

# Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives in Education: Perceptions of Pre-Service Teachers

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## Abstract

This study explored teacher candidates' perceptions of the potentialities and challenges associated with the integration of Aboriginal perspectives into mainstream education. Participants in this study were 2nd-year teacher candidates of a two-year teacher education programme who have completed a course on Aboriginal education. Using a qualitative approach, the principal investigator conducted interviews with teacher candidates in an effort to acquire data on pre-service teacher perceptions of and attitudes towards Aboriginal perspectives as a field of study and practice. This study found that while some participants reported a great deal of comfort in the study and delivery of Aboriginal perspectives in their respective school experiences, a significant number of participants reported apprehension. The findings of this study suggest that there are a number of variables that may lend to a positive experience for teacher candidates who are responsible for integrating Aboriginal perspectives in their respective practices.

## Précis

Cette étude a exploré les perceptions des potentialités et des défis liés à l'intégration des perspectives autochtones dans l'enseignement ordinaire enseignants des candidats. Les participants à cette étude étaient candidats à l'enseignement de 2e année d'un programme de formation des enseignants de deux ans qui ont suivi un cours sur l'éducation des Autochtones. En utilisant une approche qualitative, le chercheur principal a mené des entrevues avec les candidats à l'enseignement dans le but d'acquérir des données sur les perceptions des enseignants avant l'emploi et les attitudes à l'égard des perspectives autochtones en tant que champ d'étude et de pratique. Cette étude a révélé que, bien que certains participants ont rapporté beaucoup de confort dans l'étude et la fourniture des perspectives autochtones dans leurs expériences scolaires respectifs, un nombre important de participants ont déclaré appréhension. Les résultats de cette étude suggèrent qu'il existe un certain nombre de variables qui peuvent prêter à une expérience positive pour les futurs enseignants qui sont chargés d'intégrer les perspectives autochtones dans leurs pratiques respectives.

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**Introduction**

It has been argued that there is an essential relationship between students' culture and the way in which they acquire knowledge, manage and articulate information, and synthesize ideas (Barnhardt, 1999; Bell 2004; Kanu, 2005). An implication of this argument may be that schools, which are regarded as oppressive institutions that facilitate social reproduction (Giroux, 1997; Steinberg, 2007), should be environments where teachers engage their students in a manner that allows them to explore and affirm aspects

of their own identity whilst facilitating academic success. Since primary and secondary education in Canada operates with curricular imperatives that give privilege to what is regarded by many as essential curriculum, contemporary scholars and teaching professionals posit that Aboriginal perspectives should be *integrated* with existing curricular imperatives. The type of integration called for by many may be regarded as the use of supplementary resources, curricular material, or knowledge to amend or augment an existing programme of study, which allows classroom teachers to enrich mandatory areas of study with relevant, localized content. The word *perspectives* is the preferred terminology for this sort of integration because it emphasizes the importance of exploring the histories, experiences, values, and knowledge associated with an aspect of Aboriginal culture. In an effort to avoid treating such subject matter in a tokenistic manner – where aspects of Aboriginal culture are explored in a superficial, trivial way that doesn't explore why such aspects exist and the people they represent – teachers in many jurisdictions are now encouraged to share and explore with their students the respective social contexts associated with a given cultural issue or theme. The exploration of Aboriginal perspectives provides a more complete picture of their culture and the peoples and histories that they represent.

The recognition of Aboriginal perspectives as a *bono fide* aspect of public education may be regarded as a reasonable progression from socio-political events of the last four decades (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003); the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples of the mid 1990s is a cogent example of how government has recognized that Aboriginal peoples, their experiences, and their cultures should inform social change (White, Maxim, & Spence, 2004). Some provincial jurisdictions have developed resources to assist in the integration of Aboriginal perspectives into mainstream curricula

(White, Spence, & Maxim, 2006). Although Aboriginal education may be frequently perceived as a prospective or constituent part of the post-colonial, anti-racist, and decolonization discourses of educational foundations programmes (Minnis, 2008), the importance of curriculum and teaching issues in Aboriginal education is becoming more prevalent (Armstrong, Corenblum, & Gfellner, 2008; Redwing Saunders & Hill, 2007). The focus on curriculum and learning may be regarded as a response to a concern for the lack of authentic Aboriginal education in Canadian schools.

A discussion of Aboriginal perspectives may benefit from the consideration of the cultural values and heritage that exist amongst Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Gair, Thomson and Miles (2005) asserted that Aboriginal scholars frequently espouse the consideration of cultural aspects such as relevant beliefs, traditions, values, and rituals when discussing or researching human behaviour and other social phenomena associated with Aboriginal peoples. Gair, Thomson and Miles explored the importance of existent culture by highlighting the inequality that often exists between the dominant society and those who are marginalized:

When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. (2005, p. 179)

In spite of the encouraging policy and curricular developments in the area of indigenous education that have taken place in the last few decades, there is evidence that suggests that pre-service teachers experience apprehension with the prospect of integrating Aboriginal perspectives in their training practica and prospective teaching careers. In exploring the integration of Aboriginal culture amongst mostly non-Aboriginal in-service teaching professionals, Kanu (2005, p.57) identified challenges that were perceived amongst in-service schoolteachers:

- Teachers' own lack of knowledge about Aboriginal cultures,
- The lack of Aboriginal classroom resources
- The racist attitudes of non-Aboriginal staff and students,
- School administrators lukewarm support for integration, and
- The incompatibility between school structures and some Aboriginal cultural values.

