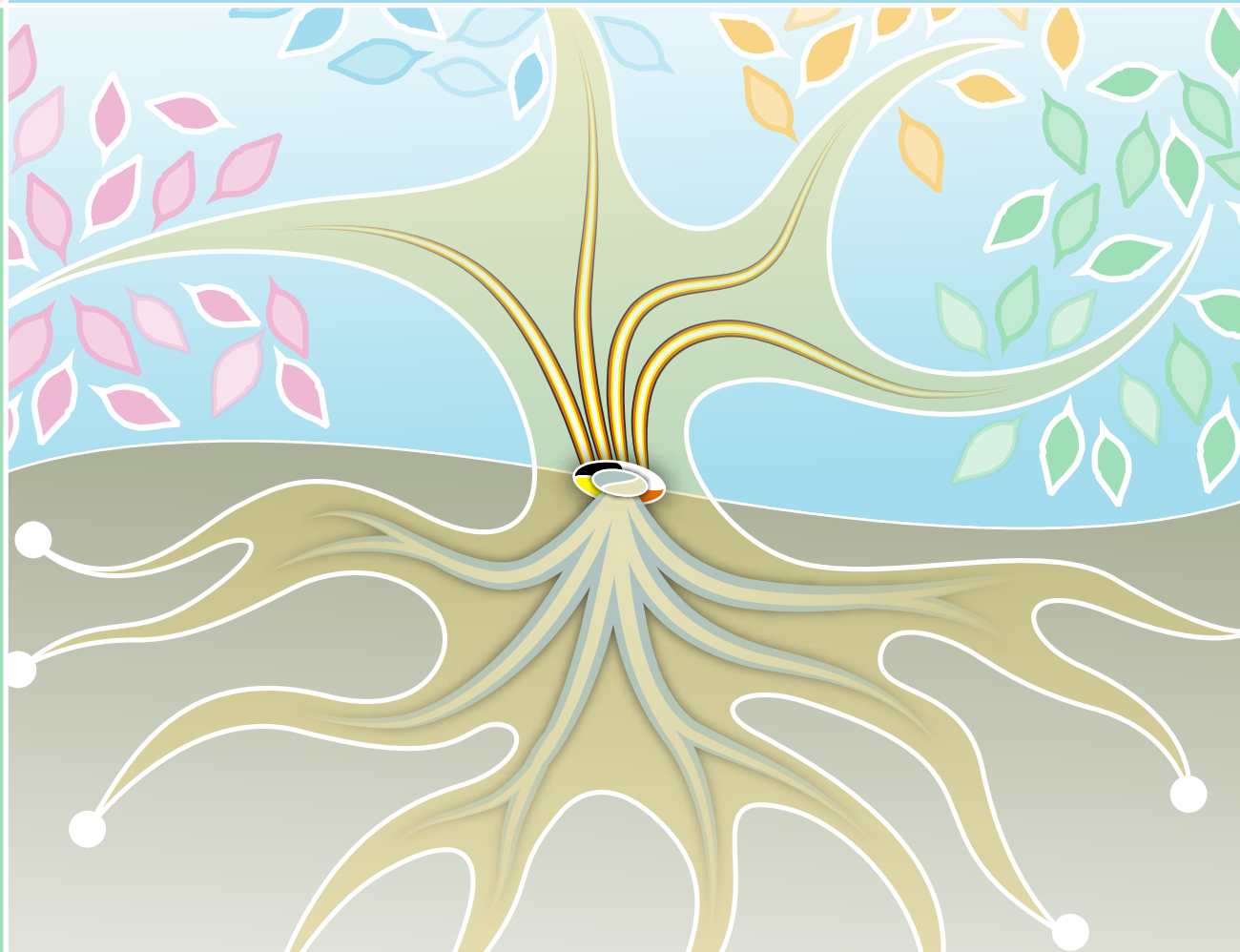


# A Study of Aboriginal Teachers' Professional Knowledge and Experience in Canadian Schools



Prepared by  
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March 10, 2010





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For the  
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# Dedication

For the Inuit, Métis and First Nations youth  
Teetering on the edge of hope and despair  
We need you

# Acknowledgements

It was my honour to meet with and learn from such remarkable, determined and inspiring teachers. I extend my deepest thanks to all involved in this study for the opportunity to conduct this research study: Noreen O’Haire, Canadian Teachers’ Federation, oversaw the project from its early conceptions to the completion of data collection, including organizing the national symposium where an early draft of research findings was presented. Upon Noreen’s retirement, Myles Ellis, Canadian Teachers’ Federation, oversaw the completion of this study. Rita Bouvier, retired Executive Assistant with the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation, who put me up to this in the first place, by inviting me to a meeting! Jo-Ann Gallant, Canadian Teachers’ Federation, who helped with, among many other administrative details, my extensive travel and accommodation arrangements.

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# Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	7
Introduction.....	11
Rationale for the Study .....	11
Background Literature .....	11
Methodology.....	17
Methodological Framework.....	17
Participants.....	17
Data collection .....	19
Instruments.....	19
Logistics .....	20
Data analysis .....	21
Findings .....	23
Perceptions of this study.....	23
Philosophy of Teaching .....	23
Motivations for Becoming a Teacher .....	23
Beliefs About What Constitutes “Effective Teachers” and “Good Teaching” .....	24
Motivations for Remaining in the Profession.....	27
Summary.....	28
Integrating Aboriginal Content and Perspectives into the Curriculum .....	29
When? Where? Who? Why? .....	29
Teaching Aboriginal Content and Perspectives.....	30
Systemic Challenges to Integrating Aboriginal Content and Perspectives .....	35
Ways to Improve the System .....	37
Summary.....	40
Racism in Education .....	41
Experiencing Racism in Education .....	41
How Participants Respond to Racism in Education.....	42
How Non-Aboriginal Colleagues and Systems Respond to Racism in Education .....	44
Appealing For Intervention and Change .....	45
Summary.....	46
Allies in Education.....	48
Behaviours of Non-Aboriginal Colleagues that Make the Work of Participants Difficult .....	48
Behaviours of Aboriginal Communities and Parents that Make the Work of Participants Difficult .....	50
Characteristics and Behaviours of Non-Aboriginal Colleagues Who Are Allies.....	51
Aboriginal Teachers as Allies.....	57
Summary.....	61
Hopes for This Study .....	62
Discussion.....	63
Recommendations.....	70
References.....	73
Appendix.....	76
Appendix A - Participating Teachers’ Organizations.....	76
Appendix B - Questions.....	77
Appendix C - A Selected Sample of the Procedures for Coding of Data.....	78





# Executive Summary

## Rationale

This qualitative study, initiated by the Canadian Teachers' Federation and its Advisory Committee on Aboriginal Education, explored the professional knowledge and experiences of Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) teachers. The rationale for the study was to address the urgent need to improve and promote Aboriginal education in public schools. This study asks the question: what can we learn from the professional knowledge and experiences of Aboriginal teachers who teach in public schools about how to better promote and support the success of Aboriginal education in public schools? The continuing goal of this study is to promote on-going dialogue and learning about Aboriginal education within teacher organizations and the broader educational community.

## Methodology

Employing a focused and critical ethnographic methodology, the study interviewed 59 Aboriginal teachers (49 female and 10 male) teaching in public schools across Canada. Participants were recruited through a process of "community nomination" (Ladson-Billing, 1994) involving the networks of the Advisory Committee on Aboriginal Education, and the provincial and territorial teacher organizations; participation was always voluntary. More than one third of the participants had twenty and more years of teaching experience, and half were graduates of Aboriginal programs, including Aboriginal teacher education programs. Overwhelmingly, the Aboriginal teachers who participated in this study valued the opportunity to be heard, to hear each other and to be part of an effort that hopes to promote change.

Nine different groups of Aboriginal teachers, each from different regions or provinces, were assembled in central locations across Canada where they participated in a full day of data collection. Data was collected through two

methods: open-ended questionnaires that teachers responded to in writing, and focus group interviews that were audiotaped. Data collection focused on four areas of Aboriginal teachers' professional knowledge and experience: philosophy of teaching; integrating Aboriginal content and perspectives into the curriculum; racism in education; and allies of Aboriginal education. Data analysis was performed using the "grounded theory method" (Miles & Huberman 1994; Charmaz, 2006).

## Findings

In this study, the ethical and moral dimensions of teaching motivated Aboriginal teachers to become teachers and to remain in the teaching profession. These Aboriginal teachers became teachers because they were committed to and valued education. They believed that good teaching involves loving and caring for their students, communicating with the whole child, helping to find their students' gifts, developing pride and self-worth in their students, and creating a safe learning environment. They emphasized the importance of all teachers working to establish respectful, positive and encouraging relationships with their students.

The Aboriginal teachers in this study remained in the profession because they valued the opportunity to teach Aboriginal culture and history, to foster responsible citizens, to challenge negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people, to serve as role models, and because they believed they could have a positive impact on children. Acknowledging the challenging circumstances that could surround their Aboriginal students and their families and communities, these teachers nonetheless they felt that there should be no "disposable" kids, and that they could not give up on their students. By positively acknowledging the lives of Aboriginal people, culture and history, the Aboriginal teachers in this study enabled Aboriginal students to become "bodies that matter" (Butler, 1993).

Eager and willing to teach Aboriginal content and perspectives, Aboriginal teachers in this study wanted to share what they knew and sought each other out to learn more. They described their culturally grounded teaching practices and how these practices positively influenced both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students. Many described how they began their teaching of Aboriginal content and perspectives by talking about their own lives and identities as Aboriginal persons. The Aboriginal teachers in this study emphasized that the integration of Aboriginal content and perspectives into public education must happen every day, for all students, in all subject areas. They sought to make that integration meaningful, in part by teaching about the everyday experiences and local life of Aboriginal people. Teaching Aboriginal culture and history was said by these teachers to give them and their Aboriginal students back their lives.

But Aboriginal teachers in this study suggested that there is still a lot more that can be done to ensure that Aboriginal content and perspectives are being taught in a meaningful way to all students. The often implicit hierarchy of school knowledge and subjects within a school system typically places a low valuation on Aboriginal subject matter, and this had negative implications on how others received both the Aboriginal teachers and the Aboriginal content and perspectives they taught in schools. Many Aboriginal teachers in the study still encountered attitudes and behaviors that suggested they do not belong in the profession, such as a questioning of their teacher education, qualifications or capabilities. This questioning occurred even as these teachers performed a number of services, such as developing Aboriginal curriculum and supporting their colleagues to teach Aboriginal content and perspectives; services that they often did willingly, and usually without compensation.

The participants in the study identified ways to support the integration of Aboriginal curriculum: meet the on-going need for schools to acquire Aboriginal curriculum and materials; adequately support Aboriginal teachers and non-Aboriginal teachers to teach Aboriginal content and perspectives; find supportive and understanding administrators and develop policies that come from the top down; accept Aboriginal teachers as fellow professionals; and hire more Aboriginal teachers and professionals.

Feeling that racism in education was typically denied, ignored and trivialized, Aboriginal teachers in this study described various ways in which they experienced racism. They reported a disregard for their qualifications and capabilities, and for Aboriginal content and perspectives; a lowering of expectations of Aboriginal students; and a discounting of the effects of colonization and oppression on Aboriginal people. Institutional responses to racism were often seen as inadequate, leaving the burden for addressing racism on Aboriginal teachers.

Aboriginal teachers in the present study interpreted the idea of who is an ally of Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal education broadly, including themselves, their families and communities, in addition to non-Aboriginal colleagues, as potential allies. They identified non-Aboriginal colleagues who were allies as being genuine, honest and trustworthy; good listeners; and persons who remained positive and open minded despite facing many challenges in education. Those non-Aboriginal colleagues who were allies also were said to show respect and support for Aboriginal people by learning to use community resources. Aboriginal teachers in the study stressed that allies seek to be a part of the local Aboriginal community without taking over; that allies avoid becoming experts about or saviours of Aboriginal people and culture. The

research participants highly valued those non-Aboriginal colleagues who accepted them as equal, helping them to succeed and offering validation for the work and perspective they as Aboriginal teachers brought to the profession.

But though allies existed, among colleagues as well as parents and community members, Aboriginal teachers in the study described the many instances where either support was absent or they experienced active resistance. Participants acknowledged there could be a lack of support—and sometimes even hostility—from Aboriginal families and community members towards the school and teachers, which contributed to sabotaging the efforts both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers were making. Instances where there was a lack of support from the Aboriginal community were felt as particularly difficult for the Aboriginal teachers.

Nonetheless, the Aboriginal teachers in this study continued to believe in the importance of being an ally—having to be an ally to become an ally—and working to support Aboriginal students and families to recover from a history of colonization. Although these Aboriginal teachers encountered a variety of adverse circumstances, such as a lack of Aboriginal curriculum materials or misunderstandings of Aboriginal education by their colleagues, or challenging social and political conditions in the schools and in the communities, or the effects of poverty on students, they remained committed to making a difference in education. They were resilient, and used that resiliency to help maintain that commitment while continuing to learn to be better teachers. In the end, these Aboriginal teachers sought to continue their own education and self-improvement, whether it was learning more about anti-racist education, or the most effective ways to be an ally, or how best to support the development of a positive identity in their students.

## Recommendations

Aboriginal teachers in the present study offered the following recommendations:

- Honor and respect the unique nature, value and contributions of Aboriginal knowledge.
- Actively seek to train, hire and retain more Aboriginal teachers.
- Require for all teachers and teachers-in-training course work and/or workshops in Aboriginal education including a focus on: contemporary Aboriginal issues; a critical perspective on the history of colonization; critical anti-racist education; and Aboriginal cultural knowledge.
- Encourage the functioning of non-Aboriginal allies to support and mentor Aboriginal teachers.
- Teach Aboriginal content throughout the school, in all subjects, every day, drawing on local resources, especially elders, when possible; while at the same time acknowledging the importance of Aboriginal education that occurs outside the school setting.
- Encourage Ministries of Education, in consultation with Aboriginal teachers, to develop and then make accessible Aboriginal curriculum.
- Seek to establish more partnerships with the local Aboriginal community and leadership to better meet the needs of Aboriginal students and teachers.
- Ensure that Aboriginal teachers are meaningful participants in all working groups, policy development initiatives and funding determinations that deal with education.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation, which initiated and supported the present research, offered a series of recommendation based on their special responsibilities in regard to supporting Aboriginal education.

- Activating networks to implement findings in the research, such as lobbying the Council of Education of Ministers; connecting teachers in First Nations' band schools with the public system; and acknowledging, through the media, the contributions of Aboriginal teachers.
- Facilitating the dissemination of and dialogue about findings in the present research, such as hosting a series of Aboriginal teachers' seminars to share information about the research; encouraging teachers' organizations to form committees of Aboriginal teachers and their allies that can educate and advocate on the basis of the research findings; and encouraging official presentations of research findings to Ministers of Education, school board associations and school superintendents.

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# Introduction

## Rationale for the Study

The aim of this study is to explore the professional knowledge and experience of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis teachers, collectively referred to as Aboriginal teachers. The Canadian Teachers' Federation and its Advisory Committee on Aboriginal Education initiated the study. Over a period of several years, discussions within that Advisory Committee identified the need to do research on Aboriginal teachers in the public school system, culminating in a meeting in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan on June 16, 2006, at which time the specific rationale for such research was delineated.

The rationale for that research on Aboriginal teachers consisted of four points; it is these four points that have guided the present study. First, schools continue to fail Aboriginal students, so there is an urgent need to improve and promote Aboriginal education in public schools. Second, there should be a focus on Aboriginal teachers' professional knowledge and experience—their working lives and their personal and practical professional knowledge—because this is an important source of data about how to improve Aboriginal education. Third, there is a need for a national perspective on Aboriginal teachers in order to help develop a national strategy to promote Aboriginal education; at present only regional studies exist. And fourth, the Canadian Teachers' Federation, with its commitment to diversity and social justice, must play a role to engender a better understanding of its Aboriginal teachers, and as a result, hopefully develop recommendations for improving Aboriginal education; hence the Federation's support of the present research.

## Background Literature

The present study emerges from a well-documented and enduring crisis in public education, namely the failure of schools to provide an adequate education for Aboriginal students (Hawthorne, 1967; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). For example, when integration of Aboriginal students into public schools began in the early 1960s, Aboriginal students were often "ridiculed and socially isolated" (Hawthorne, 1967, p. 136) and they reported, "feeling stupid all the time and not belonging" (Hawthorne, 1967, p. 140). Into the 1990s Aboriginal students continued to feel like outsiders (Wilson, 1991). In the mid-1990s the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) reported that not much had changed in regards to Aboriginal students succeeding in public schools.

Evidence of the failure of schools to work effectively, even adequately, with Aboriginal students continues to mount. Aboriginal students report negative experiences in public schools, including feeling socially marginalized and isolated, having too few Aboriginal teachers and little Aboriginal content and perspectives (Bennett, 2002; First Nations Education Steering Committee Society; 1997; Silver, Mallet, Greene & Simard, 2002; St. Denis & Hampton, 2002; Battiste, 2005). A recent study confirms "across Canada, high school completion rates are dramatically lower for Aboriginal people than for non-Aboriginal people Aboriginal students" (CCL, 2008, p. 2). Aboriginal students and youth report that negative experiences did not occur only in schools, but that they also struggle to find a place to belong in urban centers (McKay, 2005; Friedel, 2009). There is therefore an urgent need to improve and promote Aboriginal education in public schools.

In seeking to understand how to improve Aboriginal education, and in particular to

understand the strengths and challenges of Aboriginal teachers as they try to promote Aboriginal education in public schools, the present study explores the professional knowledge and experience of Aboriginal teachers who work in public schools. Although Aboriginal teachers engage in tasks often particularly specific to themselves such as supporting Aboriginal education (St. Denis, Bouvier & Battiste, 1998), they still face many of the same challenges faced by all teachers. Therefore the research literature on teachers' professional knowledge and experience is relevant to Aboriginal teachers. There is also some literature that discusses the lives and work of racialized minority teachers that is specifically pertinent to the lives and work of Aboriginal teachers, such as being accepted as teachers and feeling overwhelmed with the challenges of supporting minority children in public schools (e.g. Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1994; Henry, 1992; Lynn, 2002; Quirocho, 2000; Thiessen, Bascia & Goodson, 1996).

Until the 1990s "focusing on teachers' lives and telling their stories was not thought of as serious scholarship" (Bullough, 2008, p.11). In part, this lack of attention towards teachers' lives and knowledge, resulted in researchers observing that for the most part "teaching is an unexamined" life (Floden & Huberman, 1989, p. 458). In the last two decades, however, the research literature has shifted toward the clear valuation of teachers' lives and their professional knowledge and experiences. For example, Goodson (1992) suggested that researchers have an obligation "to assure that teachers' voice is heard, heard loudly, heard articulately" (Goodson, 1992, p. 112).

Throughout the 1990's, non-Aboriginal researchers began exploring the significance of non-Aboriginal teachers' professional lives, knowledge and experience (e.g. Beattie, 1995; Ben-Peretz, 1995; Clandinin and Connelly, 1995; Witherell & Noddings,

1991), and that line of research continue through a variety of foci (e.g. Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Bullough, 2008; Day, 2008; Elbaz-Luwich, 2007; Kelchtermans, 2008). In Saskatchewan, in the late 1990s, research began to explore Aboriginal teachers' professional experience and knowledge (Friesen & Orr, 1996; Legare, Pete-Willet, Ward, Wason-Ellam & Williamson, 1998; McNinch, 1994; Melnechenko & Horsman, 1998; St. Denis, Bouvier & Battiste, 1998; St. Denis, 2002). Others studies have explored the work and lives of Aboriginal teachers in northern contexts (Blesse, 1997), British Columbia (Stewart, 2005), and more recently Saskatchewan and Manitoba (Wotherspoon, 2008).

Research on teachers' professional lives and work has focused on varied themes. Sometimes research has studied teachers' professional identity, with an emphasis on either the formation of teacher identity, characteristics of teacher identity or teacher's stories as sources of identity formation (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Research has also explored teachers' life cycle or life-phase (Bullough, 2008; Huberman, 1989). Some studies have dealt with "teachers' perception of aspects of their professional identity, such as the subject they teach, their relationship with students, and interactions with colleagues" (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004, p. 115). Other research has concentrated on a "restricted part of teachers' professional lives—e.g. their decisions to go on teaching or their willingness to make an instructional change" (Floden & Huberman, 1989, p. 455). Still other studies appear to be exploring teachers' personal practical knowledge (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Clandinin & Connelly, 1988; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). Other themes and issues that have been researched include: teachers' curriculum stories; the interaction of knowledge and context; teachers' stories of change; and stories of diversity in teaching (Elbaz-Luwich, 2007). More recently, studies of teachers

lives' and work have focused on the impact of educational reforms—in particular, market-driven policies and practices—on teachers' morale, commitment, resiliency and ability to care (Day, 2008; Jephcote & Salisbury, 2009; O'Connor, 2008; Wotherspoon, 2008).

Building on these studies of teachers' professional lives, knowledge and work, the present study explores more specifically Aboriginal teachers' professional knowledge and experience of promoting Aboriginal education in public schools. This study asks the question: what can we learn from the professional knowledge and experiences of Aboriginal teachers who teach in public schools about how to better promote and support the success of Aboriginal education in public schools? To answer this question, the present study focuses on Aboriginal teachers' professional knowledge and experience in four areas: their philosophy of teaching; their efforts to integrate Aboriginal content and perspectives into the curriculum; their experiences of racism in education; and their relationships with allies of Aboriginal education.

In an effort to establish a basis for describing the kind of professional knowledge teachers possessed and also to be able to assess teachers as knowledgeable, Shulman (1986) distinguished between three categories of teacher knowledge: subject matter content knowledge; pedagogical content knowledge; and curricular knowledge. But Shulman's categories of teachers' knowledge were criticized because they were regarded as "ignoring almost everything that is specifically moral, emotional and contextual about teaching" (Sockett, 1987 in Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 8/9). As well, others have also noted that Shulman's categories of teachers' knowledge did not acknowledge the political dimensions of knowledge, ignoring the why, the how and what of teaching (Gordon, 1995 in Lynn, 2002).

