

# ABORIGINAL EDUCATION AS CULTURAL BROKERAGE: NEW ABORIGINAL TEACHERS REFLECT ON LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper reports on a Talking Circle of six beginning Aboriginal teachers who discussed their roles as teachers. Participants criticized teacher education programs for not preparing them to teach in ways that are respectful of Aboriginal languages and culture. They discussed the importance of coming to know themselves and their culture. The paper concludes with suggestions for decolonizing teacher preparation so that Aboriginal teachers are enabled as protectors of Aboriginal culture and brokers with Euro-Canadian culture.

**FORMER LES AUTOCHTONES COMME AGENTS D'ÉCHANGE CULTUREL: COMMENT LES NOUVEAUX ENSEIGNANTS D'ORIGINE AUTOCHTONE INFLUENT LE LANGUAGE ET LA CULTURE EN CLASSE**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article fait le compte-rendu des révélations faites par six nouveaux enseignants d'origine autochtone au cours d'un cercle de discussion sur leur rôle d'enseignant. Les participants ont reproché aux programmes de formation des maîtres de ne pas les préparer à enseigner de manière respectueuse du langage et de la culture autochtones. Par ailleurs, ils ont souligné l'importance d'apprendre à se connaître et à explorer leur culture. En conclusion, les auteurs suggèrent des approches pour décoloniser la préparation des enseignants d'origine autochtone afin de leur permettre d'agir comme protecteurs de la culture autochtone et agents d'échange culturel avec la culture euro-canadienne.

Native teachers began to articulate the dilemmas they face in “trying to regain both knowledge and understanding of our languages and culture” within a European model of education. As they explored ways in which Native language and content might be used in the classroom, they initially thought it feasible only to alternate Native and non-Native approaches during the school day. Not until later did they consider ways of melding the two. (Leavitt, 1995, p. 125)

**T**eachers of Aboriginal children encounter unique challenges in the Canadian educational system. As the opening quotation reveals, Aboriginal teachers employed in schools are situated in the borderlands between languages and cultures, and have important choices to make as they prepare Aboriginal students to

walk between two parallel yet very different worlds. The tensions experienced by these teachers are particularly acute as they feel a strong commitment to serving and protecting their students and Aboriginal communities.

Many images have been used to convey the unique role of Aboriginal educators, including navigating, negotiating, melding, synthesizing, bridging, translating, and brokering. While each image has strengths and limitations, we have framed this exploration of the perspectives of six new Aboriginal teachers in Ontario around Arlene Stair's (1995) conceptualization of Aboriginal education as cultural brokerage. Aboriginal teachers broker divergent educational goals in order to serve the interests of their communities. As the participants in our study reflected on their beliefs and experiences, they continuously grappled with how they could preserve Aboriginal languages, culture, and ways of knowing.

This paper, by giving voice to the dialogue among early career Aboriginal teachers, provides insights into the complexity of brokering language and culture. This is particularly timely as the *Ontario First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) makes a commitment to "a holistic and integrated approach to Aboriginal student outcomes" (p. 6) that "promotes the development of a positive personal and cultural identity, as well as a sense of belonging to both Aboriginal and wider communities" (p. 8). Emerging from the insights of Aboriginal participants are possibilities for improving teacher education and professional development for Aboriginal teachers. Also, the Association of Canadian Deans of Education's (2009) Accord on Indigenous Education supports culturally appropriate pedagogy, recognizes "the demise of Indigenous languages," and advocates for their "reclamation, restoration, and revitalization."

## ISSUES AND RESEARCH

A foundational element of a high quality First Nations education system is the presence of teachers and educators who understand First Nations history, culture, intellectual traditions and language. They must also comprehend First Nations relationships with the land and creation. (Anderson, Horton & Orwick, 2004, p. 2)

The above quotation, from a paper included in *The New Agenda: A Manifesto for First Nations Education in Ontario* by the Chiefs of Ontario (2005), identifies the central role of Aboriginal teachers in preserving languages and culture. It speaks to the importance of preparing Aboriginal teachers so that they both understand their languages and culture and have the skills to teach through culture and the ability to teach Aboriginal languages through immersion.

Aboriginal education needs to be considered within the historical and social context of colonial practices designed to eradicate Aboriginal languages and

culture and facilitate assimilation into the dominant language and culture. As Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2008) conceded in a formal apology on behalf of the Parliament of Canada on June 11, 2008, residential schools served to “remove and isolate children from the influence of their families, homes, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture.” He also acknowledged that “these institutions gave rise to abuse and neglect,” “created a void in many lives and communities,” and “undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow.” While this apology acknowledged the harm done by residential schools, it did not acknowledge that unexamined racial and cultural assumptions are endemic to society and engrained in Eurocentric views of education in North America (Ladson-Billings, 1998). These assumptions, when applied to Aboriginal education, lead to normative assumptions and judgments that fail to account for “the multiple, nuanced, and historically- and geographically-located epistemologies and ontologies found in Indigenous communities” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 427) and lead to proposed solutions that are not responsive to the cultural traditions of Aboriginal students (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