The general themes that these challenges represent are the sort of concerns that are frequently cited amongst pre-service teachers and scholars (Kronowitz, 2003). Few would argue that teachers require relevant content knowledge of the subject for which they teach, nor would many argue that classroom resources are an important aspect of contemporary teaching and learning. Racism, administrative support, and cultural issues are also concerns that can lead to the challenges experienced by pre-service teachers and in-service professionals. Although these issues may be regarded as challenges in the integration of Aboriginal perspectives, the nature of the content (i.e., Aboriginal culture) may lead to how these challenges are perceived, dealt with, or avoided. Because of the cultural disconnect that may be felt by many non-Aboriginal teachers, these challenges may become so ominous that a piecemeal approach may be

seen as the easier course of action – one that does not place the teacher in a vulnerable position in the classroom. If one accepts the cultural discontinuity issue that can be associated with these challenges of integrating Aboriginal perspectives in education, then, arguably, the prevalence of apprehension may be appreciated. Schissel and Wotherspoon affirm the challenges described earlier, but also suggest that self-assurance is also necessary:

Many educational reforms are implemented with the assumption that teachers will automatically be prepared to take on new roles, adapt to new curricular demands, or modify their orientations to teaching and learning. In practice, though, teachers require sufficient input, commitment from administrators and peers, background preparation, resource support, and confidence in the efforts of other teachers to reshape their jobs and work environments before they are likely to engage fully in educational reform processes. (2003, p. 118-119)

Many faculties and colleges of education, school districts, authorities, and provincial ministries have developed opportunities for professional development that can facilitate the development of the knowledge, aptitudes, and sensibilities necessary to integrate Aboriginal perspectives into their teaching. University courses have become better suited to focus on content associated with Aboriginal perspectives. Texts, curricular resources, and community-based individuals who are versed in traditional indigenous knowledge are becoming more accessible for classroom and school activities in public and First Nations schools. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the tools and space necessary for the appropriate exploration of Aboriginal perspectives in schools are improving – teacher

initiative and professional sensitivity may represent the next stage of development in the Aboriginal perspectives movement. As faculties and colleges of education continue to reform in an effort to accommodate the growing need for development in this area, pre-service teachers' confidence in their ability to deliver should become a priority.

It may be worth mentioning that one aspect of Kanu's findings, teachers' understandings of, and approaches to, integration of Aboriginal culture in education, reflected a number of approaches to teacher engagement in the integration of divergent cultural perspectives. For those teachers who were non-Aboriginal and represented the dominant culture, they tended to employ piecemeal approaches to integration that were occasionally used to explore Aboriginal perspectives in their work:

Although these teachers were unanimous in their agreement that the social studies curriculum was assimilating Aboriginal students through omission or token additions of Aboriginal perspectives, they unwittingly contributed to this process of assimilation by allowing the curriculum topics, not Aboriginal issues/perspectives, to remain at the center of their teaching. The teachers perceived integration as occasionally adding Aboriginal perspectives, where convenient, to a curriculum that remained largely Eurocentric. On average, each teacher had integrated Aboriginal perspectives into the social studies curriculum only six times over the entire academic year. (Kanu, 2005, p. 56)

Focus on the piecemeal approaches presented by Kanu that, arguably, exemplify tokenism, are worthy of note in the broader discussion on pre-service teachers' apprehension as it represents the sort of uncommitted, superficial exploration of Canadian

Aboriginal culture that should be avoided by teachers in order to create the appreciative space necessary for such perspectives to flourish in schools and communities. In the place of such piecemeal approaches, what is called for are pedagogical/curricular approaches such as those by Banks, cited by Kanu (2005), that may provide better opportunities for adequate exploration and understanding of Aboriginal perspectives. The transformational approach, where curriculum is amended to enable students to view subject matter from alternative perspectives (Banks, 2001, p. 229) and the social action approach, where students take action in an effort to rectify problematic social issues, represent the sort of advanced pedagogical methods that adequately explore and accommodate the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity that continues to develop in Canada's schools.

### **The Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore teacher candidates' perceptions of comfort and apprehension with the prospect of integrating Aboriginal perspectives into their practices. Using a qualitative approach, the researcher conducted interviews with 2<sup>nd</sup> year teacher candidates in a two-year faculty of education program in Canada. Data collection lasted 12 months and focused on students who had completed one course in Aboriginal education. Upon completion of data collection, the researcher analyzed the data for emergent themes with reference to the general questions of the study's guiding questions as well as the study purpose. These themes and the narratives that informed them were used to comment on the opportunities, challenges and apprehensiveness that may be prevalent for teacher candidates when faced with the prospect of integrating Aboriginal education in their practices.