These critiques of Shulman's categories, in particular the need to include the moral, emotional and political dimensions of knowledge, were helpful in defining the focus of the present study. This broadening of teachers' knowledge to include the moral, emotional and political dimensions is important for this study of Aboriginal teachers' work because teachers of culturally diverse backgrounds tend to go "against social and political forces" (Quiocho, 2000, p. 17).

Another approach to broadening the concept of teachers' knowledge emphasized the importance of experience, and especially personal, practical experience in developing and shaping teachers' professional knowledge. Brown and McIntyre (1993) stated that "The reliance on experience, that was once seen as a failing of teachers, is here regarded as central to their expertise and in its own way, a source of valid theory, rather than theory's opposite or enemy" (Brown and McIntyre, 1993 in Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996, p. 11). Clandinin and Connelly (1988, 1995) have been especially important in bringing credibility to teachers' experience; they write about the concept of "personal practical knowledge" that refers to "the existence of teacher knowledge which is practical, experiential and shaped by a teacher's purpose and values" (Clandinin, 1986, p. 4). "Personal practical knowledge is a term designed to capture the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, p. 25). Others have added a reflective component to the generation of teachers' practical personal knowledge, which is gained from "the fruit of significant learning through experience ...[and] from reflection in and on them" (Butt & Raymond, 1989, p. 406). By acknowledging that teachers are also adult learners, the point has been made that we can also learn from the "knowledge that evolves through teachers' interaction with, and experience of,

the classroom, of the school, and the broader educational context” (Butt & Raymond, 1989, p. 406).

What is important for the present study in these elaborations of teachers’ knowledge is the value placed on the practical experience that teachers have about their teaching, and the recognition of that experience as constituting knowledge. The present study explores similar sites of knowledge and experience, as it examines Aboriginal teachers’ practical professional knowledge and experience of the following: the classroom; curriculum matters, especially as they pertain to Aboriginal education; the political climate of their teaching, and especially their experiences of racism; and the nature of their relationships with students, community and colleagues, and especially the presence or absence of allies.

Research has also noted the importance of teachers’ stories to convey their knowledge and experience (e.g. Bullough, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Emphasizing that teachers’ experiential knowledge is often communicated through teaching stories, Elbaz-Luwiwch (2007) defines teachers’ knowledge as that which is developed out of the “stories teachers tell about their work and their dialogue with one another, with pupils, with teaching materials, and with themselves” (p. 359). The present study draws upon these kinds of teachers’ stories as a source of data about Aboriginal teachers’ experiential knowledge.

Since this study explores Aboriginal teachers’ professional knowledge and experience, a discussion of the concept “professional” would also be helpful. Goodson & Hargreaves (1996) provide informative discussions about the concept of professional and teachers as professionals. They make a distinction between professionalization, those efforts focused on “enhancing the interests of

an occupational group” (p. 4), and professionalism, “which defines and articulates the quality and character of people’s actions within that group” (p. 4). Though they conclude that “what counts as professional knowledge and professional action in teaching is open to many different interpretations” (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996, p.4), they propose the concept of the “practical professional” as a way both to acknowledge teachers’ knowledge, and

To accord dignity and status to the practical knowledge and judgment that people have of their own work. . . . The routine and situated knowledge that teachers have of curriculum materials and development, subject matter, teaching strategies, the classroom milieu, parents, and so forth—these are the sorts of phenomena that make up the substance of teachers’ personal practical knowledge or craft knowledge (Brown and McIntyre, 1993 in Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996, p.11/12).

Others, in stressing the teacher as a professional based on their expert knowledge of curricular matters, have expanded the notion of curriculum to include social, emotional and moral dimensions. For example, Beijaard, Verloop and Vermont state:

Teachers derive their professional identity from (mostly a combination of) the ways they see themselves as subject matter experts [emphasis on subject matter knowledge], pedagogical experts [emphasizes knowledge and skills to support students’ social, emotional and moral development], and didactical experts [emphasizes knowledge and skill of planning, executing and evaluating teaching and learning] (2000, p.751).

Research has also stressed another dimension of the teacher as professional, namely the



relationships teachers have with others. Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004), for example, write that in terms of teachers as professionals,

“What counts as ‘professional’, then, is related to the way in which teachers relate to other people (students, colleagues, parents) and the responsibilities, attitudes, and behaviors they adopt as well as the knowledge they use which are, more or less, outside themselves” (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004, p.125).

The present study builds on the literature about the professional aspects of teachers’ knowledge and experience by focusing on Aboriginal curricular issues and, in particular, the challenges and successes Aboriginal teachers face in attempting to implement Aboriginal perspectives and content into the curriculum. These attempts are often conveyed in stories of change and diversity. The present study also follows the lead in the literature by expanding the concept of curricular expertise to include the nature and quality of the relationships Aboriginal teachers had with themselves, and their students and colleagues. In particular, the present study examines the qualities and characteristic of allies, especially non-Aboriginal allies who Aboriginal teachers find supportive of themselves, of Aboriginal students, and of Aboriginal education in general.

Gathering data from Aboriginal teachers’ about their professional knowledge and experience, especially in regards to issues of Aboriginal education, could offer a valuable source of ideas and strategies for the improvement of Aboriginal education, and thereby of education in general. Aboriginal teachers “have been expected to play a key role in the process of educational transformation” (Wotherspoon, 2008, p. 396). As Bullough (2008) claims, focusing on the personal narratives, stories and experiences in teaching from the perspective of teachers, enables us

To open for careful consideration how and why teachers think and act as they do, the influences of their thinking and acting on themselves and on their students, and to open for consideration alternative possibilities, offering potential for solidarity and emulation (p. 12).



# Methodology

## Methodological Framework

The present research study employs the qualitative methodology of focused and critical ethnography to explore and describe the professional knowledge and experience of Aboriginal teachers in Canadian publicly funded schools. Ethnography “involves the exploration of a cultural group in a bid to understand, discover, describe, and interpret a way of life from the point of view of its participants” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 118). The practice of ethnographic research has expanded. Whereas ethnography once meant engaging in “fieldwork”, the range of ethnographic data collection techniques has expanded so that data collection may now “omit fieldwork and consist only of interviews” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 53). Ethnographic interviews may occur “with one or more informants, [they] may also include structured questionnaires” (Punch, 2005, p. 153).

The “focused” aspect of the present study’s approach sought to describe how a group of people that “share some feature or features” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 53) “see their own actions, others’ actions and the context” (Punch, 2005, p. 150). In the present study, Aboriginal teachers were invited to describe their professional knowledge and experience in an educational context that includes students, other teachers and personnel, as well as curriculum materials. The ethnography employed in this research is described as “focused”, because, although the “participants may not know each other,” the research does focus on Aboriginal teachers’ “common behaviours and experiences resulting from their shared features” (Morse & Richards 2002, p. 53). Those teachers who participated in the study were brought together based on a shared experience of being an Aboriginal person involved in education through the teaching profession.

The “critical” aspect of this ethnographic research is also important. We already know from existing research that Aboriginal teachers in public schools are faced with many challenges, including being “marginalized” (Legare, Pete-Willet, Ward, Wason-Ellam & Williamson, 1998; Stewart, 2005). In a bid to open up alternate, more liberating possibilities, critical ethnography adds a political agenda of exposing inequitable, unjust, or repressive influences that are acting on “marginalized” cultural groups. “Critical ethnography works toward conscientization, empowerment, and liberation of the ‘marginalized’ through in-depth critical analysis of underlying social fabrics” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 144). The present study fits within a “critical: tradition because it “attempts to contextualize the current situation in a larger socio-historic framework that offers and encourages others to engage in critical reflection” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 145). In offering Aboriginal teachers an opportunity to reflect on their experiences in education, this research seeks to open liberating possibilities by, for example, exploring Aboriginal teachers’ experiences with educational allies as they work together for Aboriginal education and social justice.

The present study has much in common with the methodology of narrative inquiry that has become one of the more common methodologies through which researchers have studied teachers’ stories and experiences (Elbaz-Luwiwich, 2007). As with the narrative inquiry approach to research on teachers, the present study also seeks to use “open-ended qualitative interviews, close and attentive listening to the voices of teachers, the development of grounded understanding from the texts of the interviews themselves, and attention to teachers’ practical knowledge” (Elbaz-Luwiwch, 2007, p. 360).

## Participants

Participants for this study were recruited through the process of “community nomination” (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The recruitment process occurred

through the network of provincial and territorial teachers' organizations (Appendix A), and the group of Aboriginal teachers who are members of the National Advisory Committee on Aboriginal Education for the Canadian Teachers' Federation. That recruitment process relied on the knowledge that provincial and territorial teacher organizations have of Aboriginal teachers in their respective organizations. As Ladson-Billings explains, recruiting participants through community nomination means that "researchers rely upon community members and community-sanctioned vehicles in order to judge people, places, and things within their own settings" (1994, p. 147). Actual participation for all teachers was voluntary. This research proposal was submitted for review by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board and was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds (Beh # 07-50).

The Aboriginal teachers who participated in the present study met the following three criteria: First, teachers were self-identified as Aboriginal (either First Nations, Métis or Inuit) or of Aboriginal ancestry; second, these Aboriginal teachers had to have five or more years of teaching experience in the middle grades (Grades 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8) as these are the grades when Aboriginal content becomes a requirement in the various provincial and territorial curricula. Third, a substantial amount of participants' teaching experience should have been in school contexts that were clearly considered to have a presence of Aboriginal students, although these students may not necessarily have constituted a numerical majority.

These three criteria were used in an effort to establish what Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, p.288) claim is important, namely, "homogeneity of background in the required area." At the same time, again following the recommendation of Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, p. 288), it was decided to invite "members [who] are relative strangers

rather than friends." Although in some regions of Canada, the number of Aboriginal teachers may be small enough that many are aware of each other, and although they may share similar experiences, they also may not necessarily be "friends".

A total of fifty-nine Aboriginal teachers participated in the research; forty-nine were female and ten were male. Their years of teaching experience ranged from five to thirty, with over a third of the teachers in the study having twenty or more years of teaching experience, and another third of the teachers having ten or more years of teaching experience. The number of teachers who participated by province, territory or region was as follows: Alberta (5); British Columbia (6); Manitoba (10); New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, P.E.I, Labrador (6); Northwest Territories (10); Nunavut (7); Ontario (4); Saskatchewan (7); and Yukon (4). Therefore a third of the teachers taught in northern Canada, including the Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut and Labrador.

Half of the participants identified themselves as graduates of Aboriginal programs, including Aboriginal Teacher Education programs. Ten participants were either enrolled in or had completed postgraduate education, such as a master's degree, while several participants reported having a second undergraduate degree in addition to their degree in education. As well, several teachers reported working in schools as teacher associates and/or language and cultural advisors and/or educational assistants prior to obtaining their teaching degrees and certification.

## Data collection

### Instruments

The present research focused on four areas of inquiry to gather data about Aboriginal teachers' professional knowledge and experience: 1) philosophy of education; 2) integration of Aboriginal content and perspectives into the curriculum; 3) experiences of racism; and 4) relationships with allies. Data was collected through two methods: 1) open-ended questionnaires that teachers responded to in writing, and 2) focus group interviews that were tape-recorded. Data on philosophy of education and racism were collected through the questionnaires, while data on Aboriginal curriculum and allies were collected through the focus group interviews (see Appendix B for interview and focus group protocols).

The rationale for administering a questionnaire with a limited number of open-ended questions was to provide an opportunity to engage Aboriginal teachers in reflective practice in regards to their lives as teachers. Open-ended questions are one way to "catch the authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour ... the hallmarks of qualitative data" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 255). Group interviews are important not only because they are economical, but also they can "generate a wider range of responses than in individual interviews" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 287). A group interview is one way in which the problem of teacher isolation can be broken down, at least for that moment, with that group of teachers. The focus group interviews gave teachers an opportunity to share ideas and offer strategies to each other about many issues they encountered as teachers. The study employed both individual and group setting for data collection because "understanding teaching requires that we pay attention to teachers both as individuals and as a group, listening to their voices and the stories they tell about their work and their lives" (Elbaz-Luwivch, 2007, p. 359).

Data on the participants' teaching philosophies were gathered individually by an open-ended questionnaire. A teacher's beliefs, values and philosophy about teaching provide the foundation for the many decisions teachers make about relating to children, curriculum and teaching strategies. In this part of the data collection, teachers were provided the opportunity to reflect privately on their own practice. Many teachers remarked on the value of this initial phase of the data collection, commenting it gave them a way to ground the next set of discussions and reflections about other aspects of their teaching knowledge and experience.

Data on the participants' views on Aboriginal curriculum were gathered in a group setting during a focus group interview. The discussions about Aboriginal curriculum were selected for a group discussion to offer Aboriginal teachers the opportunity to share and hear each other describe their knowledge and experience about teaching Aboriginal curriculum. This focus group method of collecting data about Aboriginal curriculum served in a limited way as a professional development opportunity for these teachers. A sharing of web sites and titles of materials and curriculum occurred spontaneously through that group process of collecting data.

Data on participants' experiences of racism were gathered individually through an open-ended questionnaire. Because discussions of racism often evoke strong emotions and controversial opinions and understandings, this topic was selected as an issue to be reflected on privately and in writing. Nonetheless, the issue was often raised in other areas of the research, especially in discussions about curriculum and allies.

Data on participants' experiences of allies were gathered in a group setting, through a focus group interview. The topic of allies was selected for group discussion because this again would provide an

opportunity for Aboriginal teachers to share their experiences with each other in way that had the potential of contributing to their own professional development. The identification of allies and the nurturing of relationships with allies were critical to supporting and promoting the work these Aboriginal teachers did in schools.

### **Logistics**

The researcher travelled to the specific province or territory where the teachers were working to collect the data. Provincial and territorial teachers' organizations provided the organizational and administrative support that brought the teachers to the data collection location, which was either a hotel or teachers' organization boardroom. This procedure for data collection was replicated in each province and territory. All data were collected in a confidential and anonymous manner, and will remain both confidential and anonymous.

All teachers participated in one full day of data collection. During this day, each teacher filled out four questionnaires and participated in two focus group interviews with fellow teachers from their province or territory. There were a total nine groups that ranged in size from four to ten teachers.

The specific procedure for data collection was as follows. During the first phase of the data collection, teacher participants responded to opening/ demographic questions (see Appendix B) that helped them to get to know each other. In the second phase of data collection, participants responded individually and in writing to an open-ended questionnaire on their teaching philosophy (see Appendix B). Teachers were given one hour to complete this first part

After a morning coffee break, the third phase of data collection began. Teachers participated in a focus group interview on curriculum (see Appendix B). Approximately one hour and forty-five minutes was allocated for this focus group interview that

was audio taped. After a lunch break, the fourth phase of data collection began in which participants responded individually and in writing to a questionnaire on the issue of racism (see Appendix B). Once again, teachers were given one hour to complete this questionnaire and once again they responded privately and in writing.

In the fifth phase of data collection, which began after the afternoon coffee break, these same teachers participated in a focus group interview on allies of Aboriginal teachers (see Appendix B). Once again, approximately one hour and forty-five minutes was allocated for this focus group interview, and it too was audio taped.

In the sixth and concluding phase of data collection, teachers were asked to respond to three concluding questions in regards to the research project (see Appendix B). The purpose of this last phase of data collection was to provide participants an opportunity to bring closure to the day by reflecting on their participation, and to raise issues that may inform future research.

Part of what can happen in the interactive qualitative research process that characterized the present research is the generation of more questions, and on several occasions this occurred. One example is particularly poignant. The researcher asked one group of teachers towards the end of a long day, 'how are you as Aboriginal teachers the same or different from your non-Aboriginal colleagues?' One Aboriginal teacher aptly responded, "That's a nine o'clock question, not a four o'clock question!" (48). In other words, this teacher was suggesting that it was an important question to ask, a question that one might need all day to answer, and if not all day, at least the kind of refreshed mind and body that one could expect at nine o'clock in the morning.

## Data analysis

The data collected in the present study, namely Aboriginal teachers' stories and descriptions of their professional knowledge and experience, present a particular challenge for analysis. While it can be argued that such data, being especially valued because they are the personal and personally validated experiences of teachers, could stand on their own, offering meaning primarily through face validity, it can also be argued that for the full meaning of such data to be understood, they must be analyzed and interpreted. Kelchtermans (2008), for example, cautions against the inclination to let teachers' stories and experience "stand on their own, without the critical analysis that looks for meaning, understanding, and relevance beyond the story per se" (p. 29).

In the present study, Aboriginal teachers' stories and descriptions will be analyzed and interpreted in order to bring forth a fuller understanding of those data. The method of data analysis used, the "grounded theory method" (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Charmers, 2006), was chosen because it is generally acknowledged as the foremost method for stressing both a respect for the integrity of the data in its initial formulation, and a need to analyze and interpret those data (Charmers, 2006; Punch, 2005; Wellington, 2000). For example, the grounded theory method emphasizes that categories of data analysis be drawn from and remain connected to the data in its original construction and formulation.

Two types of qualitative data were generated in this study. The data collected through teachers' written response was typed up verbatim, and the data collected through audiotape was transcribed verbatim. These qualitative data were analyzed using the "grounded theory method," a process of data analysis described by Miles and Huberman (1994) and other qualitative researchers who draw

on Miles and Huberman's practices (Charmaz, 2006; Punch, 2005; Wellington, 2000). Two main stages of data analysis were employed: data reduction, and the drawing and verification of conclusions. In turn, these two stages each involved three operations: coding; memoing and the development of themes.

Beginning with a process of data reduction, data were collated, summarized, coded and sorted into emerging themes, clusters and categories (Wellington, 2000). Two types of coding were used: initial and focused. "Initial coding" involved noting words that indicated actions, by conducting a line-by-line and segment-by-segment analysis of the data. "Focused coding" involved synthesizing and explaining larger segments of data, using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes, and identifying moments or processes or actions. In the second and final stage of drawing and verification of conclusions, themes, patterns and regularities were identified through comparing and contrasting units of data. Appendix C presents a selected sample of two aspects of this grounded theory data analysis process—the initial and focused coding—to illustrate the nature and functioning of the process in general.

By following the grounded theory process of data analysis, a description eventually emerged of the participants' and collective beliefs and their perceptions and interpretations of their teaching practices and experiences. The entire data analysis process was an extremely labour-intensive effort, requiring many levels and stages of returning to the original data in an effort to refine categories and themes, while remaining sensitive to teachers' actual statements.

In the discussion of findings, quotes from individual teachers in the study are used to illustrate and highlight general themes and issues that emerge from the data from all the teachers in the study.

This use of individual quotes follows “grounded theory method” principles of data analysis, interpretation and presentation; for example, “individual stories can be generalized by seeing them as representative of particular groups” (Floden & Huberman, 1989, p. 459).

Preliminary findings from the present study were first presented by the researcher at a symposium attended by Aboriginal teachers and staff members of Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF) and member organizations. This symposium, which was planned as part of the original research design, was organized and facilitated by the CTF and was held in Saskatoon, SK, on May 9 and 10, 2008. After hearing the researcher’s presentation, CTF members hosted small round table discussions to discuss the findings and to suggest recommendations. These discussions and suggestions were recorded on flip chart paper by volunteers in the groups and were later typed up by CTF staff. A preliminary list of recommendations based on those discussions was then sent to the researcher to be used to help generate recommendations for the final research report.

Later when a draft of the research report was written, members of the Aboriginal Education Advisory Group of the CTF and various staff members were able to provide oral feedback that was helpful in making final revisions of the report. As well, the final version of the report benefited from an intensive review of a draft by the Canadian Council on Learning.

Although there may have been the occasional Aboriginal person in Canada who prior to the 1970’s was able to enter the teaching profession, it was only after the policy of Indian Control of Indian Education (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972)



# Findings

calling for programs to train Aboriginal teachers, that a significant number of Aboriginal people were able to enter the teaching profession. Some of the Aboriginal teachers participating in this present research were among the first people enrolled in these teacher training programs; thus, they entered this study with well over twenty-five years of teaching experience.

## Perceptions of this study

Aboriginal teachers<sup>1</sup> who participated in the present study valued the opportunity to be heard and to learn from each other. One teacher stated, “I feel so humble by all the knowledge that’s in the room. I always learn something and take something back to my classroom, for my professional development, and of course, the kids are the beneficiaries of that” (46)<sup>2</sup>. Participants also believed that Aboriginal teachers, “have plenty of ideas that can be beneficial to non-Aboriginal teachers” (49). One Aboriginal teacher said:

You would think that non-Aboriginal teachers could have said sooner, “This is the wrong way,” “can we do this any other way?” Change could have happened a long time ago. This research project is something that I’m really quite excited about. I would like to see the change happening while I’m still here. (42)

Participants in this research were particularly excited about the Canada-wide scope of this study, believing this would help change to come about. One Aboriginal teacher expressed it this way:

I think one of the successes we have now is that we are actually talking about our work right now we are talking about Aboriginal education and trying to put some kind of handle on it nationwide and the support of the Canadian Teacher’s Federation really helps, so I think that’s a positive. (48)

## Philosophy of Teaching

Aboriginal teachers who participated in this study were invited to reflect upon their own philosophies of teaching. As Garrison (1997) suggests, by joining the ideas of “teaching” and “philosophy”, we can find a way to approach exploring teachers’ own philosophy. Garrison maintains that, “Good teaching requires a complete philosophy because it involves the three great questions of life: what is life (or teaching)? How should we live (or teach)? What does life (or teaching) mean?” (1997, p. ). In this study, teacher participants were invited to reflect on their own thinking about good teaching practices, about what constitutes an effective teacher, and about their motivations for becoming and remaining in the teaching profession. In the process of responding to these three areas of inquiry, teacher participants were able to express their values and beliefs about teaching and learning, and what they believed to be the best way to relate to their students, the curriculum and their classroom environments.