Kirkness (1992) attributes to residential schools a legacy of cultural conflict, alienation, poor preparation for the workplace, and difficulty coping with life generally. The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Canada, 1996) affirms the disruptive impact of government policies on the economic and cultural foundations of Aboriginal communities. The history of encounters between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian cultures, however, is more than a series of unfortunate events. Rather, the forces of colonization consciously set out to eradicate Indigenous culture. Colonialism has “brought complete disorder to colonized people, disconnecting them from their histories... their languages...and their ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with the world” (Smith, 1999, p. 28). In Canada, educational institutions have served the assimilationist interests of the colonizer (Binda, 2001). Even today, the undermining of Aboriginal languages and cultures still occurs through neo-colonial governance structures and teacher education practices (Bear Nicholas, 2001). The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs policies, while encouraging Aboriginal administrative control of schooling, seeks to align First Nations systems with provincial systems and make “little reference to the role of education in strengthening and supporting First Nations’ languages, cultures, and knowledge” (Peters & White, 2009, p. 115).

Aboriginal people acknowledge that there are considerable challenges facing their communities, and that educational outcomes for their children are distressingly low. They are genuinely worried that the health of Aboriginal cultures continues to decline (Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001), and that many young Aboriginal people possess little knowledge of their language and culture (Statistics Canada, 2003). Although Aboriginal leaders and scholars have long

advocated for educational experiences that identify, represent and celebrate their languages, cultures, and values, the Ontario “provincial curriculum does not allow First Nations students to learn in their own language or learn their own history in a meaningful way” (Anderson, Horton, & Orwick, 2004, p. 8). Even the *Ontario First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007), which offers a “holistic and integrated approach to improving Aboriginal student outcomes” and is more sensitive to cultural needs, leaves decision-making authority in the hands of school boards but not Aboriginal education authorities and communities.

Acoose (1995) identifies the need for healing in order for “students [to] reconnect with self, others and the true history of their peoples” (p. 20). This does not mean separating Aboriginal knowledge from Western knowledge, as integration “can counteract the effects of cultural mismatch” (Canadian Council of Learning, 2007, p. 7) that have contributed to poor academic performance. Indeed, there is also evidence that when “schools embrace programs, practices, and personnel that are informed by a combination of conventional and Aboriginal-specific sensitivities... [students] can operated successfully in two, hopefully integrated, worlds” (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 105). Bear Nicholas (2001), who emphasizes the urgency of immersion in culture and language in ensuring survival and renewal, reminds us that “it is the Native people themselves who hold the keys to their own liberation” (p. 28) and “[o]nly the people themselves can do it” (p. 28).

Nicholas Bear (2001) also cautions against neo-colonialism, which can lead to the oppressed being “easily coopted, however unconsciously, into working in the interest of the colonizer” (p. 23). In particular, he points to Native teacher education programs, which are “virtually the same training as that provided to non-Natives” (p. 23) with “the cultural content... little more than an add-on” (p. 23). Critical to breaking the bonds of colonization and neocolonization are decolonizing strategies. Smith (1999), in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, emphasizes the importance of “recovering our own stories of the past” (p. 39) which is bound to “a recovery of our language and epistemological foundations” (p. 39).

Decolonized Aboriginal teachers, with their understandings of the intricacies of balancing Euro-Canadian curriculum with Aboriginal language and culture (Archibald, Pidgeon, Janvier, Commodore & McCormick, 2002), have a critical role to play in developing culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). It is important that accommodation or integration be on terms that ensure the preservation and protection of Aboriginal culture. As Stairs (1995) cautions, “the linguistic and curricular content of Native education can be adequately pursued only when embedded in traditional cultural values concerning ways of using language, of interacting, and of knowing” (p. 139). This makes Aboriginal teachers crucial cultural brokers negotiating in the interests of their people through the content they teach, their teaching methods, and the ways in which they balance between divergent

goals such as cultural reclamation and economic advancement (Stairs, 1995). Leavitt (1995) identifies four aspects of culture that need to be considered in brokering between Aboriginal and Western epistemologies:

- *Material Culture* refers to the content of courses;
- *Social Culture* refers to the relationship between classroom interactions and the interactions and relationships that take place within the Aboriginal community;
- *Cognitive Culture* refers to the differences in worldviews, value systems, spiritual understandings and practical knowledge between Aboriginal and Western societies;
- *Linguistic Culture* extends beyond language to the role of language in the community, such as the ways in which language is used (mainly orally in Aboriginal communities) and how it is used to maintain culture across generations.

This four-part conception of culture is useful as it marks a shift from a narrow cultural inclusion approach, focused on content, to a cultural base conceptualization that incorporates all aspects of culture into the education of Aboriginal peoples.

