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## Weeding Out or Developing Capacity? Challenges for Aboriginal Teacher Education

*Teacher education is critical to the development of Aboriginal teachers able to ensure success among Aboriginal learners and contribute to the preservation and renewal of Aboriginal communities. In a series of talking circles, six beginning Aboriginal teachers discussed their teacher preparation and their first years of practice. They expressed concerns about teacher training programs that they regarded as assimilationist and a need for teacher education that helps Aboriginal teachers examine their individual and cultural identities in order to become effective teachers. Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) is used as a discursive framework for critiquing existing approaches and offering culturally responsive alternatives.*

*La formation des enseignants est essentielle au développement des enseignants autochtones en mesure d'assurer la réussite chez les leaders autochtones et de contribuer à la conservation et au renouvellement des communautés autochtones. Dans une série de cercles de discussion, six nouveaux enseignants autochtones ont discuté de leur préparation professionnelle et leurs premières années d'enseignement. Ils ont fait part de leurs préoccupations à l'égard des programmes de formation des enseignants qu'ils considèrent comme assimilationnistes d'une part, et du besoin pour une formation qui aide les enseignants autochtones à examiner leurs identités individuelles et culturelles en vue de devenir des enseignants efficaces, d'autre part. La théorie critique de la race (TribalCrit) sert de cadre discursif pour critiquer les approches existantes et offrir des alternatives culturellement significatives.*

Effective professional education for Aboriginal teachers is critical to preparing Aboriginal teachers who are able to ensure success among Aboriginal learners and contribute to the preservation and renewal of Aboriginal communities. In this study, we draw on the perspectives of six Aboriginal teachers to critically examine teacher education for Aboriginal teachers in Ontario. In a Wildfire

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Gathering (Hodson, 2004), a series of Talking Circles over three days, participants discussed their teacher education experiences. In particular, they expressed concerns about programs that emphasize the reproduction of mainstream knowledge at the expense of Aboriginal languages and culture. Although the number of participants is small and their experiences highly diverse, the perspectives of these Aboriginal teachers raise important questions about the preparation of new Aboriginal teachers in Ontario and offer insights into how Aboriginal teacher education might be reconceptualized across Canada.

The discussion in this article is informed by Aboriginal standpoints that are critical of the explicit and implicit mainstream assumptions on which Aboriginal teacher education in Ontario is based. TribalCrit theory (Brayboy, 2005) is used as a discursive framework for critiquing existing approaches and offering culturally responsive alternatives. Culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth and teacher education reform literature (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008) also inform our analysis.

#### *Theoretical Framework*

One of the challenges for minority groups in North America is that unexamined racial and cultural assumptions are endemic to society and ingrained in traditional views of education (Ladson-Billings, 1998). When applied to Aboriginal education, such unexamined assumptions lead researchers to make normative assumptions and judgments that fail to account for “the multiple, nuanced, and historically- and geographically-located epistemologies and ontologies found in Indigenous communities” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 427) and lead to proposed solutions that are not responsive to the cultural traditions of Aboriginal students (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

The limitations of interpreting Aboriginal educational outcomes using mainstream epistemology are evident in a recent C.D. Howe Institute report on reducing the high school completion gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Richards, 2008). Richards reported that more than two thirds of Aboriginals (aged 25-34) fail to complete high school, whereas high school certification has become nearly universal among non-Aboriginal students. This led the author to suggest that a “marginalized community, such as Aboriginals, living in a modern economy can only escape poverty through an educational transformation” (p. 1) that emphasizes the “successful mastery of the knowledge and skills imparted by a good primary and secondary education” (p. 2). The main recommendations are the creation on reserve of Aboriginal-run school districts independent of individual band councils and the application off reserve of best practices as measured by standardized performance indicators (Richards). There is only cursory acknowledgment that understanding of heritage and facility with culture are also criteria for evaluating education accomplishment. Richards’ lack of cultural responsiveness leads him to question the commitment of Aboriginal leaders to educational achievement and to minimize Indigenous heritage concerns in the light of growing interest in Aboriginal issues shown by non-Aboriginal students.

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) was developed by Brayboy (2005) as a theoretical frame for analyzing “the problems encountered by American Indians in educational institutions and programs that are in place to uniquely

serve American Indian communities" (p. 427). TribalCrit is an adaptation of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which has been used by African American scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1998) as a framework for identifying and critically analyzing racialist assumptions that underlie many mainstream views of education and for promoting social justice as a means of overturning subjugation. Applying TribalCrit to education in Canada helps reframe education issues meaningfully for members of Aboriginal communities and respects their ways of living.

