systemic shift "will help to get children and families more comfortable with the idea of self-identification" (Sn B). A pre-requisite to a Self-Identification Program that closes the credibility gap, creates a level of trust and encourages Aboriginal families to identify their children is a shift in school culture.

This credibility gap is evident in the many expressions of "Mistrust and Suspicion" that permeated much of the participant dialogue. Participants were candid in asking, "What benefit will my children receive from self-identifying? Why self-identify?" (Sn B) and "What are the students saying about self-identification? At what age would…they…say whether or not they self-identified?" (Sn E). But these issues of "Mistrust and Suspicion" are most evident when Self-Identification was connected to standardized testing: Participants stated: "I don't believe the ID program and the standardized testing should be the same or implemented with each other. Self-ID should not be associated with standardized testing" (Sn B). Another individual claimed that, "All the information taken can be used against Aboriginal youth" (Sn C). While a different community member wrote about the potential to, "Manipulate numbers. Youth centered out in class/school – Racism against Native students." (Sn C).

It must be considered that the *Framework* identifies the need to collect "reliable and valid data" to measure Aboriginal students' progress. The first goal of the *Framework* addresses high-levels of student achievement that includes a performance measure to gauge "the significant increase in the percentage of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students meeting provincial standards on province-wide assessments in reading, writing, and mathematics" (2007, p.11). While this renewed focus on Aboriginal peoples' educational experiences is long overdue, there seems to exist an inherent conflict of expectations; more specifically, the "reliable and valid data" identified by the OME as baseline performance indicators for Aboriginal students are in fact high-stakes external and standardized assessments that have unsavory implications in their relative cultural inaccessibility. Such baseline data is based on Eurocentric principles of teaching, learning and

student assessment. While the OME's intent may be noble, the selected means to track student achievement is suspect (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008). The research into improving literacy programs for Aboriginal students underscores "a willingness to use appropriate assessment tools to monitor student learning and program effectiveness" (Bell, 2004). External assessments based largely on a standardized colonially-influenced curriculum would seem to merely perpetuate the bias that typically favors students from the dominant culture. As Bishop and Glynn (1999) observe "the beneficiaries will be those most like the ones who designed and implemented the system" (p. 11).

The literature is equally emphatic about the unique learning needs of Aboriginal students that necessitate a transformation and genuine commitment to culturally sensitive pedagogy that includes diverse assessment and evaluation strategies to support Aboriginal students in mainstream learning environments (see, e.g., Toulouse, 2006). Given these, it would appear that province-wide external assessments are invalid interventions in terms of charting Aboriginal student achievement and connotate a Eurocentric cultural relativism that fails to account for the epistemological, cultural and spiritual schemata of Aboriginal learners. Externally imposed student assessments can be perceived by Aboriginal worldviews as inimical, puerile and disproportionately representative of the privileged mainstream epistemology that exists in provincially-funded schools (Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir, & Muir, in press). The language of standardized assessments, according to the literature, often tends to favor mainstream learners at the expense of marginalized pupils (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Giroux, 1992, p. 220; see also Giroux, 2003, 2004).

The *Framework* defines student academic success in Eurocentric terms that quantifies knowledge acquisition and literacy development by criterion and norm-referenced test scores. This appears to be contradictory to some of the other components of the *Framework* document that directs school boards to "support teachers in adopting a variety of approaches and tools to teach and assess Aboriginal students more effectively" and schools to "develop awareness among teachers in the learning styles of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students" while employing "instructional methods designed to enhance the learning of all Aboriginal students" (p. 12). The *Framework* document reflects the literature that attests to Aboriginal students' learning preferences towards holistic education, visual organizers, reflective learning and the active engagement in collaborative tasks to complete assignments (Hiberg & Tharp, 2002). Aboriginal students learn best, according to Gamlin (2003), by first-hand experiences with the learning activity and by being engaged in the learning process (see also Corbiere, 2000). The document favors a language experience approach to Aboriginal student learning that includes practical applications that have contextual relevance to students' life experiences. It recognizes the deterministic cultural influences that distinguish Aboriginal student learning from the mainstream population that have translated into larger social, cultural, and educational consequences. The language of the Policy employs frames of references that convey immediate significance for all stakeholders.