There is a need to understand the tensions experienced by Aboriginal teachers called upon to serve in the capacity of cultural brokers, even as they struggle with their own identities and come to know themselves as Aboriginal people. While Leavitt (1995) and Stairs (1995) studied the perceptions of experienced teachers and teacher candidates, their work is based on data collected in the late 1980s, and much has changed in the intervening decades; for example, there is Battiste's (2002) recommendation that indigenous knowledge be an integral part of Aboriginal education and there is the manifesto of the Chiefs of Ontario (2005). There is also a growing literature that is respectful of Aboriginal languages and culture, including studies of exemplary educational models (e.g., Curwen Doige, 2003; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). This study, by attending to the stories of experienced Aboriginal teachers, can help us better understand what it is like for them to act as brokers across languages and cultures. By learning from their stories, we can begin the process of making teacher education and ongoing professional development more responsive to the needs of the Aboriginal teachers who will serve or are serving as cultural brokers.

## CONTEXT AND METHOD

Our research gives explicit attention to the voices of six beginning Aboriginal teachers in the province of Ontario (Cherubini, Kitchen, & Engemann, 2008). These six teachers were from the three Aboriginal groups in Ontario: three

Anishinabe, two Mohawk, and one Métis. Four were female and two male. Four were in their first two years of teaching, while two were in their fifth. Three taught on-reserve while three worked in provincial schools. They ranged in age from late 20's to mid-40's.

A limitation of the study is the number of participants involved, which was made smaller by inclement weather. This small group of teachers willing to travel great distances and devote a weekend to this research were particularly able and committed, and they did offer a diversity of experiences based in terms of identity, gender, and school settings. While the voices and experiences contained in the 134 pages of transcripts represent a rich resource, we recognize the need for a wider study of the experiences of Aboriginal teachers in their first years of practice.

Participants attended a Talking Circle over the course of 3-days in December 2007, at a location that had symbolic and spiritual significance. The Wild-fire Research Method (Hodson, 2004), a semi-structured format that invites participants to share their experiences and observations in a Talking Circle, provided a communal and sacred research environment respectful of the traditions and cultural beliefs of Aboriginal people and the importance of a relationship with the land. The Aboriginal facilitator used general questions related to participants' experiences to guide discussion of a range of topics; for example, reasons for becoming teachers, teacher education experiences, working with Aboriginal students, community issues, and teaching language and culture. An Elder played a crucial role by modeling interconnectedness, respect, and the wisdom of the Indigenous intellectual tradition (Goulet & McLeod, 2002). This is consistent with Cajete's (2008) observation that "Indigenous educational research is best performed when an Indigenous view and purpose are represented in the conceptualization, development, and implementation of research" (p. 204). Also participating were Euro-Canadian university scholars, Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian graduate students, and an Aboriginal university staff member. The bi-epistemic research team (Cherubini, Kitchen, & Hodson, 2008) acknowledged and respected both Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian knowledge traditions in order to garner more profound understandings of Aboriginal epistemologies and new teacher experiences. The team, thus, benefited from insider and outsider knowledge, as well as the guidance of the Aboriginal research officer of the university's Aboriginal research unit (Smith, 1999).

In analyzing the data, the bi-epistemic research team borrowed tenets of grounded theory to provide "a procedure for developing categories of information, inter-connecting the categories, building a 'story' that connects the categories, and ending with a discursive set of theoretical propositions" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, as cited in Creswell, 1998, p. 150). Members of the team identified emerging patterns in the data while considering individual responses as "textual wholes,

not as reflecting some reality outside the spoken words” (Hilden & Honkasalo, 2006, p. 44). Codes, categories, individual stories, and the Aboriginal context were juxtaposed and discussed by the team collectively in order to identify key themes derived from the interactions of the six participants. Aboriginal members of the team played crucial roles in providing a cultural context for statements made by participants. Also, in presenting evidence, we sought to maintain the distinctive voices and stories of the participants (Smith, 1999) while modifying details that might reveal the identities of participants. In the spirit of respectful inquiry, this paper has been reviewed by the bi-epistemic research team and quotations have been vetted by participants.

## FINDINGS

The six Aboriginal participants in our study discussed a wide-range of educational issues over the course of the three-day retreat. The conversation often turned to language and culture, which were closely linked to their self-identities, cultural identities, and identities as teachers working with Aboriginal students and communities. Participants reflected on the joys and tensions they experienced as teachers and role models attempting to broker between Aboriginal and Western cultures. They sought to become more aware of their languages and culture so that they could be more effective in protecting and promoting their culture while also addressing their students’ need to be prepared for the outside world. As cultural brokers, however, their first concern was serving the interests of their people.

In this section, we look at five themes that emerged from the data: (1) Teacher Education and Induction; (2) Facing the Realities of Aboriginal Students and Communities; (3) Self-Identity and Cultural Identity; (4) Teaching Languages; and (5) Teaching Culture.