The interviews that were conducted in this study were developed and conducted with the principles of appreciative inquiry in mind. The researcher employed these principles by negotiating “initial intentional empathy” (Elliot, 1999, p. 12) with the participants, and attempted to establish an environment of individual and social affirmation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999).

### **Findings**

This study investigated teacher candidates’ comfort and apprehension with the prospect of integrating Aboriginal perspectives into their practices. To address the findings of this study, an adapted version of Kanu’s (2005) challenges that were perceived amongst in-service schoolteachers was used. The challenges have been re-conceptualized in order to facilitate the development of understanding of both comfort and apprehension:

- Knowledge about Aboriginal cultures,
- Aboriginal classroom resources,
- Attitudes of non-Aboriginal Teacher Candidates and students,
- Administrative support for integration, and
- Compatibility between the institution and some Aboriginal cultural values.

### **Knowledge about Aboriginal Cultures**

Participants in this study appeared to have varying perspectives on their own knowledge of Aboriginal cultures, including the different traditions, heritages, and spiritual orientations that may be relevant to this area. For those who were non-

Aboriginal, the lack of knowledge about Canada's Aboriginal peoples was articulated through past experiences. As one participant stated:

At the school that I attended, there's a divide in that school when I went there. I graduated in 1996, and ya there's a racial divide. I had Aboriginal friends but for the most part my friends weren't aboriginals. I would go to parties and stuff but you know there's just that racial divide. I haven't been there lately so I don't want to paint a picture of the town now, but when I graduated there was and within the high school setting to and also don't take this sounding the wrong way, but I was in the academic stream and it seemed that the people that would come from the surrounding areas they didn't go into the academic stream. They weren't really in school for the whole year. [This school] would have a huge enrolment in September and it would slowly dwindle down, and it's something I didn't pay much attention to then but as I was going through the faculty of education I wondered why is that? Not always feeling comfortable within my own skin in that school myself and just finding a way to play the high school game.

This insight represented how many participants had previously experienced a life that was shared by Aboriginal peoples. A number of participants conceded that these experiences weren't necessarily rich in Aboriginal culture, but rather existed within a school and/or community environment that was very uni-cultural. Many participants stated that they appreciated opportunities, both within the context of their formal educational experiences and in other forums, to engage with or learn from Aboriginal

peoples who have the knowledge that is relevant to the field of Aboriginal education in Canada. As one participant stated:

We actually went to a sweat....I wished that there'd been more of that opportunity even in our free time. We had our class time, but here's a number that you could call if you want. People will talk about First Nations culture, but it would be great to experience more of it when you haven't been raised in it. We are in Canada, we are not in Mexico, we can find out about Canadian culture here without having to wait for multicultural days.

There were a small number of Aboriginal participants in this study, all of whom were Métis. The insights provided from Aboriginal participants did reflect a different sort of perspective because, as one participant put it, "I've done more than just live with indigenous peoples...in a way, I lived within a culture". As many in the field of contemporary Canadian education have suggested that Aboriginal students and their families may benefit from formalized interaction with Aboriginal teachers and school staff, some participants have shared that this is an important consideration. In the areas of history, social studies, and other subjects where aspects of ethno-cultural identity may be explored, the instructional leadership of one with rich experiences within Aboriginal culture may be of particular importance. As one participant stated:

I think it is very important. I think Aboriginal perspectives is huge, in one of my human ecology courses it was stated that by 2012, it will be one in four students are going to be Aboriginal who are sitting in your classroom. I am from an

Aboriginal background, my father is Métis....It is something that I think that is very important. I grew up between two Aboriginal reserves in Fort Frances, Ontario where I saw success with Aboriginal community and I also saw failure. A lot has to do with schooling, what they are getting into, and especially when they are moving into the bigger city, is it culture shock? Is it not being able to relate to somebody else in that classroom?

Sharing a similar sentiment, another participant stated:

I still identify as a Métis person but I know what I have grown up with and I know what I am comfortable with so sometimes I don't know if it's because I am a new teacher you want to teach what you know because that is what you are comfortable with, that is what you know, that is what you are inspired by.

A number of participants stated that when it comes to their knowledge of and experiences with Aboriginal culture, some of it was acquired in a manner that focused on a particular artefact or aspect of content and did not adequately cite or celebrate the respective people, community or culture with whom that artefact or aspect of content was associated. It was suggested that by focusing on an artefact or activity without addressing the human experience associated with it is an exercise in tokenistic pedagogy. In discussing dream catchers, one participant stated:

When I was a kid and I went to school in Ontario ... There were no stated relationship between the dream catcher and any Aboriginal culture. I remember

having no idea why we made them. And at the school I walked into one of the early years classrooms where that student teacher was working and you could tell that she was infusing her culture into that classroom, so if the kids had the opportunity to be exposed to that then I think they would definitely be relating it.