## Motivations for Becoming a Teacher

Participants were asked to describe their motivations for becoming a teacher. They described having a passion and love for the profession. One Aboriginal teacher stated, “I believe in what I do with a passion,”

- 1 The Aboriginal teachers in the present study will be referred to variously as participants, research participants, teacher participants, Aboriginal teachers in this study or these teachers. The terms non-Aboriginal teachers or non-Aboriginal colleagues will be used to refer those non-Aboriginal teachers or colleagues who were talked about by research participants.
- 2 Each group of teachers and individual participants was assigned a number. Groups were assigned a number from 41-49. With the written data each member in a group was also assigned a number. For example, group 42 had 6 participants, so each participant was assigned a number 42-1, 42-2 etc.

(43-3); another expressed “a love of teaching and compassion for transferring knowledge to young students” (41-6). Some teachers believed teaching to be their “calling” (43-2), and something they “wanted to do all their lives” (44-5). As one teacher stated, it was “an honour” to be a teacher (48-8).

Participants were also motivated by the need to encourage and support Aboriginal students. They believed that “education is the buffalo for Aboriginal students” (46-1). Participants understood the importance of promoting the value of education, realizing the potential that a good education has for the future of Aboriginal students and their communities. Believing that “Education and learning is a night passage into a sense of wonderment and a stepping stone into a more secure socio-economic lifestyle” (48-1), one teacher went on to affirm that “students have a right to an education” (48-1).

### **Beliefs About What Constitutes “Effective Teachers” and “Good Teaching”**

Aboriginal teachers in this study described effective teachers as displaying a variety of qualities, including: an open and questioning mind; patience; dedication, and a sense of humor (e.g. 41-2; 47-2), as well as being organized and prepared (e.g. 42-3; 43-1; 44-1). Participants often highlighted the notion that effective teachers must have open and questioning minds by declaring the importance of teachers having a “love of learning” (e.g. 41-2; 49-3). For example, effective teachers were seen as “not afraid to learn” (47-4), and “not afraid to take risks or admit when they make mistakes or simply don’t know” (45-2). Further, participants said that effective teachers acknowledge that, in the enterprise of education, they too are learners, being “as much a student as an effective practitioner” (44-4). What was required was being open “to cultivating new ideas” (48-1) and having a commitment to a “process of life-long learning” (e.g. 44-3; 45-2).

Participants explained that effective teachers “go beyond the call of duty” (41-1); giving of themselves so they can “pass on knowledge, history and experience beyond the curriculum or academics he or she teaches” (43-3). As well, effective teachers display patience. For example, one teacher wrote, “Patience seems a no-brainer, but some teachers often sacrifice patience for their own feelings, be it frustration or exhaustion. Patience must be coupled with caring and respect” (47-2). Participants also suggested that dedication and patience need spontaneity and humour to enliven teaching; effective teachers were said to be dedicated, but also excited, flexible and spontaneous (e.g. 42-1; 45-2; 41-3; 43-4; 44-5).

The needs of students figured most prominently in participants’ descriptions of good teaching and effective teachers. Participants commented extensively about the importance and quality of their own relationship with students, stressing that effective teachers seek to establish positive relations with their students, while employing a variety of teaching methods that are sensitive to the needs of their students (e.g. 41-2; 45-1).

Participants described the importance of respect as the foundation of teaching and learning: “my teaching philosophy is all about respect” (49-3); the key to success in teaching requires “respecting and honouring all students” (43-2). These teachers understood that respecting the child “often enough creates a mutual respect and trust” (46-5). One teacher discussed how respect helps her deal with so-called “difficult” children:

Respect the child and the child will respect you. I’ve had teachers ask me how I’m able to handle a particular ‘difficult’ child. I reply that you listen to the student rather than assuming the worst. Let the student shout in anger, cry if in pain, or stay silent when asked to talk. When everything is said and

done, the students tend to be easier to handle (49-3).

Although participants were also aware that some students have not learned the value of respect, they nonetheless emphasized the importance of teaching and learning respect. As one Aboriginal teacher explained, “Certainly in the Native culture respect is very big but I’m finding that our students today are losing this virtue. ... If kids are respectful, this also prepares them for the real world” (46-5).

Good teaching, participants stressed, involves loving and caring for their students and not giving up on them. For example, one teacher expressed, “feeling a love [for students] that one cannot put into words” (48-8). Caring for their students means being “good listeners” (42-7; 44-2), and being “approachable at any time for advice, and not showing an ‘it’s my break leave me alone’ attitude” (41-1). Participants described trying to be a person who students “feel comfortable coming to talk to about their personal issues” (44-1), while referring students to a counsellor or elder when appropriate (44-1). Realizing that they are often working with lots of kids who “sell themselves short” (44-4), participants believed it is important for all kids to “experience success” (46-3), “to the best of their ability” (44-1). “No one should be left behind” (49-1) because “there are no disposable kids” (48-6) and we cannot “give up on them” (44-4).

Building upon a basic aspect of an Aboriginal worldview, teacher participants emphasized the importance of getting to know and communicating with the whole child—physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. For example, they acknowledged “in order to move forward, one must become a part of our students’ lives, where they are, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually” (45-3). The imperative to be sensitive to each child’s unique needs and potential includes applying insights from traditional Aboriginal teachings, such

as fostering four different types of relationships: “with oneself, with others, with the land, and with the spiritual world” (41-4). Participants said that effective teachers acknowledge that their work with students involves far more than teaching basic academics: “I am teaching the academics, but I’m also touching the child’s spirit, in order and to help them believe in their abilities, and to increase their self-esteem” (46-3).

Highlighting the importance of being sensitive to the lives of students, participants emphasized seeking to understand their students’ strengths, gifts and challenges. They believed that effective teachers must be empathic with their students (e.g. 43-3; 45-3), and seek to know “who their students are and where they come from” (41-5). They seek to understand “individual student needs” (46-1) by maintaining a “respect for diversity” (44-2) both in terms of those needs, and in terms of using appropriate, yet diverse methods of teaching, “adjusting goals so that they are achievable goals for each child” (44-2). In this regard effective teachers must have courage, “courage to work with students from where they are at and bring them forward” (41-2) because “each student is an individual with specific strengths” (44-5). The teacher’s job is to “search for and find the gift each student brings to his/her learning” (48-2). Participants believed that “Family, culture, poverty or not, domestic abuse or not, father or not, whether they’ve eaten or not, we accept and cherish all aspects of the child and advocate for them whenever necessary” (47-2).

Good teaching, participants stated, also involves helping to develop pride and self-worth in their students. These teachers sought to provide “students with the tools for self-learning” (41-6), “empowering them with a desire to continue learning” (41-3), by promoting in students “a sense of pride” (44-3), “feelings of self-worth and

purpose" (48-10), and "academic and personal confidence" (48-3). In general, participants identified the importance of "promoting positive thinking" in the classroom (44-3). Developing this sense of pride and feelings of self-worth was seen as especially important for Aboriginal students:

We must inspire First Nations learners to become "confident" members of society; to realize they have a rightful place in the world; to encourage hope for a good future; to foster pride in who they are, not only as First Nations people but also as part of the larger picture, knocking down barriers to oppressions and becoming globally aware (48-3).

Participants believed that an essential aspect of promoting their students' self worth and confidence is to set clear and high expectations for them: "High expectations when employed with effective practices, generates a sense of accountability that impacts students to become responsible, and develop a feeling of self-worth" (48-1). They pointed out that such clear and high expectations can lead students to work hard, and that in turn can prepare students for their lives after school (46-5). Expectations must be clear so that students can be reminded of their responsibilities (44-5), and because "students need to feel comfortable, but not too comfortable or they may take advantage or see it as a sign of disrespect" (46-5). Maintaining high expectations can be supported through compassionate discipline. Participants described the importance of "being firm yet fair" (49-6), "humble yet firm" (41-1), and "firm yet flexible" (49-6) in their approach to discipline. Acknowledging the importance of "strong classroom management" (46-3), they stated, "discipline must be compassionate, not punitive" (47-2).

Participants pointed out the importance of creating

a safe, alive and positive learning environment (e.g. 41-5; 43-1; 43-4). For example, they emphasized that an effective teacher creates a "non-threatening classroom or environment" (41-1), "where students feel secure and happy" (43-1). Good teaching involves creating a community in which children have a "sense of ownership so that they become engaged" (47-5), and so that their needs for "a sense of belonging and identity" are met (47-5). Exploring ways to make what happens in the classroom and in schools "a positive, fun experience" (e.g. 41-2; 44-1); effective teachers understand that taking advantage of teachable moments can involve "teaching the life lessons so absent from much of today's society" (43-2). Effective teachers were said to be able to take "dry subject material and turn it into food that's worth tasting or feasting on for the students" (45-3).

Participants expressed that it was important to have the belief and confidence that it is both attainable and worthy to have a mutual responsibility between teacher and student for learning and teaching. Good teaching is built on the assumption that "all students have knowledge to share" (46-2), so effective teachers work to encourage their students to be "partners in the learning process of the school" (44-1). As teacher participants admitted they "are not perfect or know everything or insist it's my way or the highway, a partnership was created in the classroom—it became 'our classroom'" (44-1). When students developed a "sense of ownership" (47-5) in the classroom learning, they also learned to "help solve problems" (44-5), "allowing both teacher and student to succeed" (48-5).

Effective teachers engaged in good teaching have respect for and participate in the practice of self-reflection and self-evaluation. Participants stated that effective teachers were the "ones who engage in reflective teaching" (44-1), and who are "self-evaluative, and thus able to make changes

when a lesson or unit does not go well” (44-2). An effective teacher is not afraid to learn and not afraid to admit they have made mistakes: “Being a self-reflective teacher means one is constantly challenging oneself and challenging others to do better” (48-8).

### **Motivations for Remaining in the Profession**

On the subject of their motivations for remaining in the teaching profession, Aboriginal teacher participants identified how they valued the opportunity to teach Aboriginal history and culture, to foster responsible citizens, to serve as role models, and to challenge negative and racialized stereotypes about Aboriginal people. In short, they remain in the profession because they cherished the positive impact they can have on children.

They valued the opportunity to support and teach Aboriginal history and culture to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students: “I feel Aboriginal education is important for all students, whether they be Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. ... My hope is that this education empowers Indigenous students and instils curiosity in non-Aboriginal ones” (41-3). One Aboriginal teacher expressed pride in the unique ability to teach about Aboriginal culture, stressing the gifts thereby brought to the teaching profession:

I feel I have so much language, culture, history and vision to share with both the children of our ancestry and the children of non-Aboriginal backgrounds. It’s a two-way street. It’s good for Native students to feel good about themselves and know their history, but they also need to be understood and respected by society as a whole (43-3).

Other participants expressed similar sentiments about the value of teaching Aboriginal culture and history, especially for Aboriginal students. One

teacher described teaching as an opportunity to “honour the child and their ancestors” (47-6); another spoke of the importance of “every child hearing or feeling their ethnicity reflected back to them, to ensure their strength of place within society” (47-3).

In the section on Aboriginal curriculum, presented next in this report, participants describe in more detail how they seek to connect in meaningful ways with their student through cultural events like a school pow-wow, or teachings based on the Aboriginal Seven Teachings or the Medicine Wheel, or calling upon elders for advice and teaching.

Participants were also motivated to remain in the teaching profession because they valued the opportunity to foster responsible citizens. They described the value of “helping nourish citizens” (47-2); teaching students “to become good people” (41-3); helping students “become respectful and compassionate in the real world” (46-5); and encouraging students to understand their “part in the global community” (44-5), so as to “build critical thinking, analytical, and equity-minded young citizens” (43-2). Participants prized the opportunity to draw upon Aboriginal knowledge to “teach virtues and matters of social responsibility, as well as modelling them ... which is consistent with oral traditions when virtues were taught through storytelling” (47-2). These teachers phrased their awareness of the need for positive role modelling using the expression “we need to walk the talk” (45-1).

These Aboriginal teachers regarded being a role model as an important part of their work, especially because it provided an opportunity both to resist negative and racialized stereotypes about Aboriginal people and to validate Aboriginal culture and identity. This Aboriginal teacher described at length the impact of validating Aboriginal culture and identity in the classroom:

As a former First Nations student and now a teacher, I've realized how ashamed I was of being Native. However education has taught me that once you've learned about yourself and your culture, you become more accepting of yourself and others. Teaching has a way of changing a person without them even knowing it... and the effects are profound and everlasting. I still remember the teacher who "inspired" me to become more than I thought possible. If I can do that to others, that's certainly a profession I want to be part of (49-5).

Another teacher also recalled her own experience where a teacher taught her "it was okay to be Aboriginal," (49-6). One teacher expressed the value of Aboriginal teachers in racialized terms, stating, "another brown face in the crowd of teachers is very needed" (44-6). However they described their value as role models, participants reiterated the important contributions they make as Aboriginal teachers. "What is needed is a positive, visual role model for all students. ... My Aboriginal students are glad to see me because they see in me what their possibilities are," said one Aboriginal teacher (47-5).

The profession of teaching was seen as very challenging by the participants, yet it was their relationships with students and the impact they saw that they could have on these students that motivated and reassured many teacher participants that they were in the right profession. Many rewards were identified for the teacher participants who remain in the profession: for example, the joy in seeing their "students rush in every morning with big smiles, eager to tell me some interesting little story" (44-2); or seeing a "spark of life in their [students'] eyes when they figure out that they are important and cared for and respected" (43-2). And these teachers revelled in the accomplishments

of their graduates: "I am rewarded when I see my past students accomplishing something; it makes me proud and really happy for them" (42-1). One teacher explained, "I love my job even when the kids are giving me a hard time" (48-1).

### **Summary**

In summary, Aboriginal teachers in this study believed that effective teachers possess the following: an open and questioning mind, patience, humour, dedication, compassion, a love of learning, and high expectations of their students. Effective teachers were seen as approachable, respectful, good listeners, flexible, organized, and prepared. Participants believed that good teaching involves being sensitive to the lives of their students, developing positive and respectful relations with their students, and working to meet the needs of their students. Good teaching also involves loving and caring for their students, communicating with the whole child, helping to find their students' gifts, developing pride and self-worth in their students, creating a safe learning environment, stressing mutual responsibility for learning and teaching, and engaging in self-reflection and self-evaluation.

Aboriginal teachers in this study remained in the teaching profession because they valued the opportunity to teach Aboriginal culture and history, to foster responsible citizens, to challenge negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people, to serve as role models, and because they believed they could have a positive impact on children. The thoughts of the educational philosopher, Parker (1998), seem relevant here. If we wish to "transform teaching and learning" (Parker, 1998, p. 160), he states, we must offer teachers, including Aboriginal teachers, an opportunity to engage in "good talk about good teaching" (Parker, 1998, p. 160).

## **Integrating Aboriginal Content and Perspectives into the Curriculum**

In the second session of data collection, Aboriginal teacher participants engaged in a focus group interview on Aboriginal curriculum. In this interview each teacher was first asked to describe an experience in which they were satisfied with how they taught Aboriginal content and perspectives. The teacher participants were then asked to describe some of the challenges they experienced in trying to integrate Aboriginal content and perspectives into public education.

### **When? Where? Who? Why?**

Aboriginal teacher participants were emphatic in their belief that Aboriginal content and perspectives should be integrated throughout the educational system in all subjects, and on a regular if not a daily basis: “Aboriginal content should be taught throughout the school” (47), “integrating that content in all subjects” (43, 49), and “infusing Aboriginal culture everyday” (46). They stressed that Aboriginal content and perspectives cannot be an “add-on” (47): “Aboriginal content has to be in everything we do; it cannot be isolated” (48). “Whenever and wherever my culture fits, I slide it in” (43) was how one Aboriginal teacher formulated her approach to integrating Aboriginal content. These teachers emphasized that while initiatives such as Aboriginal Day and national heritage programs were helpful, it is not good enough to teach Aboriginal content one week or one month; rather the infusion of Aboriginal content and perspectives must “happen regularly” (44). As one teacher summed up:

I think it’s important, especially at the elementary level to not separate Native content. You want to make it as normal as you can, not something special. You have to try and get it in everywhere, not just in Native Studies classes. I have a real problem

with Native content being seen as ‘the special class’; it needs to be everyday (49).

Participants believed that Aboriginal content is “good for both Native and non-Native students” (43); integrating Aboriginal content in the curriculum “gives everybody a chance to speak and be heard” (46). One teacher explained that it is “satisfying to see Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students learning together” (47), and another said it is “uplifting” (44) to teach Aboriginal studies to non-Aboriginal students.

The opportunity to challenge misconceptions about Aboriginal people was highly valued. “I’m not going to be able to change how the parents think,” one teacher explained, “but I can do my darnedest to change how the kids think” (49). Taking the viewpoint that Aboriginal content is also Canadian content this teacher elaborated “You don’t have to be Aboriginal to learn Aboriginal content, and so I teach Aboriginal content as Canadian content and the school board loves it” (49).

At the same time that participants stress the importance of having Aboriginal content and perspectives in school curricula for all students, they also acknowledge the particular significance Aboriginal content has for Aboriginal teachers and students:

Aboriginal Day is a school-wide event. The teachers are involved, and so are the kids. And it’s just a very big chance for the Native kids to show their heritage and their culture, and they just excel. ... You’ve got to have that for our kids so they can see they are part of the learning process (49).

Another teacher described the joy in seeing Aboriginal students succeed: “I really enjoyed creating Aboriginal Studies, and teaching it, because the kids got to shine, because they don’t

often have their Aboriginal perspective in the curriculums” (46). As this teacher explained:

When I was in school, we never had much self pride in who we were and now I see that is shifting and it’s starting to come back. In order to have respect, you need to be comfortable with who you are, where you come from, and really know yourself. I think people are starting to go down that path. And when they do graduate, they are very proud of themselves because of all that we do in schools, ... partnerships, parents, community ... we are making a difference (41).

One example of the difference Aboriginal teachers can make is illustrated in this teaching story of an Aboriginal teacher:

I remember having a grade one class and we went to pick sage out at a community. We were all busy picking sage. I stopped for a moment and I looked up and looked around. I looked out through the field of sage, and I could see the kids, see their little brown faces, and they were sweating and working hard to pick this sage. That was an incredible moment for me because it was only so many years ago we would not have seen this happen in a school (48).

Participants believed that “teaching about our culture” (47) helps build pride in Aboriginal students (46); or as one teacher said, it “gives us back our life . . . and our kids need that” (41).

### **Teaching Aboriginal Content and Perspectives**

Aboriginal teacher participants readily shared many stories describing how they integrated and taught Aboriginal content and perspectives. To successfully integrate Aboriginal content and perspectives into the curriculum, participants emphasized that one

must first create a “safe and positive” (41) learning environment. They stressed the importance of being “positive” (45), compassionate (44, 47), flexible (41) and calm (47). Explaining the purpose for creating a positive learning atmosphere, one teacher stated, “I feel that if they’re if they’re happy, this is probably my philosophy, but if they’re happy in the learning process, they’re going to learn something” (43).

Participants explained that they use their own Aboriginal knowledge and experience to establish a connection and to help develop a relationship with their students (43, 47). In describing efforts to integrate Aboriginal content, one teacher remarked, “I always start with myself” (47); other teachers said, “I use my own experience” (43), and “bring in my Native perspective” (46). These teachers shared their own histories with their students, telling them, for example, about their own families (46) and “where I grew up” (45). A teacher spoke about the importance of disclosing personal social and cultural positioning in terms of teaching Aboriginal content and perspectives:

I always start with myself and I share my identity with all my students, no matter how old they are. I give them my background and where I come from, and give them that sense of where my passion comes from, so that they’re interested and open to it (47).

When they integrated Aboriginal content into the curriculum, participants made it clear that the content must be “meaningful” (48) and “real” (49) for the students. Many of the Aboriginal activities introduced were “hands-on” (42, 45, 46), and promoted “experiential learning” (45). Teacher participants introduced Aboriginal content and perspectives through a multitude of ways. They described teaching about oral traditions, traditional kinship principles and the family tree



(42, 45); trapping on and mapping the land (45, 49); and treaty rights, especially from an Aboriginal perspective. They also taught drumming and drum making (41, 45, 49), Aboriginal dancing (44), carving (45), beadwork (44, 49), painting (44, 49), making button blankets and star quilts (45, 48), and Aboriginal hand-games (41). There were also a wide range of Aboriginal ceremonies to which participants turned in their efforts to integrate Aboriginal content into the curriculum. Ceremonies integrated into the curriculum so that students could participate in and learn from them included: smudging (48), the pipe ceremony (48), the sweat lodge (48), picking sage (48), building a totem pole (43), potlatching (47), and powwows (44), as well as cultural camps (41, 42). One important ceremony talked about was the honouring ceremony given to graduates (46). The example of language learning was often used, where “meaningful activities are needed to learn a language” (43). To better understand how participants integrate Aboriginal content and perspectives in a meaningful way we must listen to their teaching stories.

These teachers emphasized that for Aboriginal content to be meaningful and real, it must, especially for Aboriginal students, touch on the “everyday living” (44) of Aboriginal people and the issues they face in “everyday life” (49). One of the ways in which teachers accomplished teaching to the everyday experiences of their students was by going “to their prior knowledge to see what some of their personal experiences are and bringing that into the curriculum” (49).

One way in which participants brought the everyday quality and sense of meaningfulness into their teaching was by utilizing local resources. They “focus on the stories of local people” (45), and “bring local people” into the classroom (44), and in some cases, make their “own local books” for classroom use (49). For example, one teacher spoke

about a class project they did on First Nations communities, where they took pictures of common places in First Nations communities, including the skateboard park and the powwow, and ended up making twelve curriculum books:

It was just phenomenal. The kids always signed out those books because they saw their community in those books. For Native kids to see their culture represented in a book makes a world of difference. ... They're now talking more; they're writing better. We need that for them (49).

Participants were both surprised by how much curriculum they had developed (47) and cognizant of the “need to expand the curriculum by sharing these locally developed materials” (42).

Aboriginal content and perspectives that build on the idea of being meaningful, real and having everyday relevance can also be taught effectively to non-Aboriginal students, according to participants. As one example, an Aboriginal teacher told how they built their Aboriginal content and perspectives around the “everyday” in a school exchange program between an Aboriginal school and a non-Aboriginal school.