### *Teacher education and induction*

Is it Indian education or is it educating Indians? (Louise)

The participants in our study generally found their teacher education programs to be of limited value in preparing them for teaching Aboriginal students (Kitchen, Cherubini, Trudeau, & Hodson, in press). They also received limited support and faced discrimination once they began teaching.

Three participants – Tom, Louise, and Clare – were enrolled in Native Teacher Education Programs (NTEP) in Ontario. NTEP is an intense, short-duration – e.g., two semesters over two years – program designed to prepare Aboriginal people without post-secondary education to teach the Euro-Canadian curriculum to Aboriginal students. They disagreed with the philosophies of their programs, which focused on training them to teach the Euro-Canadian curriculum in conventional ways. Tom lamented the loss of 80% of his classmates, who were “weeded out” for being unwilling or unable to adapt to the program by, for

example, “cutting-and-pasting” lesson plans. Louise, who regarded her program as assimilationist, lamented, “It’s the same old system and the system’s a problem in the mainstream society.” Louise, who observed that Aboriginal faculty were “non-speakers... following the guidelines of the program” rather than adapting it to Aboriginal teacher candidates or students, wanted the program to educate Aboriginal students using Aboriginal educational methods. All three, along with other participants, were concerned that they were not prepared to meet the challenges of teaching in Aboriginal communities.

Jocelyn and Tanya were generally pleased with the five-year Eurocentric degree programs from which they graduated. They believed that they received a sound foundation in theory, reflection, and practice that they were able to adapt to their teaching settings. They received no preparation, however, in Aboriginal education. Drew, who was not a certified teacher, relied on his ability to speak his Native language and the “accumulated tons and tons of tricks and stories” he amassed working in Native counseling programs.

Participants received limited support once they began teaching. Jocelyn and Clare worked for administrators who were generally supportive. Clare, for example, felt that the “principal’s been very helpful; he’s been guiding me whenever he’s available you know along the way over there.” Nonetheless, she and Jocelyn were largely on their own when it came to planning their courses. This was particularly challenging as culturally appropriate resources were largely unavailable. Those working in Euro-Canadian schools often felt isolated, even marginalized. Louise received little guidance or peer support. This lack of support compounded by unreasonable expectations and judgments caused Drew to ask, “Does anybody else feel the pressure of you need to be more than a teacher? I’m in a mainstream [school] too and it’s like they want me to role model and teach proper behaviour.”

“They don’t treat you as a teacher. You’re just an Indian teacher,” Drew said, reflecting on the discrimination experienced by Aboriginal teachers. Clare found Euro-Canadian teachers unwelcoming, recalling that only the custodian greeted her in the morning, while “the other staff would go quiet” when she walked into the staffroom. Louise was provided with a small and isolated workspace which made her feel like “a mushroom in a dark, damp corner.” Tom, who recalled a teacher recently calling “Tomahawk Man” and telling “Wahoo” jokes, wished he had been taught “how to communicate with other teachers and shown how differently we see things than they do.” Jocelyn, an award-winning high school and university student, believed that she and other certified Aboriginal teachers in her area experienced institutional discrimination when applying to teach subjects such as mathematics. When she raised these concerns with a provincial school district official, he defended board hiring practices and seemed “patronizing.”



Overall, the Aboriginal teachers in our study felt poorly prepared and supported in their efforts to teach Aboriginal students. They questioned the Eurocentric assumptions underlying their education, and stressed the importance of preparing them for teaching a challenging population in ways that are sensitive to Aboriginal languages and culture.

### *Facing the realities of Aboriginal students and communities*

There are a lot of obstacles to Aboriginal students learning and a lot of it is environmental, in their homes. So my belief is that when they come to class they can share what's happening in their lives, as much as they feel comfortable with, and then it goes up in smoke to the Creator. (Clare)

"Educating our youth" is a "really tough job," Tom said as he reflected on his personal "life struggles" and the challenges facing Aboriginal youth and the wider Aboriginal community. All six participants recognized the immense challenges facing Aboriginal people and believed that as teachers they could have a positive impact on students' lives.

"I think that's one of the biggest challenges I face in my job is how to get kids engaged who don't see any reason whatsoever for education," commented Jocelyn. "How do you pass along... the importance of education when the community social structure is set up so that it is irrelevant what kind of education you have?" Multiple generations of colonization and poverty, Drew continued, meant that too often "their parents are all still engaged in their own [negative] behaviours and attitudes." Louise added her concern that casinos and "smoke shacks" also contributed to the devaluing of education. Drew offered an historical perspective:

That's the generation, second of two, that didn't have the language because of residential schools and that's where the biggest obstacle is to teaching our kids.... If we can't get them embracing the language... it's really harder for the kids.... One of my students asked "Why are you putting so much pressure on me for? Why are you pressuring our generation to be the saviours? That's your role." [Others say,] "We don't want to be Indian students.... We just want to be students.... Proximity... to an urban centre has done a lot to kind of undermine language retention.... You live on welfare and [perhaps] preserve the language, or have a job yet lose everything about who and what you are. Why do we always have to make those really tough choices?"