However, given these calls to meaningfully incorporate Aboriginal epistemology and culturally appropriate activities into the public schools and individual classrooms, combined with the mandate to "teach and assess" Aboriginal students in more cultural and linguistic sensitive ways (Policy Framework, 2007, p. 12), one cannot resist the question of how the use of standardized provincial tests (considered by the OME as valid and reliable data to measure Aboriginal student achievement) reflects the literature that discusses Aboriginal student success. There appears to be a fundamental disconnect between the re-conceptualization of teachers' pedagogical and assessment practices in mainstream schools to account for Aboriginal learners' predilections, and measuring student achievement by the imposed western colonial paradigm of standardized testing. While the OME's commitment to support policy development in light of Aboriginal linguistic and cultural tradition is commendable, as is their objective to foster intercultural dialogue between school communities, there remains a glaring inconsistency of how the provincial student assessments will reconcile Aboriginal students' learning inclinations to perceive concepts from whole to part, to have sufficient time and culturally sensitive resources to reply to the respective questions, and to engage in group work in non-threatening learning environments that respect their physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual selves. The matter is further confounded when one considers that Aboriginal students are less than optimally successful in following the standardized provincial curriculum:

> The provincial curriculum does not allow First Nation students to learn in their own language or learn their own history in a meaningful way… nor does it accommodate a rate of learning that is consistent with their individual learning styles. (Anderson, Horton & Orwick, 2004, p. 8; see also *Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies*, 2002)

The external provincial assessments will, however, be used as performance measures for Aboriginal student learning according to standardized grade and age appropriate benchmarks that are in themselves standardized concepts that function in a mainstream educational system based on age-grade progressing that is incongruent with Aboriginal children's learning styles. One need only point to the literature that identifies the consequences of employing standardized tests as measures of student learning in respect to Aboriginal students in northern Canada. The low test results are used by some to indicate that Aboriginal students have inferior intelligence and cognition capacities (see Davis, 1982; Mueller et al., 1896).

In the policy initiatives already discussed it is acknowledged that curriculum needs to correspond to the particular identity of Aboriginal students if it is to have a meaningful and sustaining influence on their learning (see, for example, Curwen-Doige, 2003). The school environments that best foster Aboriginal students' identity honor their distinctiveness as peoples (Gamlin, 2003; van der Wey, 2001). Formal education that is culturally informed and authentically

incorporated into students' learning experiences augment the positive identity of Aboriginal students (Battiste, 2005; Toulouse, 2006).

Furthermore, *Building Bridges to Success* facilitates for public school boards the process of developing policies for voluntary, confidential Aboriginal student self-identification to garner the self-declared "accurate and reliable data in order to assess progress towards the goal of improving Aboriginal student achievement" (p. 7). The OME, in March 2006, requested the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to report on the achievement of Aboriginal students based on the six school boards who had a self-identification policy as a result of a provincially-funded pilot project. In turn, school boards were encouraged by the Assistant Deputy Minister for French-Language Education and Educational Operations to "work directly with the EQAO to finalize plans for the separate reporting of results for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students" (p. 8). Given the widespread implications of using external standardized assessments as reliable and valid data, and the conceptual disconnect between standardized tests and experiential learning and assessment strategies aligned with Aboriginal students' learning needs, the request for Aboriginal peoples to self-identity themselves apart from mainstream learners, and the OME initiative to separately report Aboriginal students' standardized test scores, seems antithetical to the spirit of thoughtful and respectful inclusion expressed in the various policy frameworks. Aboriginal peoples are being asked to voluntarily self-identify themselves so that a mainstream branch of the government (EQAO) can publish and disseminate the results of Aboriginal students' achievement on standardized assessments that are exclusively emblematic of colonial measures of academic success. It is potentially grossly exploitative to the identity of Aboriginal learners to have the reporting of their test scores segregated from the same mainstream learners with whom they share a publicly-funded education. The enthusiastic initiatives on the part of the OME and the Aboriginal Education Office to have cross-cultural representations of Aboriginal language, culture, and epistemology risk being perceived as hallow and self-indulgent to mainstream practices of public accountability. Seeing that the results of standardized test scores are typically lower for marginalized and under-represented Aboriginal students, the separate reporting of test results can be considered a self-referential protocol whereby mainstream student performance indicators are no longer statistically anchored by Aboriginal cohorts of learners. Of significant interest and profound irony, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics cited over 81 years ago the misleading comparison of Canadian literacy statistics in comparison to other nations, and stated:

> it is very clear the illiteracy of the Indians ought [sic] to be considered as a thing apart from the rest of the population…[for] taking the illiteracy of the population excluding Indians [would result in] a more accurate description of the true situation. (1926, p. 38; as cited in Stewart, 2006, p. 1003)

In some respects, the OME's initiatives can be perceived as an extension of the same Eurocentric bias and exploitation of Aboriginal epistemology, language, and

culture that has been historically chronicled. The ambiguous dualities between the expressed intent and practices presented in the various policy framework documents imply overtones that are symptomatic of the colonial treatment of Aboriginal peoples in this province and country.

This is not to deny the fact that the *Building Bridges to Success* policy document recognizes the importance for Aboriginal families to be aware of the presentations of the data from external organizations in regards to Aboriginal learners' achievement. These reports, according to the document, "tend to bring attention to low student achievement, and can have a negative effect on First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students and communities" (p. 13). The language is tentative and inexplicit as it relates to this most significant caveat that strikes at the core of Aboriginal peoples' identity as learners. The document assures that personally identifiable data is protected from the public domain, although on the same page explains that EQAO and the OME will disclose the reporting of information (including EQAO standardized test results and course completions) on "Aboriginal student achievement at an aggregate level" (p. 15). The request to have Aboriginal learners voluntarily identify themselves in effect subjects them and the results of a culturally and epistemologically biased performance measure to public and mainstream scrutiny. In these instances, positions of power and social agency are inequitably represented. As Giroux and McLaren (1992) suggest, "we have failed to develop a comprehensive understanding of language, identity, and experience and their relation to the broader power-sensitive discourses of power, democracy, social justice, and historical memory" (p. 8). Does this not serve to propagate a history of educational, cultural, and societal stratification that has threatened the very identity that these Framework documents claim to be recognizing and advocating for in mainstream public schooling? It would seem that the forum participants have good reason to be distrustful of this initiative.

There is anecdotal information that suggests that several boards of education across the province, prompted by concerns expressed by the associated Aboriginal community, have recognized the inherent epistemic conflict that is central to the validity of standardized testing. Those boards and communities are attempting to develop testing that is both culturally relevant and epistemically accurate to the children in their schools.

**Implications for teacher education**

Over the last decade numerous mainstream researchers (Hajioannou, 2007) have identified classroom environment and the interpersonal relationships that exist within those environments to be fundamental to academic achievement. It would seem logical and reasonable to suggest then that it is the teacher who has the most influence to shape and promote an environment that is conducive to positive interpersonal relationships by modeling that interaction to their students. And yet that theoretical knowledge rarely informs a practical application of how that might occur. That is to say, this simple understanding does not change teacher education in such a way as to disrupt the educational statistics of Aboriginal academic achievement in this province. In this instance there is a

distinct separation between what social science inquiry demonstrates and how that research might be enacted in both teacher education and in the classroom.

Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) urges us to restore social science to its rightful position as a practical intellectual activity aimed at clarifying the problems, risks and possibilities we face as human beings and societies, and at contributing to social and political praxis (p. 4). If there has been one consistent and relentless open wound on the Canadian body politic it is the continued and persistent reality of Aboriginal peoples. The study that underlies this chapter is an attempt to use social science research to disrupt the circle of oppression at a critical point in an individual's development by changing those who have a significant influence, teachers.

Each year Brock University's Pre-service Department organizes a Social Issues Day attended by teacher candidates. For the past four years the Brock University's Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education has participated in that event by engaging various Aboriginal community experts as presenters to expose teacher candidates to some of the critical issues relevant to Aboriginal education. By necessity, the focus of the day is limited to creating immediate awareness of critical Aboriginal learning needs and realities, and expanding the candidate's toolbox to address them. Participating candidates hear from an Aboriginal keynote speaker for part of the morning and choose from a number of Aboriginal focused workshops offered in the morning and the afternoon.