These varying experiences of participants with Aboriginal culture have led to some to assert that they may be less confident and/or comfortable with addressing these topics in their teaching practices than others. Because this phenomenon of discomfort was perceived by the research in his teaching practices, it is perhaps important that a number of participants shared their feelings on this topic. As one participant stated:

I think that some people are uncomfortable talking about Aboriginal perspectives or incorporating them into the classroom because they feel they aren't in a position to teach about things they haven't grown up with or to feel they are always straddling this line of controversy. Teaching the unknown, even in the class we had with you people saying I'm scared to talk about this, or I am nervous to incorporate it, because they are going to say you don't know what you are talking about, or what if I say something inappropriate. Also when you walk into a school environment and all the teachers in that school are not incorporating aboriginal perspectives people might be concerned they are stepping outside the bounds of the school culture. Even if there are aboriginal kids in the school and even if you truly believe it is important to teach it anyway, which I do that it's important to teach it anyway. If you believe it's important but all your colleagues don't think so and their argument is there aren't any Aboriginal kids or we live in

rural area then you have to be the one to say that's it's important and these are the reasons why and I think there are people who might not do that.

What seemed to emerge from this study in regard to knowledge of Aboriginal cultures is the notion that, in some cases, such knowledge can be accessible, whilst in other cases it can be rather inaccessible. Spirituality, language, and practices that are rather unique to a specific community/population were seen as difficult to explore and, in some cases, completely inappropriate due to how sacred such topics might be. Other aspects of Aboriginal culture that might be relevant to art, sport, observances, some ceremonial activities, and literacy that is represented through English or French were seen as accessible for the participants in this study. Many of the participants asserted that their respective teacher education programs provided some background in understanding issues associated with what may be regarded as cultural knowledge.

### **Aboriginal Classroom Resources**

As was suggested in the introductory sections earlier, Aboriginal education is a relatively new area of study and practice. Its current manifestations being linked to recent developments such as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Aboriginal education does not have the legacy of decades of governmental involvement that would have led to a rich catalogue of appropriate literature and resources similar to other educational content areas. Because of how new this field is, some participants have noted that some content areas within Aboriginal education don't benefit from a rich catalogue of resources. As one participant stated:

There wasn't much in the library or in our classroom. I was working with Early Years kids, so storybooks and other stuff to support language and literacy is kind of important. When I asked my cooperating teacher about resources for stuff like the Seven Teachings, he didn't seem to know what to say.

Another participant commented on the availability of resources thusly:

Are there resources out there? You really have to hunt for it and develop it. I'm bad for inventing the wheel. I get an idea I research it on my own so if there is something or other available out there in a document. I would just look for the stuff on my own. Is there stuff ready to go in package form? I've never seen it.

Although some participants stated that there were difficulties acquiring resources to facilitate the delivery of Aboriginal content, other participants did make mention of experiences within their teacher training programs in which some resources were readily available and had potential for supporting the provision of effective learning experiences.

As one participant stated:

The film in class was really wonderful...there was actually a great film that we watched that had to do with residential schools and that was really helpful to be able to put people in the shoes or at least be able to have that perspective of why there is so much fall out and why that fall out is so enduring.

Statements such as this were made in the context of discussions that cited the existence of resources that were not necessarily library resources in the traditional sense (i.e., books and curriculum kits). A number of participants had, as a part of their respective teacher education programs, had the opportunity to take part in experiences that utilized resources that have been developed in recent years to support educational imperatives associated with Aboriginal education. In speaking about the region's respective Treaty Relations Commission, one participant stated that "we used a video from somebody. I met this guy who did one of the sessions at a professional development session for social studies; he is the Treaty Commissioner."

Another participant cited that the acquisition and use of resources that were acquired through the fascination that they had with a particular subject. As one participant stated:

I always did bring up in class discussions about Aboriginal war vets because there was an article in the paper that came out, and the angle that I took on the book was obedience to authority because the soldiers are kind of duped into going to war. And I brought in Buffy St. Marie's *Universal Soldier* and we talked a bit about Buffy St. Marie and they thought she kind of had a creepy voice and they wanted to hear a bit more from her. I tried my best to bring in Aboriginal perspectives, not so much because I thought I should because of the course, but more because it was my personality and things I like to do.

The availability of resources to support the integration of Aboriginal perspectives into classroom instruction was an area of concern for many participants in this study. For



many, there was an expectation that their teacher education programs and in-school experiences would inform their knowledge of the availability of such resources. When it came to the selection of a resource, the outcomes-based curricula that they utilized in the area of Aboriginal education was the principal point of inquiry for the selection process for many participants.