Although these challenges caused by colonization are daunting, the tenor of the discussion did not remain negative for long. Such comments were soon followed by laughter as they recalled the joys of teaching. Through sharing and healing the pain soon turned to determination and hope.

### *Self-identity and cultural identity*

In the last 5 years I've been taking back my language.... And doing everything I can to educate our youth. Changing the cycle is tough, so having met [my father] and getting to find out little pieces of the puzzle of who I am. Hav-

ing people help and morally support me on that path... brought me back to my language. I started to learn the language, still have tons, tons, tons to learn. (Tom)

The sharing of personal stories revealed strong connections among personal journeys, cultural identities, and connections to community. Understanding these interconnections was viewed as critical to successful teachers able to help improve the conditions in their communities.

Louise and Clare shared similar stories of hardship and cultural deprivation. Drew, who had a troubled relationship with his father, was able to maintain his language and culture thanks to the guidance of his aunt, who taught him his language and culture and, later, helped “teach my kids who they are.” Jocelyn and Tanya, who did not face the same level of hardship, have also turned towards culture in coming to know themselves and becoming effective teachers.

“I’m healing every single day,” Tom said, “It’s a really tough job.” This healing process inspired him to “go back and get those who are left behind.” Clare reflected:

I knew that my healing journey had to begin for me to seek the balance I needed. Education was the door opener for me. The instructors... taught me smudging, ceremonies, and medicines... We had teachings; we had songs, and drums.... I began learning about my culture at the age of 30 through meeting people and going to ceremonies. I took my children, who have been introduced to culture and have done their rites of passage.

These experiences in a culturally-sensitive early childhood education program inspired Clare to become a teacher and teach through culture. “Because our children are still hurting,” her teaching focused on healing as the first step in personal development and cultural reclamation.

“I’m not an Aboriginal teacher. I’m a teacher who’s Aboriginal.... I’m a math teacher,” Jocelyn said. “Or I want to be,” she said, recalling the institutional discrimination that prevented her from getting a mainstream teaching position. Jocelyn’s supportive family and success at school motivated her to become a teacher and a role model of academic success for Aboriginal students. The experience of being denied a mathematics teaching position, however, helped her better understand the struggles of her people. In order to become an effective Aboriginal teacher on a reserve, she “put aside all [her] experience and ways of seeing education” in order to get to know her students’ experiences and instill in them a commitment to education. Tanya was able to teach special education effectively without coming to terms with her Aboriginal identity, but the more she came to know herself and her culture, the more she incorporated Aboriginal understandings into her teaching. She was disappointed, however, that her colleagues were not receptive to sitting in Talking Circles to resolve problems.

The participants all believed that through teaching they could make a difference in the lives of Aboriginal students. Louise believed that Aboriginal students were “more comfortable with a Native person as their teacher.” She cited the example of a “bad ass” student “known to the principal” and “late or absent for the other three classes” who came to her class and took an interest in what she was teaching. Looking to the future, Clare said, “Our students can succeed and bring something back to their communities, something back to their Nations.” She then added, “One thing that I have come to accept through this circle and this weekend is that we need to build our own curriculum... in language and in culture.”

### *Teaching languages*

Our language makes us a unique society. The government is always trying to get rid of us. So, if we cannot speak our own language they will say that we are not a unique society and that we don't need this land anymore. (Louise)

While culture takes many forms, there is little doubt that language is critical to the existence and renewal of a distinct culture. Louise began with a recognition that language makes her people unique, that language speakers see the world through different eyes and that many aspects of culture cannot easily be translated into other languages. This perspective is affirmed by the Assembly of First Nations (1992), who argue that “Native language embodies a value system about how we ought to live and relate to each other” (p. 14). Drew, when he reported on his language classes, noted the importance of words and grammar in how Aboriginal people construct meaning differently than English speakers. If Aboriginal languages disappear, so too may the relationships among families and clans embodied in language, and the ways in which Aboriginal people connect to nature and the Great Spirit (Assembly of First Nations, 1992): “Without our languages, we will cease to exist as a separate people” (p. 14).

Drew and Louise were the only two Native language teachers in our study. The others, due to their life circumstances, had little opportunity to learn their languages. Tom and Clare were actively learning their languages. Jocelyn and Tanya, who recognized the importance of language in their traditional cultures, took pride in the dimensions of culture nurtured by their families. Drew believed that he too would have lost his language if he had not returned to a remote community to live with his grandparents. Louise did not learn her language as a child, but studied it as an adult through a range of courses at colleges and universities. This sense that Native languages are vulnerable has led Aboriginal leaders to advocate for more language courses in schools and made Drew and Louise forceful advocates for Native language education.