Sixty percent of the 189-primary/junior and junior/intermediate teacher candidates attending the 2006 Social Issues Day completed a short survey that described their experience of the day (see McGean & Bowering, 2006). This study was intended to present a reflexive snapshot of the learning experienced by the teacher candidates who in less than a year would be working with Aboriginal children in their classrooms. Analysis of the collected data demonstrated three dominant themes:

1. Participant(s) identified the need for more time, knowledge or resources to gain a better understanding of Aboriginal education.
2. Participant(s) indicated an increased awareness and sensitivity to issues affecting Aboriginal people.
3. Participant(s) recognized that the workshops had created a greater understanding of the challenges that Aboriginal people face.

It is the voices, reflected in the words of those teacher candidates that are the most poignant:

- I think presentations like this are important for teachers. I would like to learn more about how we can help and integrate Native culture into our classrooms.
- I have learned to bring respect into the classroom and be sensitive to the different cultural needs of the children.
- I really enjoyed being able to question in an environment that understands our lack of information. I have a better understanding of the

> cultural beliefs and values of Aboriginals. I also feel better equipped to embrace the students and be compassionate and understanding.
> - I have always thought of myself as an accepting person but this workshop certainly opened my eyes to the ways I can further my acceptance. Also the various traditions that will certainly benefit me as an educator.
> - It was worthwhile to share some of this information and at least get the "antennae up" for what we may see/encounter in the classroom. (McGean & Bowering, 2006, p. 20-22)

Those voices not only speak of an appreciation for the experience, but, also, expose a serious deficit in pre-service teacher learning easily recognized by those participating candidates that, left unchecked, will continue to contribute to the educational realities of Aboriginal children and youth.

Although some work has been done in Faculties of Education to address Aboriginal educational needs in teacher certification, so much more work is required to decolonize teacher education in Ontario, Canada, and beyond. The recent Framework released from the Aboriginal Education Office, Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) states that achieving the goal of higher levels of Aboriginal student achievement depends in part on an overall strategy that "builds capacity for effective teaching, assessment and evaluation practices" (p. 11). To that end, the Ministry will "encourage faculties of education and colleges to further enhance the knowledge and skills of teacher candidates and teachers in the field to better prepare them to work with First Nation, Métis and Inuit students, including students with special education needs" (p. 11). To begin that process requires a re-conceptualizing of teacher identities in a very different way.

**Re-conceptualizing teacher identities**

Teacher candidates come to the teacher education arena with a significant educational biography that is their teacher identity. Britzman (2003) suggests, "That by the time a person enters teacher education, she or he has spent approximately thirteen thousand hours observing teachers" (p. 27). It is from that observed experience, that educational biography, that teacher candidates create their own teacher identities, or as Britzman puts it:

> They [teachers] bring to teacher education their educational biography and some well-worn and commonsensical images of the teachers' work. In part this accounts for the persistency of particular worldviews, orientations, dispositions, and cultural myths that dominate our thinking and, in unintended ways, select the practices that are available in educational life. (p. 27)

It is difficult to identify another profession where each successive generation of practitioners shares such a vast observational knowledge of the profession they are entering. This is a staggering and, yet, mostly unconscious legacy that

teacher candidates carry. That being the case, it would seem reasonable to suggest that this legacy must also be devoid of any meaningful reflection of Aboriginal content and that what does exist reflects, at best, a neutral understanding and, at worst, a disturbing legacy.

To change the educational experience of Aboriginal children and youth in public education in Ontario, Canada, and beyond, requires, in part, changing the experience of pre-service and in-service teacher education in such a way as to articulate and simultaneously disrupt those educational biographies. This can be achieved by instituting three decolonizing initiatives.