We didn't do anything special, like no Aboriginal ceremonies, it was just a regular school day; this is what happens here all day long. ... We also took them to the agency, and to the Tribal Council where people work. The kids were amazed that they were all Indians working there (44).

Sometimes students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal needed specific teaching about the meaning and value of Aboriginal traditions and practices. For example, an Aboriginal teacher analyzed the motivation behind developing and teaching a unit plan on the pipe ceremony:

We were having kids go to a pipe ceremony every Monday and I was concerned that the kids did not understand why and what they were doing. So the idea behind building a mini unit for the pipe ceremony was to ensure that the kids understood what the pipe means and how it came to various Aboriginal people and their strong belief in the pipe. I did this so that when I took my students to the pipe ceremony they weren't sitting there because they were expected to but they were actively participating, whether through their own prayers or through understanding the importance of the ceremony and the actions of those facilitating the ceremony (48).

Participants emphasized the importance of having elders involved in education to teach about Aboriginal culture, especially about Aboriginal spirituality, traditions, values and ceremonies (41, 44, 46, 45, 47). Elders taught both within the classroom and school, and outside the school, in settings like the cultural camps.

We had elders come in and talk about our oral traditions, especially how to do a proper introduction and the importance of family connections, and how that serves to preserve our history, knowing who is your family. Then the students, with my guidance through formulated small lessons prepared their own personal traditional introductions and they rehearsed it. Then we went into classrooms and other elementary schools to present them. So, it was Grade 8 peers teaching the idea of family and identity to younger students. It was excellent for these students to come to see themselves as leaders and I had a really good time with them (47).

Participants recognized the central role of oral history and in particular traditional story telling (41, 43, 44, 45, 46). These teachers saw the stories as an important and positive way to reach children: "Story telling is one of the beautiful ways to teach. And I remember even non-Aboriginal children, they like stories, and they laugh and laugh and laugh" (41). Oral traditions were seen as special carriers of Aboriginal content, especially information about history and traditions, which could then be integrated into the curriculum. Oral history became an "exciting" way of teaching, a way of learning about family histories so that students become involved in the learning process (49). As a way of accessing these resources of the oral traditions, teachers stressed that students must learn about "traditional storytelling protocols" (46) so they could relate to storytellers with the proper respect (46).

I'm a storyteller. Our stories contain history, our history; they contain our traditions and our cultural teachings; and they contain the language. When we do stories, they are the voices of our grandparents, our ancestors that speak through me as a vehicle. And the stories certainly transform themselves through time, because they are always alive and they evolve with time. So when I do stories, it teaches students about values, about respect, about the core values of our culture (43).

A critical set of cultural practices was linked together through the teaching of Aboriginal languages, which many teachers identified as a very important aspect of integrating Aboriginal content into the curriculum. "Kids enjoy hearing their own language," remarked one teacher (45). Another teacher observed that when she speaks the Aboriginal language of her students, "they see you" (49). "They enjoy hearing me say things in their own language," that teacher continued on, "You just see them straighten up, and

if I say something wrong, they say, 'Miss, say it this way'"(49). Another added that when an Aboriginal storyteller spoke her own language in the class, the storyteller "brought out the Aboriginal students" in that class (43).

We've had storytellers come into our class and our school, which has been a good experience; it's been a positive thing. I had a storyteller come in and she started using some of her language and there was one of my students, who never said "boo", who was from way up there ... he never said anything. And when she came in to tell stories, that student actually put his hand up and said to her, "I know what you're saying. I know Ojibwa". They spoke a couple of things together. Oh, it was so cool (43).

This Aboriginal teacher shared another experience, dealing with the importance of creating a safe and positive classroom environment that is receptive to hearing Aboriginal students:

In English, we do journals, and I expect students to come up and share what they are writing about. I had one student who has just moved into our district and he put his hand up because he wanted to share his journal. He shared his story using his language, telling us about fishing and which house he belonged to. And the kids were just looking at him, and I was just looking at him because to me it was so amazing that he felt comfortable enough to use his language (47).

Participants also spoke about the importance of the circle as a way of integrating Aboriginal content into the curriculum (45, 48). They described their use of ceremonies involving the circle, such as "talking circles," with a feather or a stone to give

one permission to speak (43, 44), and "sharing circles" where the traditions of the "seven teachings" or the teachings of the Medicine Wheel were presented (48). Teacher participants stressed the special dynamic of the circle: "In the circle we are all teachers and students" (43); it is where all have a chance to express themselves (46). This description of using a sharing circle with five year olds was offered by one of the teachers:

A sharing circle is just so powerful and I did it at the end of the day. I kind of directed it and gave everybody an opportunity to talk. It was with five-year-olds so that's why I thought I needed to direct them. So they had to say one good thing about their day. It really empowered them and they left school on a good positive note (48).

Another teacher told about using a talking stone:

Every day we sit in the circle and we have a talking stone. ... They know that when the stone is in the circle that they are to be respectful and they're all listening. The children really enjoy that time. They know the rules and they love to sit in a circle and to learn in that manner. The very first day of school I say to them, "I will learn as much from you everyday as you will learn from me; and in this circle, we are all teachers and we are all students" (43).

Aboriginal content and perspectives is made meaningful and real through community involvement. For example, one of the teachers offered students, with the community's participation, an opportunity to learn to potlatch.

I teach Aboriginal content and perspectives in Grade 4 through the potlatch. We do some potlatching, involving the community and the classroom; ... the children always

enjoy it, since they don't get a lot of opportunity to serve others. In the potlatch they learn to serve others; and if you are a host, you don't sit down. You cook and prepare and organize and serve everybody and clean, and that's your responsibility. At first the kids are a little bit reluctant to do all that, but in the end they find so much satisfaction from doing and learning the potlatch. (47)

Integrating Aboriginal content and perspectives by building on and practicing local customs and traditions means that the community inevitably is involved. And "as the kids get involved in the Aboriginal content, their parents also get involved" (41). For example, one teacher discussed the impact of teaching about raven on both students and parents:

We studied Bear and we studied Raven a lot. My students just took to it and they wanted to learn more and more about Raven. Everywhere they went in our community, they kept talking about the ravens that they had seen, and talking to their parents about it to the point that the parents were coming to me to let me know what their children were teaching them about Raven (41).

The teacher and their students not only inspired parents and community with their teaching and learning, but the students were also inspired by their teachers interest in their culture; one teacher noted, "that as teachers are more interested, students feel it too" (43). Schools and teachers also seek to involve the community and parents through other activities such spring and fall suppers, and grandparents' day (44).

Teaching students "how to be, to live and function on the land" was identified as another important

part of Aboriginal content that needed to be integrated into curriculum (42); as one teacher put it, "being on the land is good for the soul" (42). Cultural camps were a primary setting in which students learned about being on the land (41, 44, 45). Participants stressed the importance of providing 'immersion' experiences in which students live on the land, learning traditional subsistence activities, participating in traditional ceremonies, and practicing traditional values of relationship and community organization. These camps might follow the seasons, such as fall, winter or summer camps (42), or be built around a subsistence activity, such as a fish camp (45). There was elder and community involvement in these camps, and Aboriginal languages were validated and used in a meaningful and real way. One teacher talked about the camp process in the following way:

I was in charge of cultural programs in our school. I took the kids on the land, in fall time, in wintertime, and springtime. And we involve elders. I invite elders from the community, who share some of their stories, stories from the land, stories about animals (41).

Participants underlined the importance of these camps and their cultural activities, stressing the camps are not "picnics".

Every time I come back from a camp, I share some things we did and learned with the staff, both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal teachers. I want them to know and understand why we took the kids out there, and that we don't just go out there and have a hot dog. That's not what it's about. It's more than that. It's about validating relationships, relationship with yourself, relationship with others, relationship to the land and with the spiritual world (41).

In addition to teaching Aboriginal culture and traditions, participants addressed the need to teach critical perspectives on the history of colonization, and the continuing practice of racism and oppression against Aboriginal peoples (48, 49): “We must tell our Aboriginal students that we are part of society, and help them to challenge the stereotyping of us” (48). Central to this critical stance was that students “learn who we are, and learn about the history of oppression” (48). “Analyzing and breaking down stereotypes” (48, 49) was seen as helping students “deal with anger over social injustices” (48), and creating positive alternatives. While emphasizing that, “we must understand where historically our problems come from” (44), participants also stressed, “we must know our history, but we must go beyond blaming” (44).

At the same time that participants believed that it is important to teach about the history of oppression against Aboriginal people, they also believed that it is important to communicate to students that Aboriginal content and perspectives are “not all negative material” (41).

### **Systemic Challenges to Integrating Aboriginal Content and Perspectives**

Teacher participants identified and discussed some of the challenges they encounter in their efforts to integrate Aboriginal content and perspectives into public education. They expressed a variety of concerns with the existing curriculum, including: that Aboriginal content and perspectives are not valued by the larger system of education; that the standard curriculum still portrays Aboriginal people through historic negative stereotypes; and that, in general, little is understood about what Aboriginal content and perspectives are, and how they can be effectively integrated, made even worse by a lack of funding and administrative support for such integration.

A prerequisite for change to occur is the acknowledgement of a problem, but according to many participants, the lack or slow integration of Aboriginal content and perspectives was still not recognized as a problem worthy of attention: “Aboriginal content is not seen as valuable ... nobody is even paying attention” to Aboriginal issues (47). Participants felt that they “are constantly challenged as to why we are incorporating Aboriginal content, and that is demoralizing” (47). “I walk around with a lot of anger,” expressed one Aboriginal teacher, “First Nations issues remain on the back burner” (48). Teachers ended up feeling like they had “to push to get Aboriginal content in— sometimes you have to be forceful” (43). One teacher, summing up the situation, commented, “we are moving slowly with not much progress” (46).

It was frustrating for participants when they encountered non-Aboriginal colleagues who used multicultural policies to dismiss and discount the value of Aboriginal content. When their non-Aboriginal colleagues insisted that, “with multiculturalism, we can’t focus only on one culture” (46), Participants saw that Aboriginal content was being discounted in favour of “existing multi-cultural curriculum” (41). This position on multiculturalism was seen by participants as a way “to distract” attention from the need for Aboriginal content (48).

Participants raised concerns about the standard curriculum which either ignores Aboriginal issues, or, even worse, portrays them in a negative light: “Not only are the Aboriginal resources not there, but what [non-Aboriginal resources] are there causes problems” (43). Reiterating the problem of neglect, one teacher also added that too much Aboriginal content portrays Aboriginal people as people of the past: “Aboriginal content is either being neglected or focused only in the past; they don’t bring our people to the future and into the

present” (49). Curriculum material that portrays Aboriginals as people of the past did not help participants challenge negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people. “How do you respond to kids who hold old stereotypes of Indians?” asked one teacher (48). Participants talked about how “it is really difficult to find materials with positive content or a positive slant about Aboriginal people” (48). “Canadian history can be brutal!” exclaimed one teacher, “So it is very important to break down the stereotypes of Aboriginal people” (44).

Not only is the curriculum problematic in terms of addressing Aboriginal issues, but also, there is very little positive effective curriculum. “We all keep talking about how little curriculum there is with Native content” (49). The result is that “Aboriginal kids are still not in the materials, but they need to see their reflections” was how one teacher stated it (43). “We have got to have materials with First Nations people in it so our kids can see they are part of the learning process,” added another teacher (49).

The present Eurocentric curriculum and teaching was seen as “not reflective of Aboriginal values” (41); and when participants were asked to teach Aboriginal content, it was felt “they don’t want us to make that real” (49). In talking about their non-Aboriginal colleagues, participants said that in general these colleagues need a more meaningful understanding of what it means to incorporate Aboriginal content and perspectives. As one teacher stated: “When non-Aboriginal teachers ask us to deal with Aboriginal issues, they expected us to make bannock ... they don’t really understand how to make it meaningful” (46). Participants emphasized that teaching about Aboriginal culture and values must go beyond just a show of beads and feathers: “We need the perspective, not just beads and feathers” (47). “We are beyond popsicle stick teepees and dream catchers,” a teacher observed, “we need to think outside the box” (48).

In professional settings, participants realized their non-Aboriginal colleagues were often not open, wanting only to hear about “fluff”: “People don’t want you broaching topics closer to the heart. They only want to talk about fluff” (44).

While involving elders in schools’ activities was said to have many benefits, helping make Aboriginal content and perspective meaningful and real, participants also identified challenges to this utilization of these elders. For example, “elders can be hard to find and are in high demand, and they get tired” (41); and “sometimes elders have never been in a school, and they can be kind of lost and don’t know how to do things” (42). Participants suggested that “the ideal is to have an elder in every school” (41); or even better, “at least two or more elders in every school, as a position, a male and a female for a [more complete] ... knowledge base” (42). For elder participation to be most effective, it was further suggested that that participation be consistent and ongoing.

Time and time again, participants emphasized that a lack of funding hampers their efforts to integrate Aboriginal content into the curriculum, even to the extent of preventing that integration from ever occurring. This lack of resources was experienced in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal schools. One Aboriginal teacher summed up her frustration and disappointment about lack of funding: “I think something is strongly screwed up in our culture that we don’t have the budget for these Aboriginal resource people, and that needs to be corrected” (45). The teachers expressed concerns about the lack of resources in a variety of ways, all with deep feeling and conviction: “the biggest challenge is money” (48); “the money always runs out” (42). “It is always hard to find the money,” stated one teacher, “and then when you find some money it is usually too skimpy” (47). Other teachers added that whatever money is available is not only “skimpy” but its availability is unreliable and

inconsistent: “The soft money is what is attached to curriculum, so that money targeted for curriculum gets usurped” (47). For example, “funding is not available to consistently have elders involved in the school; this lack of consistency is an obstacle” (42). The misuse of money targeted for integrating Aboriginal content is particularly galling for participants; as one teacher put it, “there are so many ways used to get out of teaching Aboriginal content” (47).

Participants also raised concerns about the lack of administrative support. The work of Aboriginal teacher participants trying to integrate Aboriginal content became much more difficult when their administrators did not “see things from an Aboriginal perspective” (43). Non-Aboriginal principals could be “afraid of us ... afraid of an open dialogue,” observed one Aboriginal teacher (48). Politics, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, could become “huge,” a teacher commented, with, for example, some administrators seeking “to divide and conquer” Aboriginal people, and some Aboriginal people “willing to protect the status quo” (47). Even though they might not have much support from administrators, participants still felt resented by others or had their “qualification questioned” (47) when they made efforts to integrate Aboriginal content.

Participants talked about how “difficult it is to find the right person to teach Aboriginal perspectives” (46). Participants saw many non-Aboriginal teachers as “either gung-ho or only skimming the surface” (43). “It is also challenging,” expressed one Aboriginal teacher, “when these non-Aboriginal colleagues think they know everything” (44). The reverse was also considered a challenge, namely, when non-Aboriginal teachers think integrating Aboriginal content is only the responsibility of the Aboriginal teachers (41). In turning to their non-Aboriginal colleagues for help, participants found “so

many non-Aboriginal teachers who don’t get it” (47). Yet there were some non-Aboriginal teachers who “are doing their share, and when you provide Native content to them, they are happy to have it” (43).

### **Ways to Improve the System**

As they expressed some of their concerns about being able to integrate Aboriginal content and perspectives into the curriculum, teacher participants also framed their discussions in terms of the changes they regarded as necessary in order for an effective integration to occur. There was a sense of urgency among participants to create a general awareness about the importance of and need for integrating Aboriginal content into the curriculum of the schools (44). A teacher explained, “Schools, educators and teachers need to recognize the importance of incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum” (46); another teacher added, “Aboriginal content should be incorporated into everything” (48). Participants spoke about the need for system-wide support; “A massive school- and division-wide effort” (44) is necessary for integrating Aboriginal content.

Participants stressed the importance of “policies that come from the top down” (48) to ensure that Aboriginal content and perspectives are taught. They were not satisfied with a policy whereby a “teacher can teach Aboriginal content if they can, but if not, they don’t have to” (49). Instead, participants advocate a policy whereby teachers would be required to teach Aboriginal content (47).

Having a supportive and understanding administration was seen as important. Participants stressed the need to have the administration “on board” (43). They said their job becomes easier with an “understanding principal, who knows what’s needed” (42), and who is “good with resources” (43). Such administrators may show their support by becoming mentors, or attending Aboriginal ceremonies, such as the sweat lodge,

round dances and feasts (44). The need to provide adequate support to non-Aboriginal teachers so that incorporating Aboriginal content was not so threatening was also recognized by participants: "Wouldn't it be great if we had non-Aboriginal teachers teach this Aboriginal content and not be afraid of doing so just because they don't know much and they don't want to look as if they don't know what they're talking about" (49)? Participants expressed concerns about their non-Aboriginal colleagues who were "not comfortable with Aboriginal content; they are confused by it and scared of it" (43). And the result is that many non-Aboriginal teachers "skip over the Aboriginal content because they don't feel comfortable with it" (47), or "fear owning the responsibility of teaching that material. ... [They] don't want to admit they don't know" (47) about that material. One Aboriginal teacher was firm in her opinion that non-Aboriginal teachers should be expected to learn Aboriginal content: "I tell my non-Aboriginal colleagues that they can teach Native history too; if you can teach Black Studies, then you can learn Native Studies too" (49).

The need for Aboriginal curriculum remains an issue for participants, so that "we don't flounder around" (44). As well, the Aboriginal curriculum that exists should be made more widely available; one teacher asked, "Why doesn't the Ministry take the Aboriginal content that works and make it more widely available?" (44). There was also an identified need to recognize officially locally produced curriculum:

We did some work on making a text to connect knowledge about First Nations peoples from our region, and we took it to the regional school board but the text was not approved. But that text is what we wanted. We keep trying to get those texts in place, but we need to have our work

officially recognized so that we have it in the school system (49).

The need for on-going in-service training to support the integration of Aboriginal content was also identified by participants: "We get reprimanded for not implementing Aboriginal content, but are given no in-service training" (41) for integrating that content. One teacher offered an example of what ideally could occur, describing how the school developed a "theme-based three-year plan for the whole school" (42) to ensure Aboriginal content and perspectives were integrated in school-wide activities.

Teacher participants also expressed a desire to be accepted as fellow professionals. For example, participants talked about having to work to prove themselves just because they were Aboriginal: "You have to work much harder to prove yourself; you're always in the spotlight and you have to perform" (46). Another teacher explained, "I am not taken seriously because I am Aboriginal. My word is just not as good, the rewards are slow in coming" (44). The burden of unrealistic expectations was also pointed out: "Things are piled on us and we take it in" (46). "We are not all perfect," said one Aboriginal teacher, "but we just don't want Aboriginal teachers singled out" and have more expected of us than of non-Aboriginal teachers (47).

Participants highlighted the cost of trying to be accepted as fellow professionals. "You exert a huge amount of energy surviving the institution, and you still don't fit in," was how one teacher phrased it. Participants work very hard at the task of integrating Aboriginal content and that work is made more difficult when they have to proceed by "inching your way into their classrooms" (47). "The only thing worse than being the only Aboriginal teacher is having them wish you were not there," was the conclusion reached by one teacher (41).



The system needed to acknowledge, participants insisted, the important contribution they already made through their various efforts to integrate Aboriginal content and perspectives: “You do their job for them as well as your own, giving professional advice, and it gets tiring providing that service for free” (41). And sometimes it was not only lack of remuneration; it was more simply a lack of recognition for work actually done: “I do it all and others get acknowledged for incorporating Aboriginal content” (47).

In addition to recognizing the time and effort they put into researching and integrating Aboriginal content and perspectives, participants said they would appreciate more acknowledgement and more adequate support for the time it takes to develop curricular materials (43, 44). They said one couldn’t simply use “patent or canned lessons” (44); therefore, they “struggled with resources and how to incorporate them into their teaching” (41). Teachers spoke about having “to make our own success; we all had to more or less make our own units and find our own resources” (49).

Another concern raised is the issue of overloading Aboriginal teachers and the need to provide adequate support and compensation for their efforts. With their commitment to integrating Aboriginal content, and the difficulties of that task, and so few Aboriginal teachers to take on that task, the few Aboriginal teachers actually doing that work were “spread so thin,” (43) and often “worn out” (41). “Doing resource and curriculum work on the side of teaching is tough,” (43), and there was rarely enough time: “time is huge” (47), because “there’s just so many hours in my life” (43). In the end, participants agreed about the both the great effort needed and the lack of time, support, recognition and remuneration to get the curricular tasks accomplished (44).

The need to have more Aboriginal teachers and professionals was identified. Given their passion to integrate Aboriginal content and perspectives, and the hard work involved in doing so, participants were confronted with the fact that “we need more brown faces” (44) to get the job done. Participants talked about lacking a “critical mass” of Aboriginal colleagues (47, 48), including needing more “certified high school Aboriginal teachers” (42). In particular, participants spoke of the importance of having Aboriginal people in “positions of power” (41), as well as being hired as curriculum developers: “It makes a huge difference when Aboriginal people write the curriculum materials” (47). In addition, participants would like to see teachers with experience working in areas of influence such as curriculum development:

It took a good number of years to realize that the initial thing I had to do was two-fold: first, was to understand that curriculum and to see the places that the curriculum could be manipulated; and second, was to understand the process of teaching that I had been taught to use. And to really reflect upon whether or not that process of teaching was in fact supportive of the values I had been taught to live as an Aboriginal person (41).

In general, participants expressed a deep commitment and passion for Aboriginal education and the teaching of Aboriginal content and perspectives. “I’m very passionate about the importance of Aboriginal education,” one teacher expressed (41); and another stated, “We are in it for life” (41). Teachers explained that it was “satisfying to be asked to teach Aboriginal content” (49) and to “get acknowledged” (47) for the job they were doing in this regard. One teacher emphatically stated, “Aboriginal content is a must. We must value a culture that has never been valued in the schools” (44). Emphasizing the

importance of Aboriginal teachers' participation in education, an Aboriginal teacher spoke without ambiguity: "We are the experts and whether they like us or not, we are coming in and we are going to make ourselves known. We are not going anywhere. We are still here. And 500 hundred years from now, we will still be here" (49).