Both Drew and Louise were passionate about preserving their linguistic culture through language teaching. Drew spoke at length about language structures and the pleasure and pressure of developing resources from scratch. Louise's

dedication to language revitalization was evident in willingness to teach the morning in the provincial school and the other half day in the band-operated middle school in the afternoon, which involved regular commuting and the poor pay of a part-time instructor. Their passion has helped them to face the significant challenges of teaching Native languages.

A major challenge was the lack of value many Aboriginal students seemed to attach to schooling. Louise, who attributed the problem to culturally-irrelevant Eurocentric curriculum and pedagogy, noted that a lack of language retention contributed to low motivation among students on reserves. Louise recalled that she had taken no Native language classes, as they were only offered in grades two years behind her. As a result, much of her generation lost their language, making revitalization a generation later more difficult. While Louise was disappointed that reserve students who had taken Native language classes throughout their schooling seemed uninterested, she was pleased that the urban high school students seemed genuinely interested in reclaiming their language.

“They’re not learning [because] they’re not living the language,” according to Drew. “They learn the words for this week” then forget them immediately after the test. Drew’s comment spoke to both his understanding of the effects of colonization and his awareness of the difficulties of trying to change student thinking while teaching within the provincial system.

One of the reasons why Native languages were poorly regarded by students may have been that timetabling and course content were decontextualized from linguistic culture. Louise described her 30-minute junior Native language periods:

We were learning a little bit of language and Native studies, but then I had to start teaching life skills – good decision-making, etc. – instead. And then a nutrition break... sometimes I feel I am there just to make sure that they don’t destroy the classroom.

Louise did her best to include poetry, drawing and Native culture into her classes but often felt thwarted by time constraints and the challenges of Aboriginal life.

Drew was discouraged by his perception that students were “failing miserably.” This may have been partly because he had no formal teacher preparation, no guidance in designing formal lessons, and no experience in organizing materials in lessons around the learning, reading, and writing strands in course outlines. His lessons were primarily organized around vocabulary lists: “I do weekly tests because I break things down into units that they can understand. So they get 20 or so words a week, and then I test them on 10.” These challenges were compounded by working with poorly motivated students of low socio-economic status, with a wide range of abilities and many identified special education needs.

Native language education, as Drew and Louise noted, is made particularly difficult by the realities of community life in the aftermath of colonization and the constraints placed on teachers. Perhaps, as Clare suggested, there is a need to link language to linguistic culture in more meaningful ways. As Drew suggested, the Eurocentric structures used to teach Native languages may not be effective:

If we can't learn from our Elders and in our language, the nuance is lost. The language is a tool and there's nuance in there that talks about who we are. There's a heartfelt sense that our culture is who we are. And first thing is to get the kids hooked on it in terms of what the language is.

### **Teaching culture**

We're Native people teaching a non-Native curriculum to our people. We're not Native people teaching about us within our own curriculum. (Drew)

Culture and cultural identity emerged time and again as central to Aboriginal education that engaged students, connected them to their language and culture, and contributed to healing and development within Aboriginal communities. It was evident that they envisioned the teaching of Aboriginal culture as extending beyond teaching material culture to bringing to life social, cognitive and linguistic culture.

They, however, had little preparation in how to teach differently. Participants were limited by their own acculturation into the mainstream and constrained by school timetables, courses of study, and the effects of colonization on their people. They often taught material culture in Eurocentric ways, such as using the lesson templates provided in their teacher preparation programs. While receptive to teaching in ways consistent with Aboriginal knowledge and ways of living, their initial teacher education and ongoing professional development offered them few opportunities to develop alternative approaches to curriculum and pedagogy.

Clare was particularly committed to teaching through culture: "I do know some about the culture so I've been incorporating that into the class" through singing, dancing, smudging, and Talking Circles. Clare strongly believed that promoting healing and cultural pride was necessary to preparing students to learn, and that culture was a foundational element rather than content to be covered during the year. She also hoped to involve Elders in her classes: "Medicine comes in when an Elder is present and providing a safe environment for us." Part of cultural identity is thinking beyond the classroom and school to the wider community. Clare was able to make some connections in her remote reserve community:

They do have a lot of community events. They have drums, singing and celebrate Equinox, so as a teacher.... I can take my students to any ceremony or function on that First Nation... So we are involved with the community

even though I've only met maybe three parents since September and those are the three that are very much involved in their children's life. I've yet to meet the others, but I'm waiting and I know that eventually, before Christmas they will come to me because they're going to see and they feel a difference in the kids. They're going to want to meet the person that was involved.

Drew and Louise also made efforts at parent outreach but received only limited response back. The Elder who presided over the Talking Circle suggested that efforts to educate the wider community could have an impact on the education of youth: "The circles are important because for me as a teacher involved with adults. I teach them the culture and so, when they go home, maybe they can appreciate their children that are speaking the language a little bit better."