### **Attitudes of Non-Aboriginal Teacher Candidates and Students**

As discussed earlier, the majority of participants in this study were non-Aboriginal. Kanu (2005) identified this area as one of concern in the area of Aboriginal education due to perceived issues associated with racism. In this study, participants who offered insights into the attitudes of non-Aboriginal peoples in schools, that of themselves and of others, didn't reflect issues of racism in the manner that Kanu found. A number of participants referred to how they perceived the attitudes of their respective non-Aboriginal cooperating teachers whilst others discussed their own position as a non-Aboriginal teacher candidate. Because teacher candidates require the supervision of their respective cooperating teachers, the perceptions of cooperating teachers as well as the teacher candidates themselves might reveal much about how some in contemporary K-12 education view Aboriginal education. As one participant stated:

He was very passive aggressive because he would say well you do whatever you want, but maybe you should do this instead. That's why maybe I felt kind of stunted as for what I brought into the classroom. He would give me lots of suggestions, but I did not see him bring any aboriginal perspectives into the classroom at all.

Many participants developed their perceptions based on the availability of resources in the classroom as well as evidence of what the cooperating teacher is prepared to explore in their classroom. This led, according to some participants, to a sort of frustration with how the importance of Aboriginal education in their school experiences was not commensurate with how it was reflected in their teacher education program. As one participant stated:

I suppose that my frustration with that would be that an Aboriginal perspective in teaching isn't an additional perspective, we are teaching in Canada, Aboriginal peoples, this is Canada- this is their country. That should be where you start, and then if you are introducing other cultures into that, then those are cultures that can be additional. My subject area is history, and I don't know how to teach history without starting and always carrying through Aboriginal perspectives within that. It is the voice, and you can say we are going to talk about this from within this context, which is fine, but we are going to start from Canada, which is the Aboriginal perspective. I think we are just catching up, which is maybe why it needs to be highlighted now as integrating Aboriginal perspectives, which ideally this is so integrated eventually that it is not highlighted, it is just where we teach from and we build from there.

In a more direct manner, another participant articulated their frustration thusly:

Yup, absolutely. In English, yup. Teaching to the white western perspective. Not to say these are close-minded people that wouldn't change if they could but I just don't think their mind goes there. There are many people that are trying to change that....Definitely my colleagues were asking things like so who is the author again, so they are definitely open to it I'm just not sure if their mind goes straight to it at the beginning. We don't default to it. I think people especially writers and artists are open to new stuff.

Some non-Aboriginal participants were very confident about their ability and attitude toward integrating Aboriginal perspectives into their respective practices. For some, this confidence was asserted to be due to how their respective teachable areas were rather commensurate with Aboriginal culture and traditions. As one participant with a Fine Arts background stated:

I don't see any challenges. I don't know if there should be any challenges. Any art form whether its drawing or sculpture or mask making, if I'm going to show students the art form I always show them context too. They want to see examples of stuff, and don't want to be told well you have to draw this or sculpt that. They want to know well why am I doing this, and show me examples and who else has done this kind of stuff. So when I show them pictures of clay bowls for example I'm going to show them bowls that for example different First Nations groups have made and bowls from Ukraine, bowls from Japan to let them know that everyone does this stuff. It's universal and here are some different examples.

When others were asked if they felt apprehension, they articulated their confidence more broadly:

No I think honest to goodness this has been to me a very beneficial class because having again volunteered in the schools for fourteen years you see all kinds of learning challenges for kids, kids are coming from all different kinds of backgrounds and I think that these underlying themes that are brought forward in your course if a person can streamline them into their curriculum I think that those kids, it's going to help work with so many kids that have challenging behaviour and I think it's just going to help kids get along better, and I think it's going to help them be happier people. Learning to deal with children as a whole person with the circle of courage, incorporating the sharing circle or beginning your class with a humble pray which doesn't actually have to be, you don't actually have to tell your students it's going to be a prayer but you can begin it by reciting something that will make their day better and help them to interact with others better and that just falls with all the other day to day practice of these things so you can become and organized person so you can get along with others so that you can incorporate the idea of a humble prayer that isn't exactly a prayer but I think that is awesome. Start day off on a good note.

In some contexts, problematic aspects of Canadian history have been cited to cause angst among some non-Aboriginal peoples. As some might suggest that we are still attempting to understand the legacies of inappropriate legislation, oppressive government practices and the broad impacts of post-colonial relations, the forums in which such

narratives are shared can lead to discomfort, tension and guilt for some. Although not all participants cited any such tension when learning about Aboriginal history, a number did make mention of such feelings. As one participant stated:

It was the fact that something occurred that made it feel like it was such a wrong doing and you know you aren't involved from the perspective of an Aboriginal person and in fact you are not involved at all but you are a descendant of someone there are two side to that story and you are a descendant of the side that basically was making some really bad choices, so that was the fall out guilt...if that aspect is not dealt delicately without trying to make anyone feel badly for it but this is how it was and where do we go from here. I can see where you could feel guilty walking away.