### **Summary**

In summary, the Aboriginal teachers who participated in this study believed that Aboriginal content and perspectives must be taught every day and must include all students in all subject areas, all the while being offered in a safe and positive learning environment. They stated that teaching Aboriginal content and perspectives gives everyone a chance to be heard, while at the same time it gives Aboriginal students and teachers back their life. Participants taught Aboriginal content by beginning with their own Aboriginal knowledge and experience. They stressed that Aboriginal content must be meaningful and real, and must include the everyday local life of Aboriginal people. Their strategies for teaching Aboriginal content were varied, involving elders, oral traditions and storytelling, Aboriginal languages, circle teachings, ceremonies, community participation, land, and cultural camps. Participants believed it was also important to provide critical perspectives on the history and colonization of Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal teacher participants identified a number of challenges they face in their efforts to incorporate Aboriginal content and perspectives, including: Aboriginal content is still not valued; multiculturalism is often used to dismiss and discount the value of Aboriginal content, standard curriculum either ignores Aboriginal issues or even worse portrays them negatively with stereotypes about Aboriginal content and perspectives being the norm; there is often a lack of funding and administrative support; and it is often difficult it is to find the right person to teach Aboriginal content and perspectives.

Participants also identified a number of ways in which the system could improve, including: creating a general awareness about the importance of and need for integrating Aboriginal content into the curriculum; developing and acquiring Aboriginal curriculum; providing on-going in-service for integrating Aboriginal content; adequately supporting non-Aboriginal teachers to teach Aboriginal content and perspectives; developing policies that come from the top down; finding supportive and understanding administration; accepting Aboriginal teachers as fellow professionals; acknowledging the important contributions made by Aboriginal teachers; adequately supporting and compensating Aboriginal teachers for their efforts to integrate Aboriginal curriculum; and hiring more Aboriginal teachers and professionals.

## **Racism in Education**

Exploring the impact of racism on Aboriginal teachers was a third area of inquiry in this study. Participants answered questions about incidents and/or practices they would identify as examples of racism, how they or others responded, and what criteria they used in deciding how to respond to the racism they encountered.

## **Experiencing Racism in Education**

One of the ways in which participants reported experiencing racism was through the disregarding of their teacher education and teaching qualifications. They described a pervasive atmosphere in which their professional capabilities were questioned, as they encountered assumptions that “we don’t have the same or more qualifications” (47-2); or they saw the validity or legitimacy of TEP programs dismissed (45-Curriculum<sup>3</sup>). As a result of having their qualifications and abilities questioned, and expectations for their success lowered (43-Curriculum), participants’ sense of belonging and acceptance in the teaching profession was compromised. Consequently, their freedom to grow and express themselves as teachers was hampered. As one Aboriginal teacher put it, “I don’t know where it comes from, but I always have the feeling of always being inadequate, unequal, always having to do more to prove oneself.” (45-3).

When their qualifications and abilities were disregarded, participants experienced exclusion and marginalization. One Aboriginal teacher described experiencing a “silencing of my voice and a limiting of my time to speak.” (43-1); another

felt “not befriended or associated with or worked with” (43-2) by non-Aboriginal teachers; and yet another teacher was not “talked to directly or asked directly” (47-6) about professional matters. Encountering a “cursory staff evaluation” (41-6), one teacher felt they were denied legitimacy and valuable feedback. These subtle but pervasive forms of exclusion made it difficult for individual participants to identify, and subsequently confront and object to the racism they experienced.

Participants also experienced racism in the way non-Aboriginal teachers resisted their efforts to include Aboriginal content into the curriculum; their efforts to include Aboriginal content were “regarded as an intrusion” (46-1), or else there was a “questioning of the focus on Aboriginal content” (41-5). In addition to having Aboriginal content and perspectives considered questionable and intrusive, participants experienced a trivializing of that content and perspectives. “They tell our students to go to craft sessions,” one Aboriginal teacher explained, “when those students are actually going to language and culture teachings” (41-3). Aboriginal content was also trivializing by being regarded as “entertainment.” “They wanted me to do workshops,” explained one Aboriginal teacher, “and it started to get gross after a while. They asked me ‘what can you do?’ like I was supposed to be some sort of entertainer. ‘Can you drum, or can you pray?’ ” (47-Curriculum). Racism in education was also experienced in the “lack of accountability for ensuring that Aboriginal content is taught” (41-6), including “not acquiring Aboriginal materials” (42-5). When proposed Aboriginal content was either trivialized or ignored,

3 Inevitably, the issues that Aboriginal teacher participants discussed in each of the four data gathering sessions overlapped. When data collected during one session was relevant to an issue raised in another session, I have identified the original source of that data. So in this case, the issue about questioning Aboriginal teachers’ qualifications was originally found in the data collected in the session dealing with curriculum.

participants experienced those actions as a form of racism.

Another way in which participants experienced racism was through what they perceived as a lowering of expectations of Aboriginal students. There was a general feeling that Aboriginal students were often “negatively judged” (44-7), resulting at times in Aboriginal students being “characterized as lazy, unmotivated and indifferent” (47-3). As a result of these negative attitudes, expectations of ability and performance were lowered; “less’ is expected” (41-1). When these lowered expectations were present, the effects were evident in practices such as “guiding and encouraging Aboriginal students out of the mainstream” (47-1). Rather than engaging in self-reflection or questioning standard educational practices to explain the challenges Aboriginal students faced, non-Aboriginal teachers often resorted to “blaming the kids” (44-7).

The discounting of the historical oppression and colonization of Aboriginal people and the devastating effects of that history was also regarded as an example of racism. Participants said their non-Aboriginal teachers could be quite insensitive about how colonization has negatively impacted Aboriginal people, including “making jokes about what happened,” (42-1) or suggesting that whatever happened, “happened in the past, so get over it” (46-4, 49-Curriculum). One Aboriginal teacher described her non-Aboriginal colleagues “publicly mourning the removal of a residential school building, claiming that nothing bad happened there” (41-1).

#### **How Participants Respond to Racism in Education**

Participants described a range of responses to their experiences of racism in education, as well as a range of strategies for dealing with that racism. For example, when they encountered behaviours and practices they believed were racist, they often

responded with shock and disbelief. Racism was expressed in many forms, and at times it was shocking to realize that it was actually occurring: “Hidden or back door racism is harder to deal with. I am still shocked when I realize what has been suggested. ... It is usually after the fact that it clicks in. I am always questioning myself if maybe I misunderstood” (48-9). Racism could leave teachers speechless: “I react with shock first and can’t speak at first. I calm myself down to go have a chat with the principal or teacher over whatever incident took place” (48-1). Because participants did not expect to encounter racism, when they did, it caused them to question their own experience and interpretation of what had just transpired. They questioned their own reality: “I ask myself if it’s racism (47-5), or “I clarify what was said or done, so I ask questions” (47-1), or “I have the person explain” (46-4). Nonetheless, the effects of racism can be devastating: “Sometimes you walk away and wonder ‘why do I always feel so awful, coming away from this person?’ I go away feeling bad about myself, and I don’t know why” (46-Curriculum).

In deciding how to respond to their experiences of racism, participants make a variety of assessments. “I like to hear more and assess the seriousness and then put my two cents in” (49-5) is how one teacher explained her approach. There are times when participants chose to walk away rather than intervene in their experience of hurtful and negative comments and attitudes about Aboriginal people. Sometimes they walked away because they were so upset they were not confident in their own ability to respond in a calm and responsible manner; other times they walked away because they felt that engagement would not make a difference.

When they feel that viewpoints are too deeply entrenched—that “the situation will not change

or it's not possible to be understood" (43-2), and that "no intervention could have changed attitudes" (45-3), participants usually chose not to respond. They recognized the futility of some situations: "Sometimes it's best to ignore racism. In cases where people are 'racist' you can tell that there is no convincing them to see the other side because they choose to 'not see' or not want to see the negative implications of their actions or comments" (49-6). At times there could be a sense of resignation about everyday racism: "It is difficult to change the views of all cultures. ... It is easier for people to be negative towards others and usually most people do not take change easily" (48-70). One teacher summed this choosing not to respond strategy, saying, "I just leave it as it is. I let [the person who is racist] ... be on her or his way" (42-2).

In deciding not to respond, participants might decide to ignore, rather than risk being provoked: "I ignore them, not taking it personally and remember that they are not better than you and try to respond professionally" (42-3). Another teacher explained: "If I hear a comment that I know is meant to provoke me in a confrontational way (which doesn't happen often), I refrain from getting involved in such arguments and prefer to ignore the person and go my own way" (43-4). "I try to treat [racism] lightly," added another teacher, "and point out that everybody has the right to not be judged" (44-3). The complexity and depth of feelings evoked when teachers finally walked away was captured by this teacher's words:

When faced with racism I often find that the person who is being offensive is often the person who is unaware of his or her own racism. I always intervene with racism when I am pushed to a point of disgust for lack of a better work. At times I may just think, "you're an idiot and you're not

worth my breath." It really depends on the situation, as it is always different (48-5).

Participants assessed whether it is worth their energy and time to respond to or intervene with such entrenched racism: "I ignore racism when it's obvious the person is irate and unwilling to listen and to learn; and if it's not someone that I have to deal with on a daily basis, sometimes it's not worth the energy" (43-1); or "Sometimes I ignore it if I don't have time to deal with it" (46-4). Teachers also assessed their own energy level and emotional state in trying to figure out how to respond: "Sometimes it depends on my energy level! It can depend on how I emotionally react to the specific situation. I need to be in control of my emotions in order to effectively make my point of view known" (43-3).

Decisions on how to respond to racism were also based on the nature of participants' relationship to the other person: "[How I respond] depends on my relationship to the speaker." (48-10). Sometimes they don't respond because of a reluctance to question authority: "It is difficult to intervene when it is someone in higher power" (47-2). At other times, teachers chose not to respond if the comment made was isolated and in public: "I usually do not intervene when I hear isolated comments in public about Aboriginal people" (44-7). Participants also held beliefs and values about the importance of challenging racism and bigotry. They were often in a position where it became necessary to take on the task of educating their colleagues and parents. Drawing upon the belief that we are all worthy of dignity and respect, teachers asserted the dignity of their own and others' humanity, reminding themselves and others that, "we are all human" (42-4). They spoke up, challenged and educated others about racism, even though they knew that they might be expressing different views from those held in the homes of their students: "We cannot

change the way children are raised but we also need to respect the parents' views without causing them tension" (48-7).

The importance of "responding immediately" (49-4) and "assertively" (49-6) to racism was also described by participants, who also stressed the need to "call it what it is" (48-8), "confronting others if they are aware" (49-1). One teacher stated, "I make contact and describe what I feel is racist, reminding students that racist comments are inappropriate" (49-4). Another teacher explained: "I tell them they are being racist and in what ways," added another teacher, "I speak up, identify the wrong and offer a history lesson" (43-1).

Participants said they "must be careful" (49-5) and respond to racism in a "professional manner" (46-1). They tried "to educate without isolating" (47-4), "providing correct information" (49-1) and "explaining and pointing out errors" (49-2). Participants explained how they tried to challenge their colleagues and students respectfully, by saying, "I am not an expert, but 'in my experience' or 'to the best of my knowledge'" (48-9). One teacher explained that her engagement was offered in good faith: "I go to the person and tell them that I was uncomfortable hearing his/her remarks. If they want to be the enemy let them be, but I am not" (42-1).

The belief that anger was not helpful in responding to racism, that becoming angry could make the other person defensive, was shared by participants: "I don't like to get into this with someone when I am angry because it only makes things worse for my argument and the person I am addressing is only becoming more defensive, not open" (47-1). They tried to "respond without anger" (47-1) and "not to respond with an attack" (46-1). Teachers described making efforts to remain calm in the face of offensive behaviour: "I learned not to fly off the handle" (49-4); or to dissipate tension by "trying to

round rough edges" (44-5), or use humour (47-4).

"Cooling down" was another way participants attempted to respond to their experiences of racism; they tried to "cool down and then talk to the person" (42-6). They tried to remain calm and quiet, so that they could listen: "I always talk to people in a quiet manner whenever racism pops up" (48-1). "Listening with a quiet voice" was the phrase one teacher used to explain this approach: "No one listens to a madman. I make an extra effort to listen with a quiet voice, calm, reasoned approach" (49-5). Another talked about needing "think time" before responding: "At times it depends on my own think time. I will often come back later to react based on reflections or dialogue elsewhere" (48-10).

Other teachers mentioned "filing an official complaint" (44-2) or "writing letters, providing opportunities for communication including circle meetings" (45-1). But this type of "professional" response was not always successful: "I went to our administrator but had the incident played down. I did keep an incident report, but did not do anything with it" (45-2).

### **How Non-Aboriginal Colleagues and Systems Respond to Racism in Education**

When participants were asked to comment on how racism in education was addressed by the system and their colleagues, they mentioned that some programs and strategies were in place to ostensibly address racial discrimination. These participants emphasized, however, that much more effective and extensive intervention was needed.

Participants identified a variety of institutional strategies and programs intended to address equity, discrimination and racism, including anti-racist programs, multicultural education programs, and anti-bullying and social responsibility initiatives. They mentioned a variety of anti-

racist programs and strategies instituted by the schools, such as the ACT NOW program; anti-racist workshops and campaigns; and in-service training (44-3; 44-5; 47-2). Another institutional approach for dealing with racism was to promote multiculturalism, in the form of cultural weeks (41-5), posters (42-6) and teaching respect for different beliefs and cultures (42-1; 44-3). Participants identified a third group of strategies meant to combat racism, namely anti-bullying (43-4; 44-5) and social responsibility (47-1; 47-3) programs. Finally, anti-harassment and equity policy initiatives were mentioned as related initiatives (44-1; 44-4; 46-4). Some of the means by which all the above strategy and program initiatives were enacted included: Aboriginal Days; assemblies; focus groups and targeted interventions; PD days; blanket policy statements; and restorative justice circles.

Whatever institutional response was offered, its success depended on whether there were enlightened leaders to “make effective change” (41-6), and whether people were receptive: “whether the ears are listening or are airtight” (45-3). And although participants may address racism in their own classrooms and sometimes in their schools (48-6; 49-1) they also felt that on the whole the institutional responses were inadequate and insufficient. For example, participants talked about how equity, bullying and social responsibility programs avoided the issues of racism, “skirting around” those issues (44). Racism could be ignored by assuming it was being dealt with by “the beads and trinket method, [which] is friendly” (47-5).

On the whole, participants reported that racism was denied, ignored or trivialized. Many teachers felt that racism was not dealt with in schools: “Racism in education. How is it dealt with? It’s not! (48-5); nor was it acknowledged: “Racism is not addressed; it is not acknowledged that racism exists in the education district and system” (41-1);

or “We don’t make an issue out of this topic [of racism] as much as we should” (41-6). “Racism overpowers without even using words” is how one Aboriginal teacher expressed it:

At our school level racism is not dealt with ... its not. To name it could rock the boat and this is frowned upon or it is out and out ridiculed. Racism is ignored within the majority context. By not discussing racism it doesn’t exist. In essence, the societal and institutionalized racism overpowers without even using words (48-10).

One of the difficulties pointed out by participants was that racism had become subtler, more hidden: “Racism has deteriorated and has become more hidden in recent times. The open ‘racist’ is rare; people tend to keep racist comments to those who share the same view. In my experience as a Native teacher, I have heard racist comments, but I address them” (49-6). When racism is expressed more subtly, it is regarded as easier to ignore or trivialize: “People sometimes accept racism. ‘Oh he really didn’t mean it’ kind of attitudes. It’s really not dealt with on a professional level. It’s kind of ignored. Put under the carpet” (48-8). Another teacher felt “our school and school division is trying to show that systemic racism does not exist” (46-3). Capturing her feeling, one Aboriginal teacher stated, “Racism directed towards Aboriginal people in Canada remains acceptable to Canadians. We have to say that it is *not* [italics added]” (47-5).

#### **Appealing For Intervention and Change**

Participants made an appeal for change, for implementing long-term strategies for dealing with racism, strategies that touched everyone every day. As one teacher said: “I believe we need to create safer environments to voice hurts created by racism. I believe we need to be solution-oriented when trying to mend experiences created by racism” (45-1).

Anti-racist education was one-strategy participants would like to see more of and learn more about: "Anti-racism education is vital to the success of and improvement in the lives of Aboriginal students" (48-6). There was also the recognition among teachers that, since racism was unfolding in new and subtle ways, there was the need for further training in anti-racist education: "I feel teachers, including myself, are ill-prepared to deal with handling racist issues" (43-3). "Racism is adapting, like everything else," observed one teacher, "It's looking different than twenty years ago. More subtle, sneaky, sneaking up to you when you don't expect it. We need to be trained to view the world through 'equity'" (43-3). For another teacher anti-racist education was important because of its focus on power and privilege: "I really believe we need to make anti-racism a part of our everyday teaching practice; an analysis of 'power' and 'privilege' and 'equity' need to be made sexy and desirable for all to be a part of" (47-4).

Strategies that deal with racism, participants stressed, must be long-term and enduring, "Not just for a day, not just for a week but also for every day" (41-5). Rather than minimizing the injustices committed under a belief in racial superiority by ignoring perpetrators and victims of racism, teachers insisted that those injustices must be made explicit: "Racism exists and it is hurtful, and history has proved that time and time again. I think collectively we make mistakes by trying to placate past wrong doings" (45-1). Placating past wrong doings too often results in sporadic efforts to deal with racism: "Racism is addressed out in the open at what seems like only a few times out of the whole year by the whole school, usually on the International Day for the Elimination of Racism in March. Although there is promotion of multiculturalism it just seems that we can be doing more" (44-2). These sporadic efforts were seen as

downplaying the racism of everyday life, becoming mere window dressing: "Racism is addressed somewhat; however, sometimes its just window dressing and other times you have one or two people making a concerted effort to effect change" (48-3). Rather than having only one or two people making an effort, participants suggested any effective strategies for dealing with racism must involve an institutional commitment marshalling the efforts of many people.

### **Summary**

In summary, Aboriginal teachers in this study experienced racism in several ways, including, feeling that: their qualifications and capabilities were discounted; they were frequently excluded and marginalized; that expectations of Aboriginal students were often lowered; that Aboriginal content and perspectives were trivialized or ignored; and that the effects of colonization and oppression on Aboriginal People were discounted. The participants in this study often responded to what they perceived as racism with shock and disbelief. They also made a variety of assessments in deciding how to respond. For example, they assessed whether it would be worth their energy and time to respond, which depended on the nature of their relationship to the person. Sometimes they chose not to respond when they felt that no intervention could have changed attitudes, and sometimes they decided to ignore, rather than risk being provoked. Other times they did take on the task of educating their colleagues and parents, which they tried to do without isolating. Many participants believed it was important to respond immediately and assertively, but they also believed that anger was not helpful, so they tried to listen with a quiet voice. Sometimes they also decided to file official complaints.



When asked how their non-Aboriginal colleagues and the school systems in general responded to racism in education, participants identified a number of programs such as, anti-racist programs, multicultural education, and anti-bullying and social responsibilities initiatives. They believed that effective programming depended on enlightened leaders and on whether people were receptive or not. But, in general, participants felt such programming was insufficient. For the most part, participants felt that racism was mostly denied, ignored or trivialized, and that it had become more hidden in recent times. Aboriginal teachers in this study would like to see more of and learn more about anti-racist education and they believed that educational strategies for addressing racism must be long term and enduring.

## Allies in Education

In the fourth and last area of inquiry, Aboriginal teachers in this study were asked to identify and describe the qualities and characteristics of non-Aboriginal colleagues who were allies, that is colleagues who they found helpful and supportive of Aboriginal education. For some participants this question seemed to be puzzling, but when probed to identify a particular non-Aboriginal teacher or administrator who they felt really helped them and was supportive of Aboriginal education in general, they were better able to respond about who and what allies were. They reported that it could be challenging to find allies among their non-Aboriginal colleagues, but they were able to offer a common description of those who were allies.

Participants also expanded their interpretation of the question about allies, becoming more inclusive than was originally assumed in the research protocol. For example, an important element of their conception of allies included reflections on how they themselves were or were not allies. Participants addressed some of the strengths they bring to being an ally as well as some of the challenges they face in becoming and being an ally. They also spoke about the ways in which Aboriginal parents and communities could either support or sabotage their work.

### Behaviours of Non-Aboriginal Colleagues that Make the Work of Participants Difficult

Finding non-Aboriginal allies could be very difficult for participants. The educational system was often seen as not being supportive as it utilized a “top-down one-way approach”, forgoing any “two-way street” (45). Participants talked about the lack of Aboriginal colleagues at all levels (42, 44, 47), and expressed their feelings of “being alone” (47). “I work in a white context and it is very demoralizing,” was the blunt explanation of one teacher (48). Participants felt exhausted from

the continual resistance of their non-Aboriginal colleagues to “think outside the box” (48). They got tired from trying to establish connections: “You keep throwing out the line and hoping our colleagues will jump on at some point. I think that’s the biggest challenge. You get tired of throwing the line” (48).

To become an ally, participants insisted that non-Aboriginal teachers must “start to address the biases and misconceptions that they have” (48) about Aboriginal people. Some non-Aboriginal teachers seemed unconcerned about Aboriginal issues, displaying a “why bother attitude” (43) and others, “just didn’t care” (46). Those who didn’t care also resisted learning about how differences among students might matter in the classroom. For example, one Aboriginal teacher described a colleague who felt “all kids are the same” (46) so there was no need to learn about the “uniqueness in Aboriginal people” (46). Another Aboriginal teacher was concerned that a non-Aboriginal colleague who inadvertently held stereotypes of how Aboriginal students might look, in fact failed to see his Aboriginal students:

Our principal hasn’t taken the time to get to know what our school community is. ... Half our Aboriginal students don’t have the traditional look and he doesn’t realize they’re Aboriginal. And I said to him, “You’re not going to see any of them wearing feathers. They’re not going to be coming here in regalia. Nobody has a loin cloth” (43).