Jocelyn reminded everyone of the importance of working with non-Natives: "It is important to educate our non-Native educators to see that we have a very rich culture and background, and it has nothing to do with money." By coming to appreciate each other's cultures, she argued, "it would really benefit our kids and their self-esteem."

## DISCUSSION

The Talking Circle discussions revealed that the new Aboriginal teachers were not well prepared for their roles as cultural brokers. Their teacher education programs taught them to teach a Euro-Canadian curriculum, often in old-fashioned Eurocentric ways, rather than to bridge cultures. These teachers resisted the colonial teacher education practices imposed on Aboriginal people (Smith, 1999). Instead, they wished for decolonized and culturally appropriate teacher education that would provide them to teach in ways that were consistent with the material, social, cognitive and linguistic culture of Aboriginal people (Leavitt, 1995). Also, they wished for stronger connections to their personal experiences and to the needs of the communities in which they were going to teach (Battiste, 2000).

As we analyzed the data, it became apparent that a fundamental transformation needs to take place in the preparation of Aboriginal teachers in order to help teachers become cultural brokers able to protect and strengthen their culture while preparing students for the wider world (Kitchen, Cherubini, Trudeau & Hodson, in press). The personal and professional stories told by participants revealed that they already possess the capacity to become effective cultural brokers. Two questions then emerged:

- How can Aboriginal teachers build on their personal experiences to become more effective as cultural brokers for their students and communities?
- How can Aboriginal and Western epistemologies be brokered in teacher education so that Aboriginal teachers are better able to teacher students how to exist within both cultures while protecting and strengthening their own?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Aboriginal teachers have the potential to play a crucial role in the preservation and renewal of Aboriginal languages and culture. Given the challenges facing Aboriginal peoples in the wake of colonization, it is important that teacher education programs prepare these teachers to become effective cultural brokers able to help students know and live in their culture, while also providing students with the skills needed to succeed in the wider Western culture that surrounds them. The stories and perspectives of our participants suggest that, in order to move forward, there needs to be a dramatic reconceptualization of Aboriginal teacher education. We now discuss some ways in which the preparation of Aboriginal teacher education could be improved.

### *Drawing on personal experience: Reflecting and healing*

The personal experiences of Aboriginal teachers should form the basis for the effective preparation of Aboriginal teachers. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) coined the term *personal practical knowledge* to convey respect for teachers as “knowledgeable and knowing persons” whose knowledge resides in their “past experiences... present mind and body, and... future plans and actions” (p. 25). Participants clearly understood that knowing oneself was vitally important to effective teaching and to being responsive to the needs of Aboriginal communities. They saw themselves not as empty vessels to be filled with educational strategies, but as individuals whose experiences as Aboriginal people and learners should be honoured in their teacher education programs. One of the main purposes of teacher education should be to draw on their knowledge, skills and dispositions in authentic classroom situations (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995). The purpose of teacher education should be to nurture their abilities, honour their experiences, and respect their culture, not to weed out those who are unwilling or unable to adapt to conventional teacher education programs. This is consistent with James Banks’ (2007) view that, while all students should “develop a delicate balance of cultural, national, and global identification,” marginalized ethnic minorities can attain “healthy and reflective national identifications only when they have acquired healthy and reflective cultural identifications” (p. 25).

A positive example is Jocelyn’s Eurocentric teacher education program that emphasized reflection and adaptive expertise. Leading North American teacher education programs have long recognized the importance of promoting reflective practice, making informed pedagogical decisions, reflecting on these decisions, and adapting to one’s teaching context (Schon, 1983). There is also a growing recognition that teachers need to become adaptive experts able to make curricular choices suited to the particular individual and collective needs of their classes and communities (Bransford, Darling-Hammond & LePage, 2005). When adaptive experts “use knowledge about the social, cultural, and language backgrounds of their students, the academic achievement of students

can increase” (Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richert, Zeichner, LePage, Darling-Hammond & Duffy, 2005, p. 233) and disparities can be eliminated. Teacher education programs that prepare teachers for Aboriginal contexts, based on our study, need to draw on the material, social, cognitive, and linguistic culture in order to be more effective.

The importance of distinctly cultural knowledge is highlighted by Orr, Paul and Paul (2002), who “infuse Connelly and Clandinin’s notion of the personal with the cultural” in their conception of “cultural practical knowledge” (p. 335). They argue that for many Aboriginal teachers see “their teacher knowing as inseparable from their community... which has educated them as part of a collective to work against assimilation” (p. 335) and protect their languages and cultures. For our participants, particularly those who were raised on reserves, the personal was very much connected to a larger cultural story and sense of purpose as agents of decolonization. Many felt at times like isolated cultural workers rather than as members of “indigenous teacher groups” with “the potential to transform the culture of schooling” (Lipka, 1998, p. 3).