A number of non-Aboriginal participants suggested that there is a sort of politeness when it comes to offering deference to the developing field of Aboriginal education. This was articulated in a manner that suggested that for some, such polite deference could be seen as a form of apprehension or resentment. Although this is not necessarily unique to the Canadian Aboriginal experience, consideration of such deference might be important. As one participant stated:

I feel like a lot of people almost feel like they are supposed to say yes it is a good idea, but they don't understand or appreciate why. I remember having a conversation with one of the other teacher candidates and we were talking about it. It wasn't specific to Aboriginal perspectives, but we were talking about

language education. He was saying how he doesn't understand why rural schools need to offer it because most of those kids will never leave the town, and I said that it was about choice and opportunity to leave if you want to, but he felt that the curriculum should reflect the local community, and if there is no one in that community then why should they offer those courses. So I said that if we are not ethnically English, why should we study English or literature in class? So I think that could be extended to Aboriginal perspectives, some people feel that it is Aboriginal students who would benefit, but if there are no Aboriginal students into the school then why should they study it? I think that most people would say that it is a good idea to integrate Aboriginal perspectives but they aren't exactly sure why or how. It is kind of like saying that war is wrong, but why is war wrong?

Much of what was discussed by participants in this study was associated with the lack of experience and/or knowledge with/of Aboriginal peoples and culture. The perception of a lack of experience and/or knowledge by participants was at times articulated in the context of an inability to integrate Aboriginal perspectives into their teacher while, for others, it was articulated as a challenge – one that has been assisted by a variety of sources such as university courses and professional development. The attitudes associated with ability represents perhaps the most important finding of this study as it has implications for the length, depth and breadth of Aboriginal content that may be a part of their respective classrooms.

### **Administrative Support for Integration**

Discussion regarding administrative support for the integration of Aboriginal perspectives was not a significant dimension of participants' perspectives. For many participants, administrative support, or lack thereof, was discerned vicariously through their cooperating teachers or based on what they were learned as a prescriptive imperative from university coursework. For those participants who had the opportunity to take part in professional development in Aboriginal education or a related topic, administrative support became an issue that they had an opportunity to witness and discuss within their practical experiences. What became clear from those participants who had bore witness firsthand to the existence or non-existence of administrative support acquired the sense that in many contexts, the integration of Aboriginal perspectives depended more upon the initiative of teachers compared to that of administrators. As one participant stated:

The first thing that comes to mind would be department initiatives...I think if you do it as a department initiative and you break it down into those sections working in a smaller group environment with like minded individuals you can all sit there and incorporate your ideas and bounce ideas off of one another and get resources or get an external person to go and support that group but at least you are comfortable talking to one another and you can inspire each other, and I think that accountability and inspiration are key. Like I said I take responsibility for incorporating Aboriginal perspectives but I think accountability and inspiration would have been two things that would have helped me.

At least a few participants had rich experiences in the school placements such that they had the opportunity to interact with other staff and in school activities outside the context of their classroom teaching. These extended opportunities allowed this small number of participants to acquire a sense of how prepared administrative authorities were in exploring this relatively new area of education. As one participant noted:

I think, from the role of the school and what they can do to facilitate my ability as a beginning teacher to bring these element of aboriginal education into the classroom, if the whole school is on board and if every classroom teacher from the beginning of the year when you are having your staff meetings if the principals and all the staff are on board under the same philosophies and those are brought up in assemblies and brought up throughout the year and children are being commended and it's out there in broad view, then it brings a cohesiveness to the aboriginal perspective or perspectives that are being brought in. Then the beginning teacher would feel as though everyone is on the same page and from the side of the university just hearing professors say come to me if you have questions, come to me, come and see me. That gives a person confidence because you walk away knowing I am not alone, I have someone I can turn to with question, and bounce ideas off of.

A number of participants noticed what they characterized as unfortunate and/or frustrating situations in their respective school placements when it came to the integration of Aboriginal perspectives. For these participants, the importance placed on Aboriginal education in their university course work was incommensurate with what was actually



being undertaken in their school placements. Otherwise stated, some schools/school districts were not doing enough to fulfil the imperatives that were asserted by university faculty and other stakeholders. In some cases, this problem was manifest in how reticent a cooperating teacher was in supporting Aboriginal education in their classrooms and that these were microcosms of how the school or school district operated. As one participant stated:

I don't know. It was more the feeling from the cooperating teacher that was disturbing to me, more than the access to resources, more than anything that could have been taught in our class, here at the faculty. I thought that you had wonderful examples in the class, and gave ideas of "this is how I have to do this in the classroom", I knew I have to bring in stuff, like when you brought in the corn and you taught about how to grain it and stuff, it was hands-on, tactile, it was there, it was something that not just the Aboriginal students, I don't know how many were Aboriginal in our classroom, but all students could appreciate. I just think that helped me in my teaching, but for my teaching I think that I am okay.

The perceptions of administrative supports held by participant in this study were limited by the fact that they were teacher candidates with two or three teaching "blocks", each of which lasting five to six weeks and was rather focused on the curricular and pedagogical learning opportunities of the classroom. Nonetheless, it seems as though some participants were sensitive to administrative influences upon school climate as reflected in the representation or absence of Aboriginal perspectives or content in their school.