Whereas Indian stereotypes prevented an identification of Aboriginal students’ needs, the racial invisibility of some participants also meant they could be unbeknownst witnesses to negative perceptions that some non-Aboriginal teachers had about Aboriginal issues:

You see a lot of true colours when they don't know who they're sitting with and they are having conversations about Aboriginal people . . . sometimes it is quite interesting. I think to myself, 'you say that about Aboriginal people', and then I tell them I'm from a First Nations community—and their attitude changes (49).

Sometimes the body language and other not-so-subtle behaviours of non-Aboriginal colleagues were used as a window into how those colleagues felt about Aboriginal people:

They say all the right things, they know what to do, ... but it's "the look", the body language. They are saying all these things to me, and I can't say that they are not welcoming, but the body language is telling me something else. I may not hear what the person said, but I know how I feel, and I am very much aware in that sense (46).

Feeling like they were from "another planet" or invisible in the midst of some non-Aboriginal teachers was how one Aboriginal teacher expressed it:

There are others that will not even say "hi" and they will not participate in discussions when it comes to Native stuff. It's like you're from another planet and yet they're working with Native students or they won't look at you or they will say things without saying anything, but body language says a lot. Or when you're talking during a group discussion, and somebody cuts you off and butts in and starts talking (43).

Sometimes this invisibility meant that participants were not heard: "I didn't get the message through very clearly unless it was done by a non-Aboriginal person, because they were willing to listen to the non-Aboriginal person" (47).

On the other hand, participants also expressed concern about those who present themselves as a "saviour" of or an "expert" about Aboriginal people:

We don't want someone to come in and save us and make everything all better. Aboriginal people want to be involved in the decision-making. We don't want people to fix it for us. Those colleagues, the people that are sitting beside us at the table, who are not Aboriginal, [they are helpful] if they can come to that table open and flexible in their thinking, and not have an agenda; if they know themselves and have some perspective on what Aboriginal people are going through, ... and have the ability to problem solve and see the bigger picture (47).

Those non-Aboriginal colleagues who presented themselves as experts on Aboriginal people and issues were seen as irritating:

A lot of time people want to be helpful but they go at it from the belief that they know best. And so they really don't have anything to learn from you, they will just tell you how to do it. They will be able to instruct you on how to teach your culture or instruct you on how to teach in a classroom of Native students. So that's definitely a drawback. My feeling is, "please don't come near me because I'm getting old and not very patient with it" (41).

But those non-Aboriginal colleagues who admitted their mistakes provided a very compelling example of what it meant to be an ally. One Aboriginal teacher offered a story about a non-Aboriginal colleague who shared his moment of insight:

He described the moment when the “light bulb” went on. He said, “For thirty years, I have done my life’s work, investing my energy in what I thought was right, never once considering to consult you”. He finally came to a realization and explained and apologized to us. He said, “I have to apologize; ... never once did I think to consult any of you. ... You have taught me so much”. This man was a big enough person to be willing to say he hadn’t been right (41).

So, some of the challenges in finding non-Aboriginal allies vary from those who are not interested in learning how to meet the needs of Aboriginal students and to those teachers who think they know best.

### **Behaviours of Aboriginal Communities and Parents that Make the Work of Participants Difficult**

Participants also detailed how Aboriginal communities, parents and leaders could behave in ways that undermined and made their work so much more difficult. “There are so many different issues in Aboriginal communities ... problems are so prevalent we can’t pretend that there are not there” (48), expressed one teacher; and those problems could prevent Aboriginal communities from serving as an ally (44, 45, 48, 49). Teachers noted that sometimes “the community is sick” (48, 49), making it difficult for students to do schoolwork (48); at other times community conflict “carries over to the classroom, to the kids and to the school . . . and makes the school sick” (49). For example, sometimes an Aboriginal community was divided among white, First Nations and Métis members, contributing to cliques within the school (44) and therefore making collaboration and cooperation difficult.

Ongoing conflict in the Aboriginal community, resulting in a lack of consistent support and occasional attacks, could leave some of these participants feeling confused and sabotaged, which undermined their work: “We’re a bridge to the community but...the community keeps pulling the pillars out from the bridge. ...After a while you end up getting confused and don’t know what you’re doing” (45). “Vicious” was how one teacher characterized the community’s response, vicious and inconsistent: “They are totally, totally vicious. ... They can be your friends one minute and then the next minute, they’re at your door beating it down” (45). People in the Aboriginal community could also act to undermine their Aboriginal teachers through jealousy: “Sometimes it’s our own people who are more quick to be jealous of where you’re at and what you have achieved” (48). A community’s negative response to Aboriginal teachers led another teacher to comment on how hard it was to be treated so badly by one’s own people: “This exploitation makes me emotional, because I think it’s awful the way we treat our own. Unless we work together, we don’t have a fighting chance” (45).

Sometimes it was Aboriginal parents who were identified as failing to be responsible or accountable for their children’s education:

I do have the parents there that will work with their children and me and that’s good. ...[But] somewhere down the line we’ve got to get that responsibility back to the parents, that education is not just the school’s responsibility, it’s all of us. And so many of our parents don’t want to have anything to do with their kids until it’s 3:30 and by then it’s too late sometimes. If your child is misbehaving, you’ve got to come to school and help us. The parents and we have to work hand in hand (48).

Another concern about parents was their resistance to traditional or cultural knowledge

being taught to their children, including participating in smudging ceremony and learning to speak their Native language (48).

A lack of Aboriginal leadership was also seen as an obstacle to a community serving as an ally to Aboriginal teachers (49): “The Native leaders and/or organizations or tribal councils need to have some accountability with the schools. ... There’s no acknowledgement from the tribal leadership, councils. And they just don’t have input or involvement” (43). One Aboriginal teacher summed up the situation with the community, parents and leadership by saying, “When you look at change, it has to be change as far as the community too” (45).

#### **Characteristics and Behaviours of Non-Aboriginal Colleagues Who Are Allies**

Non-Aboriginal colleagues who served as allies to Aboriginal teachers were seen by these participants as genuine and honest people: “You know right away which ones are pretending and which ones are not. ... You know when it’s genuine; you know when it’s fair. I feel really lucky this year that I do know who supports me and that I know who is an ally” (48). Part of this genuineness was being direct yet sensitive, not “beating around the bush” about Aboriginal issues. An Aboriginal teacher explained it this way: “An ally doesn’t feel she needs to choose her words to ask me any kind of question about Native people. She will just come and ask me” (45). “The big thing with an ally is it’s somebody who’ll call it as it is,” stated another teacher, “I distrust people that pretty it up with all these nice words. Allies are people who recognize that you can have a different quack” (48). Another part of being genuine was not telling Aboriginal teachers just what they want to hear: “I don’t want them to be telling me what I want to hear. I want them to be honest with me. I want people who have integrity” (48).

Allies were described as positive and open minded, people who listened, learned and made an effort to change: “[Non-Aboriginal allies] were open to different views and remain positive in light of adversity; [they] ... remain committed to finding the light, always” (45). Being open-minded was seen as leading to a willingness to listen: “I have worked with some teachers that are open-minded and they want to learn, even when there is not a lot of resources, because they are open-minded and good listeners ... It all works well, if they listen” (43). A willingness to listen, for example, led to a receptivity to new ideas, including the implementation of Aboriginal educational activities; a non-Aboriginal teacher was described as being “very good in listening to ideas, and whenever we had any special activities to do in the school, she was very supportive that way, and we would bounce ideas off each other” (48). Participants said that their non-Aboriginal allies must be secure in their own identity so as to be receptive to different ideas and activities.

Professionally, [non-Aboriginal teachers] need to feel secure about who they are and the work that they do, so that they don’t become defensive when you work with them or when they see that perhaps you’re going in a way that they don’t really understand. They need to be secure enough to be able to ask questions [about what] they need to understand, and they need to be willing to change (41).

Being able to listen was said to open the door to learning: “The most caring people I’ve ever met had taken Aboriginal courses. Even though they were the same people, they became very different people [after taking Aboriginal courses]; it’s almost like their eyes had been opened” (42). Allies were seen as active learners: “someone that is willing to ask for help and ask you questions. ... They crave knowledge of the [Aboriginal] people because they love the [Aboriginal] children and they know it’s

necessary to make their classroom successful” (43).

In the context of their being open-minded, willing to listen and learn, these non-Aboriginal teachers who were considered as allies were also portrayed as persons who accepted the need for change:

Allies are people who are learners and not just teachers; they are individuals who get to know children and families. It’s not just “another September” and we file another group through the room and they’ll leave, and then “next September” comes. Instead these teachers can actually tell you about each of those kids. They are people who themselves listen, ask questions and listen some more. They’ll challenge themselves and challenge you as well (48).

It is helpful that allies have confidence in their abilities to learn and change and are not threatened by the expectation that there is more to learn: “Allies are very trusting and they have resolve. They want to see change happen and so they’re not intimidated by the fact that they don’t know much ... but they have the resolve and commitment to see change happen” (47).

Participants explained that non-Aboriginal colleagues who were allies had a positive impact on Aboriginal students, in part because these non-Aboriginal teachers had a positive attitude toward Aboriginal culture, communities and students. As one Aboriginal teacher stated, “I thought of a non-First Nation teacher, who was very, very involved, very understanding, and positive. Even though some things didn’t work, she still stayed positive ... they seek the goodness and pass that on to the children” (45). Participants valued those colleagues who remained positive, realizing they could make a huge difference in regards to the success of students, especially Aboriginal students:

Non-Aboriginal people in the communities who are effective talk about our children in a positive manner all the time. I’ve worked in many small communities and generally there are those non-Aboriginal teachers who walk in and are always negative. And then there other ones that really make a difference, and they are the ones that actually see the good things in that child and were positive all the time. I was never sad to see those ones that were negative leave” (41).

One Aboriginal teacher, in talking about allies, explained, “You need them to be positive all the time, and prepared and willing to work with the students, all the time” (41). Participants valued those non-Aboriginal colleagues who become allies because these colleagues were “able to listen to our children, to their needs and their way of learning. Same way we have to be there for our own children, to be able to listen to them and to see them” (42). Allies worked to establish safe, supportive and meaningful relationships with their students: “It is a really good thing, when [Aboriginal students] feel safe with a teacher and know they can get help with things” (46). It was noted, for example, that allies put effort into learning and remembering names of students and parents (45). Allies tend to be people who were “teaching because they love to and because they are encouraging and open-minded” (43). “These non-Aboriginal allies tend to have some of the same qualities as we have in our own culture, “ observed an Aboriginal teacher, “They don’t hit something with anger. They deal with the students in a soft yet firm way” (47). One Aboriginal teacher offered advice for those who wish to become allies, stressing the importance of connecting to their Aboriginal students: “Develop that friendship ... [your Aboriginal students] are little human beings. They understand when they are wanted. I think that’s the missing part in our education, the connection between the teacher and the student” (42).

Seeking to adapt their pedagogy to the needs of Aboriginal students, non-Aboriginal allies were said to “start from where their [Aboriginal] students are and [then] just set the priority level and goals. Then they work with these students to insure they get it” (41). One non-Aboriginal teacher who was highly valued as an ally was described as follows:

[She is a] master teacher, the kind of person who’s very flexible in her deadlines and is willing to have her students hand things in late. She utilizes the services that are provided through Aboriginal education as best she can. ... I see her as being flexible, open minded, and willing to do what she can to help kids succeed. I admire her for that and wish there were more of her (47).

Non-Aboriginal teachers who were successful understood that there was no simple recipe for working with Aboriginal teachers and students. “I find, [non-Aboriginal teachers] . . . are always looking for a recipe to work not only with us but also with our kids,” observed one Aboriginal teacher, “and I keep telling that there is none “(48). Allies also understood the importance of teaching Aboriginal content:

They see the power in the curriculum when you teach Aboriginal content because it’s reflected in the students. ... Students who see themselves in the content that they’re being taught have more pride. Our teaching peers who come knowing how valid it is to have Aboriginal curriculum up and running, see how it makes their teaching powerful, powerful (47).

Those non-Aboriginal teachers who got to know Aboriginal people from the communities where they taught were highly regarded by these participants and Aboriginal people; allies were

people who “take the initiative to get to know us” (49) was how one Aboriginal teacher expressed it. If non-Aboriginal teachers wanted to become allies, then it was important that they had a genuine interest in Aboriginal people, their culture and history, “getting to know us as people first”.

I think what non-Aboriginal people have to realize is that they have to become our friend, get to know us as people first. Then we’ll gradually open up to you about our culture, our histories, everything else that we’re about. I think that goes for the kids too. See the students first, and get beyond the stereotypes and then that person will open up and get to know you (48).

Those non-Aboriginal colleagues who were willing to learn were said to be showing respect and support for Aboriginal people.

Those who are willing to learn our culture, our people and our history, that for me is being very supportive, respecting the community, our values and beliefs. That’s a really big thing I see in non-Aboriginal people, because some people come here with no idea what it is like to be living here (42).

Teachers who were allies cared about and were committed to Aboriginal education, often “have a passion for Aboriginal culture” (46); they “support First Nations period” (45) and were not people “who moved forward with Aboriginal education because it’s a mandate” (47). Allies take the initiative to connect to the community: “You don’t have to ask them. They just come and do it” (43).

Allies “learn to use Aboriginal community resources and be a part of the Aboriginal community” (46). They “make the effort to attend cultural events, or try to bridge communication with Aboriginal parents, and have an open attitude toward change

and are not afraid because it's Native" (47). Getting to know the elders, attending community events and celebrations, and serving on local committees, colleagues who were allies also sought to learn the local language, and eat "country food" (41, 42, 46, 49). Allies were observed to become "part of the family . . . [being] so comfortable around Native people that it's second nature" (45); they "have local friends and do stuff together" (41), and they have a sense of humor (41, 45)—in short, they become "Indianized" (47). When non-Aboriginal people get to know Aboriginal people, one Aboriginal teacher, tongue-in-cheek, said, "They actually see that Native people are half-decent and sometimes fun" (49). Non-Aboriginal teachers who are really connected to the community experienced a full range of emotions about Aboriginal people, including sadness as well as joy: "Sometimes in our community things are very tough. If you take the risk of becoming part of a community, then you get the joy but you also get the sadness" (41).

And yet, non-Aboriginal allies understood the importance of participating without taking over. As one Aboriginal teacher expressed it:

I've had a lot of good non-Aboriginal staff that understand the need for community ownership of the school, and empowering our community, like our local teachers and our local support staff. They don't come in trying to take from us, but actually participate and help us strengthen ourselves. It's very hard to find those kinds of people, very hard. And yet when you do meet them, there's a lot of commonality. . . . The key is, if they connect with the community, then that's it—they are on their way (41).

Allies were aware of and appreciated the impact of colonization on Aboriginal people: "Allies are aware of the historical traumas and events, so they're

more aware of the Aboriginal students' plight. Those kind of teachers are making a difference in students' lives" (46). "Allies understand colonialism and therefore are proponents of social justice," one Aboriginal teacher explained, " . . . they understand that even though assimilation dusted all of us [Aboriginal people], we're still here. We still have pride in our community and culture" (47).

The acceptance of Aboriginal teachers as equals was another characteristic identified in these non-Aboriginal allies: "I've been able to create allies in non-Aboriginal people when they treat me like an equal, cause you know, that's something that you feel from them. You know when you're being patronized, you know when people just aren't treating you on equal footing" (48). Participants knew that, "Staff who are allies value my opinion as a teacher. They see me as a colleague, as a peer teacher. They don't see me strictly as a Native teacher" (49). Being accepted as equals meant becoming a valued team member: "My non-Native teachers who are peers, respect my view, and treat me as part of the team" (49) which often means we "do a lot of things together" (45).

Participants and their non-Aboriginal allies each brought their own areas of expertise, based on experience and knowledge, to the relationship. Allies share their own expertise with Aboriginal teachers: "[She's an ally because] she'll find material for me that I can use"(48). In turn, allies respected Aboriginal teachers for any special knowledge they had about Aboriginal education: "[if my non-Aboriginal colleague does anything cultural and she is not sure, she will come across the hall and ask me." (45). Beyond sharing their respective areas of expertise, allies encouraged improvement in both parties: "A good ally is somebody who will not only push themselves but push you further" (48). It was also noted that allies were realistic in what they expected of Aboriginal



teachers: “Allies are open, honest, and supportive, and they treat you like an equal. But it’s also important that they are interested in listening and sharing their experiences and asking your opinions—but not just treating you like you are the expert” (48). The valuing of collaborative learning was another characteristic of allies identified by Aboriginal teachers: “We learned a lot of valuable stuff together” (43). The strengths of teamwork were seen as instrumental in “helping us break some ground,” stated one Aboriginal teacher, “We give our [non-Aboriginal] ally ideas and she’ll fly with it” (48). This description of the how collaborative learning can work was offered by one of the participants:

I’ve seen non-Aboriginal principals come and go. Now I’ve had this one principal for five years. When he first came he was one of those “know-it-all” type of a person, and I couldn’t really get along with him. At first we had our differences, but we always ended up talking about them, and agreeing upon any decisions that we were going to make. ... When we started to get along, we were able to work well together. We understood each other more clearly; he knew where I was coming from and I knew where he was coming from. Like we started to get that understanding of each other. He really became a mentor, where he was training and teaching me. We were side by side, like we were a really good team in the end. ... He had a better understanding of our community, our culture, and our traditions. He was really starting to get it. He supported every decision that I made. He was there to listen to my concerns, and he was really trying to understand where I was coming from. As first we were constantly fighting over things but we ended up being a really good team (42).

Knowing that it was the voices of Aboriginal teachers that must be heard, allies often worked behind the scenes to support success.

Allies are collegial; they want to see me succeed as an Aboriginal educator. They are going to do whatever they can do to help further Aboriginal education, to help you bring up the issues. But they know that’s it’s your voice that needs to be heard and not theirs. And so they do whatever they can to lift you up on their shoulders (47).

At the same time that allies supported efforts to have Aboriginal voices heard, they did not have to “blow their own horn,” and take public credit for their actions.

I can think of a principal who helped with the Aboriginal program. ... [He] was not in full view, but he was always behind, making sure everything was in place. You didn’t have to run and get this or that; if you were looking for something; he’d be there and he’d have it. He just made sure that whatever you were doing for your program went smoothly; he was like the little gopher. You always need somebody like that. He wanted it to be successful and he knew we didn’t have a lot of hands, and so ... he managed that way (41).

Fundamentally, non-Aboriginal allies were seen as providing the necessary back up; they were “always there to back me” (47) and “they let you know that they are on your side” (48). “Allies never say no” (49), was how one Aboriginal teacher expressed it; another teacher stated, “Natural allies right away, they help” (43). Most importantly, allies were there for Aboriginal teachers, even when it was difficult: “They did not leave me out there to hang” (47)

Acknowledging and praising contributions by Aboriginal teachers, at times vocally and publicly, was said to be another important part of being an ally, especially since there were so few Aboriginal teachers and their participation in the system was relatively recent: "One of my colleagues [who is an ally] is very supportive and vocal about her support. Whenever we do anything cultural in our classroom, she's been very supportive and cooperative and motivated to see those things happen" (45). Allies who were eager to promote the value of Aboriginal teachers were greatly valued: "[This ally] ... was very open to suggestions I had and would often tell other colleagues about what I did" (48). Praise and encouragement of Aboriginal teachers was said to lead to building their confidence, and to encouraging them to take innovative paths:

This one individual has been very encouraging in that way and that has helped me a lot ... because they sort of build you up and you need that in the beginning, you need encouragement. She will say, "Oh I can see you doing that, I can see you doing that and keep that ball rolling" which made me try a couple of new things this year. It kept me thinking of trying new things (48).

"They help bring on new ideas that had been forgotten," was the way one Aboriginal teacher described allies.

Providing validation and words of wisdom, allies could also serve as mentors for Aboriginal teachers. "He believes in me, and that's the biggest thing," said one Aboriginal teacher in describing an ally, "[With him] ... I'm allowed to grow and that makes a big difference" (45). Allies who are in positions of authority, such as a principal or administrator, could bring an extra dimension to their mentorship:

My associate principal is extremely supportive. She is my mentor. She validates me, she encourages me, and she supports me. ... In just the things that she says to me, she says, "Oh, that was really awesome" and it's like, she means it, she's not just saying it. ... She is very sincere about the things that she says to me. A lot of times I get discouraged about the kids, and she's the one that gives me words of wisdom to help me (46).

Participants said that allies helped them "manoeuvre through the system" (47), including caring for themselves. One example was teaching them "how to say no" (49) when bombarded with requests. Allies also helped Aboriginal teachers resolve conflicts (45).

Allies also offered emotional support, which was highly valued by these participants: "Administrators who listen to your concerns and support you, emotionally, especially if you are going through a really hard time, and they encourage you to continue" (43). With this emotional support, allies helped Aboriginal teachers in times of personal difficulties, dealing with teacher burnout (44) and building up teachers' confidence that they can do their job well:

I was going through a difficult time in my personal life. [These allies] . . . were just awesome. They were just so encouraging, and they really built confidence in myself. They helped me to develop more confidence that I could teach, and that I could do it well, and that I didn't have to keep proving myself over and over. They helped me feel good, so I could say, "Hey, I can do it" (46).

Serving as a sounding board was another valued contribution of allies identified by participants:

“Sometimes I’ll have an idea and I need someone to bounce it off of; he’s like my sounding board, and he’ll let me do it” (48). With participants often being the only or one of the only Aboriginal teachers in the school, having a sounding board became especially important: “Often you’re in your room alone and sometimes you don’t really know what you’re doing well. So it’s good to have somebody to share ideas with and someone who will give you feedback” (48). At the same time, participants emphasized they wanted trustworthy sounding boards: “I want people who I can trust. I don’t want people who after I’m doing something with them are then going to pass it off as their own idea” (48).

### **Aboriginal Teachers as Allies**

An important element of participants’ conception of allies included reflections on how they themselves may or may not be allies. Participants addressed some of the strengths they bring to being an ally, some of the challenges they face in becoming and being an ally, as well as some of the ways they sought to gain non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal allies.