First, the next generation of pre-service teacher education in the province of Ontario should rely on the personal exploration of the educational myths that underlie teacher candidate's unconscious biographical legacy to realize how it shapes teacher practice. This is a sustained process that promotes a constant and active realignment of self through the exploration of self in an effort to counter the disharmonious mythologized teacher that is a direct result of her/his experience of education. Breaking from that dominant and unconscious understanding of how to teach is contingent on breaking from what the dominant society privileges as the correct intellectual heritage, positivistic philological scholarship, and humanistic pedagogy. Hernstein Smith (cited in Britzman, 2003) writes that, "the former posits neutrality in its supposed separation of fact from value, while the latter attempts cultural maintenance in preservation of selected traditions" (p. 57). To achieve this demands a radical reconfiguration that abandons the intellectual tradition that contextualizes and dominates the entire education discourse and the subsequent adoption of a culture based tradition of teacher education.

Second, we recommend that all Faculties of Education in the province of Ontario and elsewhere should implement two mandatory courses, one dealing with Aboriginal education, as well as one presenting history and contemporary issues. Furthermore, both courses should be taught by culturally grounded Aboriginal educators who are demonstrably connected to their communities. Both courses should connect teacher candidates to Aboriginal peoples through the meaningful representation of local communities, Elders, history, treaties, and literature, and reflect both the local and provincial realities.

Finally, even the most cursory review of the existing in-service education developed by various provincial ministries of education and other agencies demonstrates (see Alberta Education, 2006; Saskatchewan Education, 2000) an almost singular focus on 'how' educators teach in the hope of shifting their practice in favor of Aboriginal children. In many ways the endless concentration on the 'how' has reduced teacher education and teaching to a very menial level where one generation passes on the tricks of the trade and the well worn(out) ideas that effectively extend the colonial project into our classrooms. Britzman would shift that focus by asking us to identify 'what' is it that educators do and 'why' do they do it. Britzman asks us to consider the power of teacher biographies to shape teaching practice and it would seem that it is those biographies that are the starting point of education reform. Only when teachers have a conscious understanding of 'what' they privilege, and by extension, 'what' they penalize

in their teaching, and 'why' those dynamics exist, is there the possibility that the educational experience of Aboriginal children will evolve. It is an ongoing process of healing that continuously asks: As teachers, who are we becoming? And in what ways does that 'becoming' further the cause of Aboriginal self-determination in Ontario classrooms and by extension a socially just Canada?

Building an understanding of the complex narratives of Aboriginal youth can only occur through an equally complex dialogic process. This dialogue transcends the usual approach that focuses on the 'how' to teach in favor of a deeper, richer interaction that asks teachers to reflect on the 'what' and 'why' of their biographies to reveal to them 'how' they are created, and 'how' those biographies privilege a particular worldview, orientation, and disposition, or promote certain cultural myths in their classrooms. In other words the dialogue has to speak to the rational minds of teachers, to abandon the usual lists of do's and don'ts in favor of beginning a discussion along Aboriginal cultural lines. It is an approach that reflects the belief that teachers are inherently dedicated to the academic achievement of all students and because of that dedication would be willing to look inward first before they look outward.

**Conclusion**

Increasing numbers of Aboriginal children will traverse this complex and highly nuanced educational landscape that is punctuated by the historic and contemporary expressions of colonialism in a daily parallel journey with teachers that too rarely intersect in a positive manner. It is as if Aboriginal children stand on one side of a gaping chasm at the bottom of which runs a thundering river of colonialism that has eroded the very bedrock of Aboriginal lives, carving through cultures, languages, spirituality and families for over 400 years; a chasm that threatens to sweep each successive generation away if they attempt to traverse that torrent of colonialism, of misunderstanding, of unrecognized ignorance, and of epistemic privilege. All the while teachers and schools stand on the opposite side singing, exhorting, demanding, minimizing, wholly unaware of the perils that Aboriginal children confront every day.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly the pressure to cross over for fear of leaving themselves behind becomes too great. Some literally fall to their deaths and are swept away. Others instinctively recognize the dangers and walk away, rarely able to reconcile the tension between their instincts and the dominant myth of schooling as a positive force. With time that tension gradually turns inward and the possibility of self-determining one's life from within an epistemic heritage changes into something else. Very few successfully descend into that canyon and swim across those rapids, but when they arrive on the other side they are no longer themselves: the journey has a cost that reshapes epistemologies and wipes away languages and cultures. Truly the landscape of public education in this province is littered with Aboriginal dead, the walking spiritually wounded, and those who are fundamentally changed by their journey.

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