### **Compatibility between the Institution and Aboriginal Cultural Values**

A survey of current scholarly literature on contemporary Aboriginal education reveals that there may be a lack of compatibility between contemporary K-12 education, especially that of public education, and what may be regarded as Aboriginal cultural values. For many participants who appeared to be sensitive to such compatibility issues, the issue of school climate became an issue – to what degree were the values of a school perceived? Was the quality of those values commensurate with what they knew of those Aboriginal cultural values that were relevant to that school/community? Some participants noted that their sensitivity toward such compatibility had heightened due to their personal experiences with Aboriginal peoples and/or with their experiences in university (e.g., completing a course in Native Studies and/or Aboriginal education). For a number of participants, the perception of a school's climate may be affected by the mere presence of Aboriginal students. As one participant noted:

It's interesting because a lot of the Aboriginal presence in the school was injected by the employees. For example, the EA and the math teacher and two student teachers were Aboriginal and they brought a lot of that focus into the school. It seemed to go quite smoothly. I saw kids even on their shirts, I mean they come out with a new shirt for their teams every year and this one had a dream catcher on it, so that kind of stuff that may seem on the surface, but I think it does help with that kind of climate.

Within the school experiences of a number of participants, Aboriginal cultural values seemed to have been made into a bona fide part of a school's climate. Sometimes articulated as schools that "do more than just put posters on the walls", some schools/school divisions had accomplished a lot in the eyes of participants who had opportunities to engage with students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, through curricular and extracurricular activities that privileged an Aboriginal perspective. In speaking about such issues, one participant stated:

A lot of what they did was extracurricular...they did sweat lodges. I met with the head of the history department and this is just speculation but I couldn't imagine them not just because they were very up to date, they were very professional and they there where the ones that were spear heading these extra-curricular sort of missions. In the school division in which I worked, they had a bunch of books they were bringing in that were for lower level readers. They were bringing in this one series that looks like a novel but when you read it it's much lower level perhaps grade 2 level for grade 8 students, and a couple of those were Aboriginal issues or themes. I can't remember exactly what they were but I remember reading them and thinking it good they brought in this particular book for that reason.

Much of what was asserted by participants made reference to Aboriginal cultural values that were spiritual in nature. A number of participants drew parallels between Aboriginal spirituality and non-Aboriginal ethnic frameworks such as the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments. Based on their experiences in their university course work,

participants at least learned of the Seven Teachings and, in some cases, had occasion to employ them in a way to address appropriate student behaviour – sometimes in a manner that didn't emphasize the spiritual dimensions of Aboriginal culture. As one participant stated:

Just as a little reminder, as your students walk in the door and an individual may be feeling miserable because they had a rushed morning or just listened to an argument or who knows where they are starting their day and just that humble prayer to remind each of the children we are lucky to be learning, how lucky we are to be here among friends.

Some of the findings of this study are commensurate with some assertions in contemporary scholarly literature that advances the notion that there is an incongruity between the values and institutional culture of many K-12 schools and those of the Aboriginal families that they serve. It was clear through the discussions with some participants that this incongruity is not as pronounced as it is elsewhere. On the evidence of many of the interviews conducted in this study, schools appear to be providing some opportunity for teachers and students to explore Aboriginal content within and outside of the classroom. Opportunities to explore Aboriginal activities, observances, and even ceremony and spirituality have become available.

### **Discussion**

Earlier, it was suggested that there is currently some debate and/or confusion amongst students and academics on the reasons why the integration of Aboriginal

perspectives has become important for public and First Nations education. These questions reflect a larger debate of the purposes of primary and secondary education. The simple response for this “final product” question is a vision of the good citizen: one who possesses the skills, values, and knowledge necessary to make a positive contribution to Canadian society. Making the necessary connection to this vision is the notion that such a good citizen – one who embodies the values of Canadian multiculturalism and the benefits that harmony and equality can have for broad social betterment – would be knowledgeable and appreciative of the Canadian Aboriginal experience. Many scholars, politicians, and indigenous community members have cited the need for mutual awareness and understanding amongst all Canadians as necessary for the realization of equality by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

As crucial as one’s perspective of the “final product” might be for the understanding of why the integration of Aboriginal perspectives is important, these questions seem to have been obfuscated by a concern regarding the clientele for whom the integration of Aboriginal perspectives is intended. Two competing notions may best characterize this concern: for some, Aboriginal education is for Aboriginal students. For others, Aboriginal education is for all students. There is a potential risk in limiting the integration of indigenous perspectives to those situations where Aboriginal students are members of the classroom or school community.