Participants spoke about the desire and importance of being accepted as an equal to their non-Aboriginal teachers. Being accepted as equals by their non-Aboriginal colleagues also meant that they in turn could be allies to these colleagues. The belief that it was important to “treat others as you would like to be treated” was foundational. One Aboriginal teacher expressed that belief with these words:

I need to be a role model and be what I expect. “Treat others as you would like to be treated.” I have to try and live by those words. If I come across colleagues who give me a sense that they believe in that too, then that’s a good beginning for us to work together (47).

Another Aboriginal teacher expressed the belief that, as with friends, “the best way to get an ally is to be an ally”:

Originally my work was all about Aboriginal issues. Then I thought I’d better start giving workshops on anti-homophobia and other types of racism. So then I would learn more about everybody else’s beliefs and be an ally for them because nobody can stand alone . . . to get people to want to learn about Native Studies, we have to get allies. The best way . . . to get a friend is to be a friend, so the best way to get an ally is to be an ally (43).

Being allies, stressed these participants, entailed reciprocity. As non-Aboriginal teachers were seen as potential allies to Aboriginal teachers, the reverse was also said to be true. Being an ally “goes both ways” one Aboriginal teacher said, “The non-Aboriginal allies that I see and have within our district are few, but very much appreciated ... they need some supports in terms of their interests in First Nations ... so I take the time to connect them to people in my community which they really appreciate” (47).

A key to non-Aboriginal teachers recognizing the importance of learning from Aboriginal teachers was said to be Aboriginal teachers acknowledging and believing in their own strengths and gifts. For example, one Aboriginal teacher saw the significance of their own commitments and taking credit for what they had learned and had to offer: “I have seen a lot in my 20 years in the inner city. And I’m going to give credit to myself for that, and how I establish my strategies, and how I do things. And this is not in any way a putdown for anyone” (48). Another Aboriginal teacher explained “We have to start believing in ourselves, not just dreaming ... I guess we have to build our confidence and make it strong” (42); still another

teacher insisted that it is time for non-Aboriginal teachers to “be learning from us, from our [Aboriginal] values, culture and language” (42). “If we want to be satisfied, we have to do it ourselves” (42), said one Aboriginal teacher, which includes developing confidence in expressing “what they feel they know” (42).

The importance of developing the confidence in their knowledge of the profession was understood by participants, especially since at the same time that they struggle with “always trying to prove ourselves to our colleagues” (48). Developing confidence in expressing “what we feel we know” (42) was an important ingredient. But teachers also realized that because of their sometimes “quiet” style, they could easily be misunderstood and their competence questioned:

It takes a lot for me to get comfortable enough to share my thoughts and speak up. So I allow others to speak first, and sometimes that is viewed by a lot of colleagues as being passive. But I don’t have this need to be challenging and aggressive. With me, it’s a more quiet kind of leadership. But there are drawbacks to this because people assume something else; they assume “maybe she can’t do the job or maybe she’s not capable or competent” (48).

This “quiet leadership” often demonstrated by some their non-Aboriginal colleagues could misinterpret Aboriginal teachers as a sign of inadequacies, such as being too “passive” or even “incompetent;” and hence the feeling emerges in participants that, once again, they must prove themselves.

Participants also stated that it was important to acknowledge what they felt was an undue sense of burden and responsibility to make a difference:

“There’s a lot of expectations. I don’t know if its expectations, but as teachers we take a lot of burden. We put a lot of burden on ourselves” (48). And much of the burden these participants felt was the expectation that they perform in ways beyond the usual roles of teachers: “We don’t have all the answers ... but we’re supposed to be nurses, psychologists, mothers and sisters, and nutritionists and all these things that we’re not trained for” (45). The feeling of undue burden is often exacerbated by the fact that these participants often work in isolation, as the only one or only one of two Aboriginal staff members on a teaching staff.

A part of these participants’ being able to see themselves as allies to non-Aboriginal teachers might include acknowledging their own biases, and in particular their ambivalence toward non-Aboriginal people. “I’ve had my own biases towards white people” (48), one Aboriginal teacher stated clearly. Participants’ concerns about and frustrations with non-Aboriginal teachers who thought they were helping by lowering academic standards for Aboriginal students, made being an ally to those non-Aboriginal teachers a complex task:

I kind of flip-flop sometimes [about being an ally]. And I have become a non-ally every once in a while ... because I find a lot of people with good intentions who give Aboriginal students too many breaks, ... So, at what point do we accommodate the cultural needs for learning and at what point does that set them up for failure? You know, so I kind of flip-flop being an ally. I don’t want someone giving my child an easier test because he’s Aboriginal (49).

In addition to learning to value their own gifts and strengths as well as the challenges they face, participants also worked to nurture the development of non-Aboriginal allies by “giving

people the benefit of the doubt” (48), and being encouraging (48), as well as by “being there for others” (49), by simply “taking the time” to be with others (47). It was stressed that non-Aboriginal colleagues must first get “comfortable being next to a Native person” and “comfortable with Native issues”: “You have to get non-Aboriginal colleagues comfortable with Native issues, and being comfortable next to a Native person. And then once they get that comfort level, they’ll start to open up” (49). “I’ll throw a smile” (49) to help open a conversation was how another Aboriginal teacher expressed it. Participants remained sensitive to the challenges of raising “touchy subjects” with these non-Aboriginal colleagues—subjects such as those dealing with Aboriginal curriculum or racism: “We can get into those touchy subjects, but I know that they won’t be able to handle it” (49). Even though participants acknowledged that sometimes their non-Aboriginal colleagues don’t show “their best behaviour” when difficult subjects arise, and often talked about these issues when Aboriginal teachers were “not in the room,” participants felt the best way to be an ally is to have these difficult subjects discussed “in the open” (49).

Participants described freely sharing the curriculum materials they produce. A generosity of spirit, the “true Native way,” fuelled this sharing of their experience and knowledge with others: “As far as allies goes, there is the true Native way. The value is sharing and giving, whenever you can. All the stuff I make as a Native language teacher, I give, I share with whoever needs it. I never say, ‘No this is my stuff, I worked hard for it’” (43). Participants sought to give in return and not just take, reiterating the importance of reciprocity.

I find sometimes some teachers are willing to share and then you can also tell the ones that are not. ... When I’m asking them to share with me, I actually give them

something that I’ve done in my class, too. So I’m not really asking them for something unless I’m willing to give them something back. So it’s reciprocal. I like reciprocal team teaching (48).

Participants also described themselves as allies for Aboriginal people in general, for each other, for Aboriginal students and for Aboriginal communities. One Aboriginal teacher described the importance of ensuring that Aboriginal people are heard as the reason he or she stood up and spoke out.

I have to stand up for Aboriginal people in our country who do not have a voice. It’s not something I would have chosen to do. I would rather not have to stand up and talk. But it’s something that I feel I have to do. I’m passionate about it, because someone has to do it. It’s about time somebody stops and listens to us. (43).

They described various ways in which they supported and encouraged other Aboriginal teachers, explaining that they must “stand up for our Aboriginal teachers because nobody else will” (43). Some of the structures and strategies through which these participants become allies to their Aboriginal colleagues were by serving as role models for each other (45, 48), participating in an Aboriginal cohort (47), and seeking guidance from colleagues who were more knowledgeable about culture (44). Yet being an ally to their non-Aboriginal colleagues was made difficult, in part because of the job pressures and time constraints Aboriginal teachers felt; participants spoke of “having too much on their plates” and “not enough time building up capacity” so they could collaborate effectively as allies (47).

Sustaining a commitment to being an ally to their Aboriginal students was something participants saw as especially important, since many of these

students wouldn't identify themselves as Aboriginal because of pervasive stereotypes. Participants worked to validate a positive Aboriginal identity for their students, knowing the negative stereotypes they often received.

For so long, some Aboriginal students wouldn't even tell their teachers that they are Aboriginal because they know the teachers are going to have all of these stereotypes in their head, and they're going to teach and treat them differently. They're going to be judged differently and not necessarily in a good way (43).

There was a particular poignancy and urgency in participants' desires to be allies to their Aboriginal students. One Aboriginal teacher said her Aboriginal students are "like shadows," they are "invisible" with little connection to the school:

Maybe it's getting late in the day, but it's almost like our Native students are like shadows. They come and they go. They're invisible. They are usually not behaviour problems. They come and they go. They either do their work, or they don't do their work. They're in school, and they are not in school. The connections aren't there (43).

Participants also worried about their Aboriginal students when school was not in session, knowing how difficult home life could be for some (48).

Some of the ways participants tried to connect with their Aboriginal students included: emphasizing that "Education is your ticket out" (48); "bringing them to a level they're capable of reaching" (49); using humor (44); giving students the benefit of the doubt (48); not expecting perfection (44); and reaching out to students as a fellow teacher and learner. One teacher spoke about this shared journey of teaching and learning:

I tell my students right off the bat that I'm a human being first of all and I will make mistakes. I tell them "I'm not the only teacher in this classroom. You are also teachers in this classroom. You have a lot to teach me and I have a lot to share with you" (48).

Drawing on their relationships with Aboriginal parents, including their own families and the larger Aboriginal community was one way teacher participants sought to validate and support their efforts to teach their Aboriginal students personal responsibility, explaining that "how you live your life is how you will be judged" (49). Trying to connect with "tough" parents, participants would, for example, call these parents and say sincerely "thanks for sending your child to school today" (48), or not "put on airs" while in the community (48). A big part of the effort to connect with Aboriginal parents meant helping them to understand what was happening in the school (42). For example, one Aboriginal teacher stressed the importance of having an understanding about school rules regarding discipline, so that the child "cannot get away with so many things, saying one thing to the parent and another to the teacher" (42). Participants noticed a big difference between parents who were involved and those who were not:

I've noticed there's a real difference between those parents who will stand outside of the door at the end of the day, and the ones that will come into the school. 'Cause the ones that come in are fully in support of everything you do, and the ones that are standing outside are judging everything you do. The majority come in which is a good thing. ... Now that the parents see what we're doing, they become the allies and speak about it. So that's a good thing (48).

To encourage all stakeholders to understand what was happening in the school, it was important to find ways to have open and clear communication between school and community. A variety of strategies were used by participants to encourage community connections, including: community feasts (42); breakfast programs where parents help prepare and serve the food (42); annual meetings (42); and honouring ceremonies for graduates (41, 46). It was also seen as very helpful to have a chief and council, who were “very pro-education and know what they are talking about, who do their homework and fight for what they believe in” (49). As one Aboriginal teacher expressed it, when there is understanding between the teachers and community, it is “like a handshake. We’re in this together” (42).

### **Summary**

In summary, Aboriginal teachers in this study reported that finding allies could be very difficult, because of what they perceived as a resistance and/or lack of interest in learning about Aboriginal people; that they felt stereotypes and biases towards Aboriginal people are still too common; and that sometimes their non-Aboriginal colleagues communicated their lack of interest through body language, and by not listening and not acknowledging Aboriginal teachers. Participants stated it was very unhelpful when their non-Aboriginal colleagues presented themselves as saviours or as experts of Aboriginal people. The behaviours of Aboriginal communities and parents were also identified as a source for making the work of Aboriginal teachers difficult or undermining that work. For example, participants in this study reported the following: that problems in Aboriginal families and communities could negatively affect their classrooms; that they sometimes encountered a lack of support and at times hostility from the community and parents toward their work; and a lack of Aboriginal leadership about educational

issues, both within and outside Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal teachers in this study also identified and described characteristics and behaviours of non-Aboriginal allies. These non-Aboriginal colleagues tended to be genuine, honest and trustworthy, positive, open minded and good listeners; they were persons who made an effort to learn and to change. These allies were said to be effective with students because they were positive; sought to establish meaningful relationships with their students, and adapted their pedagogy to the needs of Aboriginal students, making efforts to get know the people of the communities where they were teaching. In general, these allies showed respect and support for Aboriginal people. They learned to use community resources and be a part of the community, and understood the importance of participating without taking over.

According to participants, non-Aboriginal colleagues who were allies were also aware of and appreciated the impact of colonization on Aboriginal people, accepted Aboriginal teachers as equals, and valued collaborative learning. They knew that it was the voices of Aboriginal teachers that must be heard, and so they often worked behind the scenes, providing the necessary back up, though at times they vocally and publicly acknowledged the contributions of Aboriginal teachers. Allies could also be mentors for Aboriginal teachers in this study, providing validation and words of wisdom, offering emotional support, and serving as a sounding board.

Aboriginal teachers in this study also identified themselves as allies, believing that to have an ally is to be an ally or to get a friend is to be a friend. To help become an ally, participants believed it was important to acknowledge their own strengths and gifts and to develop confidence in their knowledge of the profession, while at the

same time acknowledging the undue sense of burden and responsibility they have taken on in their commitment to make a difference. Some participants acknowledged that it was important to recognize their own biases and ambivalence towards their non-Aboriginal colleagues before they could be allies. Aboriginal teachers in this study believed that as allies they must give people the benefit of the doubt, encourage openness and comfort, and share their resources. Being an ally, participants believed, depended on their supporting other Aboriginal teachers, Aboriginal people, Aboriginal students and Aboriginal communities.

### **Hopes for This Study**

In conclusion, overwhelmingly, the Aboriginal teachers who participated in this study valued the opportunity to be heard, to hear each other and to be part of an effort to both promote change and to seek a better future. Participants expressed gratitude and appreciation for the “opportunity to have my voice heard” (49), and stressed, “the Aboriginal voice is imperative; we have to get it out there” (47). They believed that “the capability and determination of Aboriginal educators must be heard and seen” (42).

Participants hoped that the study would help facilitate some of their most deeply held goals and ideals. For example, they maintained a deep desire “to create a society that will hold true to our ideals regarding Aboriginal progress” (44); and they felt “changes in the education system” (42) were necessary “to promote the well being of our people across Turtle Island” (48).



## Discussion

In this discussion section, the initial point for the rationale of this study—that schools continue to fail Aboriginal students, and therefore there is an urgent need to improve and promote Aboriginal education—will serve as a constant, though often implicit, reminder. As a result, the discussion that follows will deal not only with understanding the nature and content of the Aboriginal teachers' professional knowledge and experience who participated in this study, but also the implications of that knowledge and experience for larger political issues, including social justice critiques of the current educational system.

In considering the data first collected in the present study, namely Aboriginal teachers' philosophy of education, it is evident that much of what Aboriginal teachers identify as characteristics of "effective teachers" and "good teaching" would also be identified by non-Aboriginal teachers. For example, most teachers, would likely agree that it is important for teachers to have an open and questioning mind, patience, humour, a love of learning and high expectations of their students. As well, they would likely agree that teachers must be approachable, respectful, good listeners, compassionate, flexible, organized, prepared, self-reflective and committed to developing positive relations with their students.

Maybe there is more in common between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers about what constitutes "effective teachers" and "good teaching" than there are differences. Yet, the Aboriginal teachers in this study report struggling to be accepted by non-Aboriginal teachers as fellow teachers. Perhaps, this struggle to be accepted is related to the question of who can be regarded as models of morality. For example, Bullough (2008) in describing his own story of becoming a teacher, explains that it was once understood that a teacher's moral standing was an essential

part of the content of schooling, and becoming a teacher was one way that he could live a moral life. Perhaps this idea of teachers' lives as providing moral examples has implications for the reception of these Aboriginal participants in public education. Bullough further explains that historically, the "quality of the lives lived by teachers mattered to the point of determining who would be employed to teach" (2008, p. 10). If teachers are expected to be a role model for what constitutes a good and moral way to live, then the history in Canada of Aboriginal people being treated as subjects to be civilized rather than as civilized agents has negative implications for these Aboriginal teachers. The findings in this study suggest that many Aboriginal teacher participants still encounter attitudes and behaviors that suggest that they do not belong in the profession, whether it is questioning their teacher education or qualifications or capabilities.

In addition to having their qualifications questioned, the research participants also reported feeling excluded and marginalized within the profession. Building on the idea of teacher as moral agent, Schick (2000) adds a critical race analysis. This race analysis helps to understand the hierarchal social relations that are reinforced by the racially dominant through the performance of unspoken norms about who can be a teacher. Arguing that the teaching profession has been one way in which racial dominance has been held in place (Schick, 2000) draws on the work of Fanon (1963) to describe:

The terror initiated by the colonized [Aboriginal teachers] when they perform perfectly those functions which the dominant group imagines it performs as distinguishing features of its dominance. ... What is shocking is the discovery that dominance is neither innate nor an automatic entitlement; and further, that

racial superiority is a social construction dependent upon those whom one has named as Other (p. 94).

The research participants sought to be accepted as teachers and valued for the important contributions they made to public education. Cohen explains, “it is through the social process of recognition that social groups, in this case professional educators, get established and maintained” (2009, p. 3). Although, Aboriginal teachers in this study reported a discounting of their qualifications and capabilities as teachers, they were at the same time, often expected to provide a number of services on the side, such as developing Aboriginal curriculum and supporting their colleagues to teach Aboriginal content and perspectives—and they often provided these extra services willingly. The research participants highly valued those non-Aboriginal colleagues who accepted them as equal, helping them to succeed and offering validation for the work and perspective they brought to the profession.

In the area of motivations for becoming a teacher and remaining in the profession, the present study highlights one difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers that warrants comment. Although participants had some of the same motivating factors as non-Aboriginal teachers, such as having a passion and love for teaching or seeing teaching as a “calling,” Aboriginal teachers in this study also described the importance of their Aboriginal identity. They stressed the special contributions they made to education both because of their commitments to challenge negative and racialized stereotypes of Aboriginal people, and because many had unique experiences grounded in their lives as Aboriginal people that they could bring to the profession.

Although some participants referred to non-Aboriginal teachers who also effectively resisted

and challenged negative assumptions about Aboriginal people, participants also addressed the significance of having Aboriginal teachers in the classroom as role models to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Aboriginal teachers in this study described their culturally grounded teaching practices and how these practices positively influenced Aboriginal students by offering those students a sense of belonging and “presence” in the classroom. Lynn (2002) found that African-American male teachers positively influenced Black students by serving as change agents, role models and by relating to students. Certainly, the research participants also described how they served as change agents and role models, but most importantly, they gave Aboriginal students presence in the classroom both by how they related to those students, and through their teaching of Aboriginal culture and history. As many Aboriginal students attending public schools have long struggled to be accepted and to find a place to belong (Friedel, 2009), providing them with a sense of presence and belonging is essential to their succeeding.

Aboriginal teachers in this study believed that good teaching means most of all being sensitive to the lives of their students. Loving and caring for their students, creating a safe learning environment for them, these Aboriginal teachers said they remain in the teaching profession despite all the challenges because they feel they can have a positive impact on children. They believed that teaching Aboriginal culture and history gives them and their Aboriginal students back their lives. In several instances it was clear that teaching Aboriginal culture and history provided an opportunity for Aboriginal students to speak out in the classroom, when otherwise they would not. The research participants sought to bring out the gifts of Aboriginal students, and in many ways supported Aboriginal students’ right to belong in

public schools. By positively acknowledging the lives of Aboriginal people, culture and history, the Aboriginal teachers in this study enabled Aboriginal students to become “bodies that matter” (Butler, 1993). These Aboriginal teachers worked to “enable a rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as ‘life,’ lives worth protecting, lives worth saving” (Butler, 1993, p. 16).

The participants in this study became teachers and remained in the teaching profession because the ethical and moral dimensions of teaching motivated them. But these dimensions can be undermined in a climate of market-driven education policies and practices that are increasingly present in educational systems. O’Connor (2008) brings attention to the impact on teachers of ignoring the ethical and emotional nature of their work through policies intended to assess teacher quality. This present study, like O’Connor’s (2008) and Day’s (2008) suggests that the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching need attention, and that teachers’ morale is an important factor in effective teaching, one that appears to have been marginalized in an educational climate that defines success in terms of test scores.

Other literature explores how market-driven policies in education and a climate of intensification of educational reforms has impacted the work and lives of teachers (Bullough, 2008) including: contributing to a climate of competing pressures (Jephcote & Salisbury, 2009); stimulating conflicting occupational dynamics in Aboriginal education, (Wotherspoon, 2008); while also affecting teachers’ continuing professional development (Tang & Choi, 2009), teacher commitment (Day, 2008), teacher resiliency (Gu & Day, 2007) and caring behavior of teachers (O’Connor, 2008).

Concerns and issues raised in this recent research literature on market-driven policies are

also relevant for the Aboriginal teachers who participated in this study. For example, O’Connor found that teachers believed that “caring for students form a crucial part of their identity” (2008, p. 118). Jephcote & Salisbury (2009) also found in their study that teachers believed that successful teaching was based on “establishing supportive relationships with their students ... it was these [relationships] which provided the necessary basis for changing students’ understandings of themselves as learners and their learning behaviours” (p. 970).

Both caring for students and taking time to establish supportive relationships with students are often not considered in teacher performance standards (Jephcote & Salisbury (2009; O’Connor, 2008), which has implications for those teachers who value this aspect of their work. But, when asked about the qualities and characteristics of effective teachers and practices of good teaching, the Aboriginal teachers in this study emphasized the importance of teachers, whether themselves or their non-Aboriginal colleagues, caring, even loving their students, and working to establish respectful, positive and encouraging relationships with their students.

Participants acknowledged the challenging circumstances that could surround their students and their families, and communities, but nonetheless these teachers felt that there should be no “disposable” kids, they could not give up on their students. Establishing and maintaining positive and caring relationships can be challenging. For example, in a recent study, Wotherspoon found that “social relationships pose the most controversial and highly contested challenges for teachers in Aboriginal communities” (2008, p. 407). Participants in this present study also acknowledged that a lack of support, and sometimes, even hostility from Aboriginal families

and community members towards the school and teachers contributed to sabotaging the efforts the teachers were making. The Aboriginal teachers in this study nonetheless continued to believe in the importance of “being a friend”, and working to support students and families to recover from a history of colonization.