As reflection is central to traditional Aboriginal ways of knowing, Aboriginal healing processes and education practices seem better than Eurocentric approaches to meeting personal and community needs. Aboriginal Elders often draw on personal, spiritual, or political crises to help people heal themselves by returning to traditional teachings and ceremonies (Stiegelbauer, 1996). Clare, in particular, drew on teachings and ceremonies to heal herself and to teach through culture. All participants, however, identified their inward personal journeys as critical to becoming effective teachers and relating to their students and communities. Since, as Hampton (1995) states, traditional Aboriginal education “orients itself around a spiritual centre that defines the individual as the life of the group” (p. 21), it is particularly important that Aboriginal teachers attend to their own healing in order to heal and teach their students. Indeed, participants wanted Aboriginal teacher education to be more focused on personal healing journeys within the context of Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

### ***Grounding Aboriginal teacher education in Aboriginal ways of knowing***

Participants, in order to become whole themselves and to heal their communities, turned to traditional Aboriginal knowledge. NTEP’s, which favour Eurocentric training processes, largely disregarded this knowledge and, often, discarded teacher candidates best able to teach through culture (Bear Nicholas, 2001; Kitchen, Cherubini, Trudeau & Hodson, 2010). The Eurocentric degree programs that Jocelyn and Tanya attended did little to acknowledge Aboriginal knowledge, but at least did not overtly suppress tradition.

While naming colonization and its adverse impact on language and culture is important, Smith (2000) challenges “Indigenous people to engage in posi-



tive, proactive initiatives rather than resorting to reactive modes of action” (p. 210). One way for Aboriginal teachers to succeed is to become cultural brokers able to “synthesize traditional and formal teaching” (Stairs, 1995, p. 149) in themselves and their students. Aboriginal students can be successful in both cultures when decolonized teachers draw on Aboriginal pedagogy while making links to complementary Eurocentric approaches (Stairs, 1995). The teaching of languages needs to extend beyond Eurocentric strategies such as vocabulary lists, oral recitations, reading, and writing to the ways in which language is used within Aboriginal communities, as these do not accurately represent their experiences (Battiste, 2000). Aboriginal scholars and leaders are increasingly promoting traditional Aboriginal education as effective in meeting the needs of students in their communities. Battiste (2000) argues that “an act should declare community-based education as an existing Aboriginal and treaty right that must be fully complied with and supported” (p. 2003). The Medicine Wheel, which offers wisdom and explains relationships at the personal, social, national, global and cosmic levels to understanding and spirituality, is one Aboriginal pedagogical approach that has been found to be very useful in bridging self and community for Aboriginal teachers (Calliou, 1995). Talking Circles can also help students to learn through the structures of oral Aboriginal culture (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Elders and other community members have the potential to be powerful educational partners (Chiefs of Ontario, 2005). Regardless of the approach, as our participants and Aboriginal leaders make clear, it is crucial that language and culture be understood and experienced in their contextual complexity under the guidance of community members, not the Euro-Canadian elites (Battiste, 2000).

## CONCLUSION

This research has reinforced the need for teacher education and ongoing teacher development that helps Aboriginal teachers become effective cultural brokers and protectors of their own languages and culture. As a result, we have identified ways in which the preparation of Aboriginal teachers can be reformed to better meet the needs of Aboriginal teachers, the students they serve, and the culture of Aboriginal communities. While the reform of Aboriginal teacher education and professional development will be a long and complicated process, two elements are critical. First, the personal practical knowledge of Aboriginal teachers could be better utilized if reflective practice was central to their teacher preparation programs. Even better would be programs that do this by centering reflection on traditional teachings and ceremonies. Second, Aboriginal ways of knowing and teaching should be at the heart of the program. Rather than indigenizing Eurocentric pedagogical approaches, Aboriginal teacher preparation should be centred on Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy, with Euro-Canadian content incorporated as appropriate.

Aboriginal students, teachers, and communities are more likely to prosper when their education is culturally appropriate. As a bi-epistemic team of researchers familiar with both Indigenous knowledge and the progressive school of Western thought, we find common ground in our shared commitment to teacher education that is respectful of teacher knowledge, adaptive to student needs, and sensitive to Aboriginal cultural contexts. Some lessons learned in Euro-Canadian education may prove helpful in developing such a system and providing an intellectual rationale for it. The *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) and the manifesto of the Chiefs of Ontario (2005) gives reason to hope that Aboriginal teacher education programs can become truly Aboriginal and better serve the linguistic and cultural needs of Aboriginal students and communities. The *Aboriginal Knowledge Exchange Project Self-Study and Report* (Niessen, 2008), which reveals that a number of Western Canadian Aboriginal teacher education programs are experimenting with Indigenous ways of knowing, suggests that positive and proactive initiatives are moving forward. By working through these tensions, cultural brokers can play a constructive role in improving Aboriginal education. Also, the lessons learned from the experiences of Aboriginal cultural brokers may one day help educators interested in developing more holistic approaches to learning and living in Euro-Canadian society (Battiste, 2000).

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