In discussing the legitimacy of the racial achievement gap argument, one that assumes the inferiority of the respective minority racial group, Martin (2009) suggested that educators should avoid employing pedagogies that have been informed by negative social constructs such as the questionable notion that a minority racial group, in this case African Americans, possess an inherent inability to become proficient in the area of

mathematics. In place of using questionable stereotypes on which class programming and interventions may be built, a more appreciative approach that requires teachers to “reveal and reaffirm positive developments in children’s racial and [academic] identities” (p. 138). This requirement may be predicated on the notion that the social context that accompanies children of minority cultures may be an important medium in which academic content can flourish. In regard to Aboriginal Canadian students, this sort of context is becoming progressively more accessible for classroom teachers as the growing number of teacher resources and scholarly material has become more reflective of indigenous contexts.

Although Aboriginal education has become an important aspect of contemporary schooling in many jurisdictions in Canada, many faculties and colleges of education are home to student populations where Aboriginal peoples are under-represented (Goddard and Foster, 2002). In faculties and colleges of education where most, if not all, of the teacher candidates are non-Aboriginal, an interesting phenomenon has been alleged to develop where some teacher candidates experience apprehension with the prospect of integrating Aboriginal perspectives in their school placements. This sort of apprehension may be evidenced by numerous assertions or sentiments put forth by teacher candidates: fear of failure, discomfort with the subject matter, guilt, and not being Indigenous are some of the reasons provided for the apprehension communicated by teacher candidates.

There may be some plausible reasons for why such apprehension develops. At the current time, the Canadian media has devoted copious amounts of broadcast and print space to Aboriginal issues in Canada; issues that are frequently characterized by marginalization, harsh living conditions, lack of opportunity, and emotionally-charged narratives of Aboriginal life that are put forth in relation to alleged government and

societal mistreatment. The apprehension in question may be, in large part, a result of viewing one's self as so culturally, ethnically, and linguistically removed from the Aboriginal Canadian experience that the exploration of Aboriginal issues in education may be viewed as the task of an Indigenous peoples.

### **Aboriginal Perspectives & Aboriginal Identity**

Educating in a manner that is congruent with, and sensitive to, the ethnic identities of a school's respective student population and community may not necessarily lend itself to the development of a standardized set of curricula or a uniform set of educational resources for use in all schools (White, Maxim, and Spence, 2004).

Localizing educational programming to its fullest potential may require the empowerment of teachers to amend course subject matter as well as alter school climate in a manner that is congruent with the perceived values, ideals, and cultural mores of the local community (Lee, 2007). Although educational programming should provide content that incorporates national ideals related to citizenship (Levin, 1998), aspects of local identity should be reflected in such programming (Rousselot, 2007). The sentiment of incorporating aspects of local identity in Canadian schools is particularly prevalent in Aboriginal communities that have developed a collective value for cultural revitalization.

Inclusion of localized Aboriginal identity in Canadian school programming development has been characterized in a variety of ways in the scholarly literature. St. Denis (2007) explored how education should be tempered by an anti-racist framework that informs school programming; a framework that assumes the importance of race as an essential element of identity. In exploring the importance of maternal roles in Aboriginal communities, Hammersmith (2002) asserted that gender roles are an important aspect of

traditional ways of life. Turner (2006) suggested that one of the principal aspects of Aboriginal identity in Canada is the inherent right to such things as land entitlement and self-government. According to Niezen (2003), contemporary Aboriginal identities in Canada are underscored by the adverse impacts of colonial experiences that have stifled cultural awareness. In regard to educational development, it has been suggested that localized aboriginal identity is essential to the sustainment of local character and culture (Rousselot, 2007).

It has been suggested that aspects of localized Aboriginal identity should be prevalent in Canadian schools that cater to Aboriginal students. The inclusion of such aspects of Indigenous identity in school programming can be marked by language-intensive programming (Fettes & Norton, 2000), curricular and extra-curricular subject matter that is inclusive of Indigenous Knowledge (Battiste & Henderson, 2000), and traditional Aboriginal pedagogies (Friesen & Friesen, 2002). The incorporation of such aspects of Aboriginal identity into general school programming can facilitate identity awareness education for Aboriginal students, thus aiding in the realization of Aboriginal cultural revitalization.

These final thoughts are intended to put forth the idea that Aboriginal ethnic identity may be a more appropriate theoretical lens with which the sort of educational programming called for in this chapter may be developed. Following on what is suggested in Feinberg's discussion on *robust recognition* (Feinberg, 1998), developing and employing pedagogy that provides appropriate space for the exploration, discovery, and celebration of diversity in the classroom requires more than simply focusing on culture. A student's identity encompasses more than just ancestral culture – perspectives, personality, peer socialization as manifested in behaviour, and family issues are just some



of the constituent elements of one's identity. The sort of recognition that has been discussed here encourages students to not only embrace their own cultural identity, but to also make that contemporary, personal connection with those aspects of culture.

Culture, as it has been addressed in here, is not a static phenomenon, but can be influenced and/or amended by society over time – this may be especially true in a nation like Canada where immigration has made the process of transculturation more rich. Through respect for and response to the continual evolving cultural mosaic, the recognition necessary to allow marginalized peoples flourish in Canadian schools may be realized.

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