Aboriginal teachers in this study had knowledge and experience to share about the benefits, successes and challenges of integrating Aboriginal content and perspectives and how it is possible to teach both in a meaningful way, offering one source of validation for the unique strengths and gifts that Aboriginal teachers can bring to the teaching profession. The history of colonization in Canada has meant that the beliefs, lives and history of Aboriginal people has either been excluded or grossly misrepresented in the Canadian school curriculum. This exclusion and misrepresentation of Aboriginal people has had negative effects on all students. Consequently, participants insisted that integrating Aboriginal content and perspectives into the curriculum not only has special resonance for Aboriginal students but also, by integrating in a way that includes all students becomes important for all students, as well.

But, Aboriginal teachers in this study suggested that there is still a lot more that can be done to ensure that Aboriginal content and perspectives are being taught in a meaningful way to all students. These teachers were calling for the system of public education in Canada to place more value and resources into supporting Aboriginal education. The need to provide adequate support to teachers attempting to respond to curricula change was also identified by Wotherspoon (2008) who found that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers “welcomed curricular demands though they were uncertain about the strategies best able to accommodate such demands” (p. 401). Participants in this study also identified the need for on-going

professional development for both themselves and their non-Aboriginal colleagues. By framing the challenge to integrating Aboriginal content and perspectives as a “need”, participants suggested ways in which the system of public education could improve. An important step, they said, would be for the public education system to listen to and act upon the professional knowledge and experience of Aboriginal teachers.

The hierarchy of school knowledge/subjects has implications for how others received both the Aboriginal teachers in this study and the Aboriginal content and perspectives they taught in schools. Goodson (1988) has argued that knowledge, including school subjects, is hierarchically stratified, and the legitimization of the unequal status of school knowledge is enforced through granting of high status to and the unequal subsequent allocation of material rewards for certain areas of curriculum. Academic curricula “involve assumptions that some kinds and areas of knowledge are much more ‘worthwhile’ than others” (Young, 1971 in Goodson, 1988, p. 161) and there is a pattern of social relations associated with that curriculum. These points raised by Goodson, may help us understand why the changes that participants in this study sought to establish are were so often resisted: we could argue they were “resisted insofar as they are perceived to undermine the values, relative power and privileges of the dominant group involved” (Young, 1971 in Goodson, 1988, p. 161). Not only is the subject matter resisted but there are material consequences in terms of resource allocations, such that those “deemed to be of higher status are assumed to need more” (Goodson, 1988, p. 179); more of everything—more time to teach, more teachers, more equipment, more books—all with implications for those who teach (Goodson, 1988). These politics of knowledge impacted the research participants who saw the Aboriginal content and

perspectives they sought to integrate underfunded, resisted and trivialized. These Aboriginal teachers were concerned with the low status accorded to Aboriginal content and perspectives they were teaching and the lack of funding and often minimal administrative support for their efforts. Aboriginal teachers in this study cited the ongoing need to acquire Aboriginal curriculum and materials, as well as the lack of adequate support for Aboriginal teachers who often developed their own curriculum materials in addition to all other duties and responsibilities, doing what amounted to unpaid work.

Aboriginal teachers in this present study interpreted the idea of who is an ally of Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal education much more broadly than was originally assumed in the research protocol; they also included themselves, their families and communities, in addition to non-Aboriginal colleagues as potential allies. Believing that to have an ally means you also have to be an ally, the research participants recognized the importance of acknowledging the special gifts and strengths they brought to the profession, especially how they encouraged openness in and gave comfort to their non-Aboriginal colleagues, and how they supported each other, Aboriginal students and people in general. These Aboriginal teachers acknowledged that finding non-Aboriginal allies could be difficult. But, they also reported that sometimes working with Aboriginal families and communities could be very hard on them, making their work in education so much more difficult and challenging. Wotherspoon (2008) has also reported that a student's home and community life often negatively impacted the work of teachers. The Aboriginal teachers in this study were appreciative, as were the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers in Wotherspoon's study of support from "administrators, colleagues and communities in which they work" (2008, p. 413).

It has been noted that becoming an ally in Aboriginal and Indigenous education is fraught with potential dangers, and "dependence upon non-Indigenous allies is a complicated and risky endeavour" (Kaomea, 2005, p. 40). The Aboriginal teachers in this study, for example, were concerned with those non-Aboriginal colleagues who presented themselves as saviours or experts of Aboriginal people. Non-Aboriginal colleagues who were allies, these Aboriginal teachers stated, knew when to speak and act, and they also knew when it was time for them to step aside so the voices of Aboriginal teachers could be heard.

Research participants appreciated non-Aboriginal colleagues who were genuine, honest and trustworthy; who were good listeners and who remained positive and open minded despite facing many challenges in education. Kaomea (2005), an Indigenous scholar, explains that non-Indigenous allies work collaboratively with Indigenous people, "listen closely to our wisdom as well as our concerns, interrogate unearned power and privilege (including one's own), and use this privilege to confront oppression and 'stand behind' [Indigenous people], so that our voices can be heard" (Kaomea, 2005, p. 40). Aboriginal teachers in this study, described the importance of those non-Aboriginal colleagues who showed respect and support for Aboriginal people by learning to use community resources and seeking to be a part of the community without taking over. Non-Aboriginal colleagues who were seen as allies accepted the research participants as equals, valued collaborative learning, often worked behind the scenes, providing backup when necessary.

Allies of Aboriginal and Native American education are also described in the literature as acknowledging the "historical circumstances that have resulted in low socio-economic status and a myriad of related issues" that impact education

(Hermes, 2005, p. 16). Rather than trying to be experts at teaching culture, these non-Aboriginal teachers are “cognizant of oppression, cultural change, and their own cultural identity” (Hermes, 2005, p. 22). Aboriginal teachers in the present study supported this finding. They also valued those non-Aboriginal colleagues who were aware of and appreciated the devastating impact of colonization on Aboriginal people. This did not mean for the participants in this study that non-Aboriginal colleagues lowered standards and expectations of Aboriginal students; rather these colleagues sought to establish positive and meaningful relationships with Aboriginal students, and adapted their pedagogy to the needs of those students.

At one level, participants described non-Aboriginal allies and good teachers in a similar manner; for example, both were seen as honest, trustworthy and good listeners. But allies had additional characteristics that showed their commitment to supporting Aboriginal education, such as mentoring Aboriginal teachers or working with the Aboriginal community. In short, allies were good teachers, but not all good teachers were necessarily allies—some good teachers have commitments other than to Aboriginal education in particular.

Aboriginal teachers in this study reported having a strong commitment to education. Teacher commitment has been identified as one of the most critical factors in the success of education (Huberman, 1997; Nias, 1981 in Day, 2008, p. 254). In a study exploring teacher commitment and resiliency, Day explains,

Teachers who are committed have an enduring belief that they can make a difference to the learning lives and achievements of students (efficacy and agency) through *who* they are (their identity), *what* they know (knowledge,

strategies, skills) and *how* they teach (their beliefs, attitudes, personal and professional values embedded in and expressed through their behaviours in practice settings) (2008, p. 254, original italics).

Research participants in this study believed that they could and did make a difference in the learning lives and achievements of their students, especially Aboriginal students. Drawing on their experience and identity as Aboriginal people they sought to make a difference in education. Many participants described how they began their teaching of Aboriginal content and perspectives by talking about their own lives and identity as an Aboriginal person; in that way they sought to establish a positive and meaningful relationship with their students. They reported having a strong commitment and passion for teaching Aboriginal culture and history, and shared many stories of the varied way in which they sought a meaningful integration of Aboriginal content and perspectives into the curriculum, which included teaching the everyday and local of Aboriginal life. Aboriginal teachers in this study were eager and willing to teach, to share what they knew and to seek each other out to learn more.

But, a climate of increasing expectations and “persistent results-driven national policy interventions” (Day, 2008, p. 243) is having negative effects on teachers’ commitment to education. Days’ research seeks to understand how to enable teachers to build and sustain their sense of identity, commitment, agency, and effectiveness (Day, 2008, p. 246). He found that as expectations on teachers have increased, teachers need a higher level of morale and commitment to stay in the profession and to be effective; though for many teachers external pressures have led to a decrease in teacher morale and commitment (Day, 2008). Day also argues, “a positive sense of identity

with subject, relationships and roles is important to maintaining self-esteem or self-efficacy, commitment to and a passion for teaching” (2008, p. 250). The Aboriginal teachers in the present study remain committed to maintaining and developing a positive sense of identity in themselves and their Aboriginal students.

Resiliency is another concept that can help us understand the Aboriginal teachers in this study. Day explained that children and adults who are resilient are “able to form and sustain socially positive relationships, [are] adept in problem solving, have a sense of purpose and motivation for self-improvement, and have the capacity to ‘bounce back in adverse circumstances’” (2008, p. 254). Participants exhibit characteristics of being resilient. After decades of Aboriginal people experiencing failure in schools, that these participants have managed, (often because of Aboriginal educational programming) to obtain a post-secondary education required to be certified as teachers is an indication of their being resilient. Furthermore, many have also obtained master degrees and remained in the teaching profession for well over twenty years. Despite many social, economic and political challenges, both within Aboriginal communities (e.g. Wotherspoon, 2008), but also within their own profession, they still sought to establish positive relationships with their students, parents, colleagues and each other. In discussions of allies, they described the ways in which they sought to be allies, believing that to have a friend you have to be a friend, and to give others the benefit of a doubt is the best approach to solving problems.

If being resilient means have a sense of purpose and motivation for self-improvement than the Aboriginal teachers in this study can be described as resilient. They were motivated to make a difference in the lives of students by challenging

negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people, by serving as role models, and by teaching Aboriginal culture and history in a meaningful and relevant way. Although they encountered a variety of adverse circumstances, such as lack of Aboriginal curriculum materials or misunderstandings of Aboriginal education by their colleagues, or challenging social and political conditions in the schools and in the communities, they continued to be committed and motivated to remain in education. Whether they encountered resistance to their presence in schools, or conflict among parents and families in diverse communities or the effects of poverty on students, they remained committed to making a difference in education. In the end, these Aboriginal teachers sought to continue their own education and self-improvement, whether it be learning more about anti-racist education or about the most effective ways to be an ally or how best to support the development of a positive identity in their students.

# Recommendations

## Recommendations about substantive issues that need to be addressed<sup>4</sup>

- Honour and respect the unique nature, value and contributions of Aboriginal knowledge and Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning.
- Select, train, hire and actively seek to retain more Aboriginal teachers.
- Require training and/or course work in Aboriginal education, including a focus on: contemporary Aboriginal issues; a critical perspective on the history of colonization; critical anti-racist education; and Aboriginal cultural knowledge, such as values, traditions and ceremonies. Faculties of Education, in their teacher training programs, Teacher Certification Boards in their setting of certification standards, and School Divisions in their on-going professional development workshops, could all implement such training or course work.
- Encourage the functioning of non-Aboriginal allies, including administrators and colleagues, who can work with and support Aboriginal teachers; allies who are passionate about Aboriginal education.
- Offer mentoring to Aboriginal teachers, helping them learn how to negotiate the system and how to maintain a reasonable workload.
- Teach Aboriginal content throughout the school, in all subjects, every day.
- Acknowledge and utilize local resources, especially Aboriginal elders.
- Encourage Ministries of Education, in consultation with Aboriginal teachers and local Aboriginal resources, to develop and promote the use of Aboriginal curriculum.
- Establish a national website that makes available Aboriginal curriculum and resources.
- Develop authentic orientations for teachers about local, provincial and territorial First Nations, Inuit and Métis cultures.
- Acknowledge the importance of Aboriginal learning and education that happens outside regular school setting.
- Seek to establish partnerships with the local Aboriginal community and leadership in meeting the needs of Aboriginal teachers and students, such as more Aboriginal representation on school boards.
- Ensure that Aboriginal teachers are meaningful participants in all working groups, policy development initiatives, and funding determinations that deal with education, at all levels and agencies of administration and government.
- Provide opportunities for Aboriginal teachers to network with each other, with as much face-to-face contact as possible.

<sup>4</sup> These recommendations are based on comments and observation made by Aboriginal teachers who participated in the study.



## **Recommendations about how the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) can further support and promote Aboriginal education<sup>5</sup>**

- CTF should activate all the relevant networks to implement the above substantive recommendations made by Aboriginal teachers in the present study, all the while ensuring collaboration between agencies and working groups.
- Some specific suggestions on networks that can be activated to support and promote Aboriginal education:
  - Since the CTF has a legitimate and potentially significant role to play in lobbying the Council of Education Ministers, CTF should pursue that avenue.
  - The CTF should consider conversations with Office of the Interlocutor, including pursuing the idea of a national lobby to increase the hiring of Aboriginal teachers.
  - CTF should work to connect teachers in First Nations band schools with the public system through professional development and school exchange programs.
- CTF should foster dialogue with those outside of the education establishment.
- CTF should foster public acknowledgement of the impact of Aboriginal teachers on education through CTF media partnerships (e.g. APTN project).
- CTF should publish statistics and information to establish and promote economic benefits of an educated Aboriginal work force.
- CTF should consider collecting a second Anthology of Aboriginal Educators' stories.
- CTF should work to ensure money provided for Aboriginal students actually goes to support Aboriginal students.
- The CTF can facilitate the dissemination of and dialogue about the findings from the present research study

5 These recommendations were generated from the CTF sponsored National Symposium on Aboriginal Education held on May 9- 10, 2008. In attendance were members of the CTF Aboriginal Advisory Board and staff members of teacher union organizations. A draft of the research findings from the present study was presented for discussion at that symposium. Attendees gave feedback about the findings and generated a series of recommendations based on those findings.

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**Some specific suggestions about ways to facilitate dissemination of and dialogue about findings<sup>6</sup>**

- CTF should host a series of Aboriginal teachers' seminar across the country to share the information in this research report.
- CTF could encourage each teacher's organization to form a committee, consisting of Aboriginal teachers and their allies, who could take ownership of the present research and develop presentations and an advocacy campaign to educate stakeholders about the findings in the study.
- CTF should make sure provincial and federal levels are aware of the research report, creating opportunities for dialogue and professional development within teacher organizations; and among those outside of the educational establishment.
- CTF should make this research report available to bargaining units of member organizations as well as staff.
- CTF can encourage teachers' organizations to make official presentations of this research to Ministers of Education, school board associations and school superintendents.

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# Appendixes

## Appendix A

### **Participating Teachers' Organizations**

Canadian Teachers' Federation  
Alberta Teachers' Association  
British Columbia Teachers' Federation  
New Brunswick Teachers' Association  
Northwest Territories Teachers' Association  
Nunavut Teachers' Association  
Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation  
The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario  
The Manitoba Teachers' Society  
Yukon Teachers' Association

## Appendix B

### Opening/Introduction Questions

1. When and where did you receive your teaching certification?
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. Describe the contexts and subject/grade level of your teaching assignments?

### Open-ended Questionnaire on Teaching Philosophy

With as much detailed description as possible respond in writing to the following questions. Give as many concrete examples in your responses as possible. You will have one hour to complete these questions.

1. An effective teacher is ...
2. Good teaching means the following to me ...
3. My own teaching philosophy is ...
4. I am motivated to remain in the teaching profession because ...
5. I would add the following ideas on my philosophy of teaching ...

### Focus Group Interview on Aboriginal Curriculum

1. Describe a teaching experience in which you were satisfied with both the Aboriginal curriculum/content and your approach to teaching it?
2. What approaches and strategies, if any, do you utilize in making curriculum culturally appropriate?
3. Describe successes and challenges of your colleagues and/or school districts efforts to incorporate Aboriginal curriculum and content?

### Open-ended Questionnaire on Racism in Education

Respond individually and in writing to following questions.

1. Can you describe incidents and/or practices that you would identify as racist, whether they were intentional or not.
2. What criteria do you use in deciding how to respond when faced with racism? For example sometimes you intervene and sometimes you don't.
3. How is racism in education addressed in your educational context?
4. Are there other experiences with and understandings about racism that you would like to add?

### Focus Group Interview on Allies of Aboriginal Education

For each of the following questions, it would help to tell a story or two to illustrate examples.

1. Can you describe the professional and personal qualities of a non-Aboriginal colleague who you have found particularly effective in supporting your own work as a teacher?
2. Can you describe the strategies of non-Aboriginal teachers and/or administrators who you regarded as supportive and generally making the school an affirming place for Aboriginal teachers, students and families.
3. Describe any challenges or drawbacks you may have encountered in collaborating with non-Aboriginal colleagues.
4. Are there other issues about allies that you would like to discuss?

### Concluding / Existing Reflections

Respond in writing to the following:

1. What other issues did we not address that you think are important and relevant in a study of Aboriginal teachers and their knowledge of education?
2. Can you describe your motivations/reasons for participating in this research?
3. What expectations if any did or do you have of this research?

## Appendix C

### A Selected Sample of the Procedures for Coding of Data

This Appendix will offer a selected sample of how the data was coded for the present study. In this Appendix, a *sample* of that coding process, illustrating two phases of the process (“initial coding” and “focused coding”), will be presented. For a full discussion of how these two phases of data analysis function, see Charmaz (2006), pages 47- 60; these pages guided the coding in the present study.

The sample of coding which follows deals with *one of the four areas of inquiry* in the research, namely the Aboriginal participants’ experiences of racism. Participants were given a questionnaire with four open-ended questions about racism. Their written responses were typed out fully. Each of the four questions about racism was coded separately, and each question was coded individually for each participant, before being looked at for themes that emerged from the group of participants as a whole.

To ensure anonymity, a numbering system was used to identify the data. Each group of participants—a total of nine groups from across Canada were assigned a number from 41-49. There were two methods of data collection, in one method, participants responded individually in writing and for that data each participant in each group was given a number; e.g. group 42 had 6 participants, so participants were assigned numbers 42-1, 42-2 etc. As a result the data from each participant in the study could be identified, and coded. The second method of data collection occurred through a focus group interview, in that data participants were not individually identified, the data from that source is simply identified by the assigned group number.

### **The Process of Initial Coding**

Initial coding involves assigning the data, either line

by line or segment by segment, “action words” that represent and interpret the meaning of that data.

### **The Process of Focused Coding**

Focused coding involves synthesizing and interpreting larger segments of data, using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes, identifying moments or processes or actions. In this next stage of data analysis, the data from the initial coding phase is reviewed to determine what responses were most often identified and/or given importance by participants.

### **Question #1 on racism**

Can you describe incidents and/or practices that you would identify as racist, whether they were intentional or not?

### **Initial coding**

What follows is a list of action words that were used to provide an initial coding: trivializing, isolating, devaluing, dismissing, intruding, resisting, belittling, ignoring, rejecting, ridiculing, discounting, discrediting, disapproving, overlooking, minimizing, questioning, silencing, overlooking, judging, resenting, disrespecting, confronting, not welcoming, undermining, distorting, tokenizing, lowering expectations, stereotyping, blocking changes, not addressing, not inviting, not recognizing, and blaming.

### **Focused coding**

At this phase of the coding, broader categories or themes arose, such as: 1) trivializing of Aboriginal curriculum, culture, content, history and oppression of Aboriginal people; 2) belittling and stereotyping Aboriginal teachers, students and history; 3) lowering expectations; and 4) discounting Aboriginal teachers

The final categories and/or themes became: 1) disregarding Aboriginal teachers qualification and abilities; 2) resisting Aboriginal content and



curriculum; 3) lowering expectations of Aboriginal students; and 4) discounting history of oppression and colonization of Aboriginal people

### **Question 2 on racism**

What criteria do you use in deciding how to respond when faced with racism? For example sometimes you intervene and sometimes you don't?

#### ***Initial coding***

Action words for the initial coding included the following: assessing, correcting, confronting, responding, asserting, addressing, identifying, talking, asking, responding, ignoring, controlling, expressing, attempting, questioning, voicing, filling in, defending, reporting, telling, building, leaving, affirming, correcting, telling, speaking up, ignoring, interpreting, disbelieving, withdrawing, intervening, and shocking.

#### ***Focused coding***

The data presented itself in the following sequence. First, participants described what their perceived role was in responding to racism; second, participants identified the decisions they made in the moment about how to respond; and third, participants described the effects on them when faced with what they perceived to be racism.

Using these three broad categories as a way to understand and interpret the data, the data showed that participants either challenged, confronted, intervened, asserted themselves or they withdrew and were disbelieving. The focussed categories involved teachers engaging in the following: assessing self and situation; seeking clarification and more information; challenging, confronting and teaching; sometimes deciding to withdraw or seeking to prevent; seeking outside support; and making suggestions for change.

The final categories and/or themes became: responded with shock and disbelief; made assessments; sometime choosing not to respond; did not want to risk being provoked; decided whether worth their time or energy; depends on relationship to the other; necessary to respond immediately and assertively; must be professional; anger not helpful; need to cool down; and file official complaint.

### **Question #3 on racism**

How is racism in education addressed in your educational context?

[Note: there were fewer responses to this question than there were to the first two. Participants seemed to have detailed most of the knowledge and experience in response to the first two questions]

#### ***Initial coding***

Action words for the initial coding included the following: not addressing, creating discomfort, lacking action, not acknowledging, needing support, teaching equity, encouraging, enlightening, avoiding, needing to be everyday, immediately, healing, ill prepared, ignoring, discomforting, leaving, occasionally, targeting, addressing continuously, teaching moments, educating, including, not taking personally, asking, equity, and institutionally.

#### ***Focused coding***

In the focussed coding, participants described what was presently occurring, but also commented on the quality of those responses and what needs to happen. Categories and/or themes which emerged were: identified a number of institutional strategies and programs; that enlightened leadership was a must; responses inadequate and insufficient; mostly racism was denied; racism had become more hidden; appealed for change; and long term and enduring strategies

**Question #4 on racism**

Are there other experiences with and understandings about racism that you would like to add?

As is typical for the processes of initial and focused coding in the grounded theory method of data analysis, an increasing number of codes and/or themes emerge as each question is analyzed. Soon, the codes and/or themes that have emerged can properly represent all the data from participants' responses. In the present study, this was already happening with Question 3, where most of the responses could already be coded by existing codes. By the time responses to Question #4 were analyzed, the codes and/or themes that had already been created, covered and explained the data presented in response to that final question.



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