The primary tenet of TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) is that colonization is endemic to North American society, that tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are critical to Aboriginal people understanding their lived realities and that state educational systems need to acknowledge this as part of a program for Aboriginal socioeconomic participation and educational success. Such colonization means that Western knowledge and power structures are predominant and lead to the dismissal of Indigenous ways of knowing and living. A stark example of this is Richards' (2008) emphasis on mainstream standards and dismissal of band council leadership. In order for Aboriginal people to move forward toward social justice, they need to be able to recognize and break away from government policies rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and capitalism in order to reestablish liminal spaces in which they can begin to reclaim self-identity, self-determination, and tribal sovereignty (Battiste, 2002; Brayboy; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). In teacher education, this entails understanding the values and cultural contexts of the Aboriginal communities in which learning takes place. TribalCrit can inform understandings of Aboriginal education by elaborating and legitimizing theory based on Aboriginal experiences and contributing to social change by addressing problems faced in communities. TribalCrit can lead to recommendations for closing the achievement gap that apply the language and cultural heritage criteria that were downplayed by the C.D. Howe Institute. By rejecting the deficit model of many mainstream researchers, TribalCrit can lead to recommendations for teaching and teacher education that build on the beliefs and capacities of Aboriginal learners, teachers, and communities.

Aboriginal people acknowledge that considerable challenges face their communities and that educational outcomes for their children are distressingly low. They are genuinely worried that the health of Aboriginal cultures continues to decline (Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001), and that many young Aboriginal people possess little knowledge of their language and culture (Statistics Canada, 2003). Although Aboriginal leaders and scholars have long advocated for educational experiences that identify, represent, and celebrate their languages, cultures, and values, "provincial curriculum does not allow First Nations students to learn in their own language or learn their own history in a meaningful way" (Anderson, Horton, & Orwick, 2004, p. 8). Even the *Ontario First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007), which offers a "holistic and integrated approach to improving Aboriginal student outcomes" (p. 6) and is more sensitive to cultural needs, leaves decision-making authority in the hands of school boards but not Aboriginal education authorities and communities.

Aboriginal teachers, with their understandings of the intricacies of balancing Euro-Canadian curriculum with Aboriginal language and culture (Archibald, Pidgeon, Janvier, Commodore, & McCormick, 2002), have a critical role to play in developing culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). With appropriate teacher education, Aboriginal teachers with linguistic and cultural competence can also enhance student educational accomplishment (Moyle, 2005) and Aboriginal world views (Neegan, 2005). Conventional approaches to teacher education in mainstream institutions, however, often weed out prospective Aboriginal teachers who possess the linguistic and cultural competence to educate Aboriginal students effectively because these competences are not valued and accounted for in the mainstream training programs.

Recent changes in mainstream understandings about teacher education also offer reason to hope for more culturally responsive Aboriginal schooling and teacher education. In response to criticisms of teacher education programs and practices (Fullan, 1993; Goodlad, 1990; Holmes Group, 1986), significant efforts were made to improve teacher education. Teacher education increasingly shifted from training teachers how to transmit prescribed curriculum to preparing teachers to become responsive to the complex demands of diverse classrooms and schools. The significant body of knowledge that has emerged from these efforts has the potential to transform teacher education, including the education of Aboriginal teachers (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & Le-Page, 2005).

Because we live in an increasingly diverse and rapidly changing society, effective teachers need to possess professional knowledge, pedagogical skills, flexibility, a capacity for continual professional development, and commitment to meeting the needs of diverse students in complex communities (Bransford et al., 2005). They need to become “adaptive experts” (Hatano & Oura, 2003) capable of being “a source and creator of knowledge and skills needed for instruction” (Cohen & Ball, 1999, p. 6) and able to “exercise trustworthy judgment” (Bransford et al., p. 2). Critical reflection is a pedagogical strategy now regarded as vital to helping new teachers make their learning explicit by drawing on the richness of their experiences while also challenging their unexamined assumptions about learning (Zeichner & Liston, 1987). Critical reflection permits students to become self-aware in the context of their own development and practice, thus theoretically making them adaptive experts. They can draw on knowledge about the social, cultural, and language backgrounds of themselves and their students to teach in ways that increase the academic achievement of their Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and reduce disparities.

These understandings correspond with research being conducted by Aboriginal scholars and recommendations from Canadian Aboriginal leaders. Ensuring that teacher education is responsive to the needs of diverse communities is consistent with the position of First Nation leaders, who argue that Aboriginal teacher education curriculum needs to address culture, language, history, and intellectual traditions to ensure quality Aboriginal education (Anderson et al., 2004). These understandings align with Battiste’s (2002) recommendation that Indigenous knowledge be an integral part of Aboriginal

education. Aboriginal teachers with adaptive expertise may also be more receptive to the importance of working with Elders to affirm cultural identity in students. Reflection by teachers can also help them instill in children greater awareness of traditional values and by so doing strengthen their pride in being Aboriginal people. Together, current mainstream teacher education reform initiatives, the educational reforms advocated by Aboriginal leaders, and the recommendations of Aboriginal scholars have the potential to transform the preparation of Aboriginal teachers and the learning opportunities of Aboriginal students. Below we use these understandings to examine the teacher education experiences of the new Aboriginal teachers in our study.

#### *Context and Methodology*

Our research gives explicit attention to the voices of six Aboriginal teachers in the province of Ontario. These were from three Aboriginal groups in Ontario: three Anishinabe (Jocelyn, Drew, and Clare), two Mohawk (Tom and Louise), and one Métis (Tanya). Four were female and two male. Four were in their first two years of teaching, whereas two (Tanya and Louise) were in their fifth. Three taught on reserve (Clare, Jocelyn, and Louise) whereas three worked in publicly funded schools (Drew, Tom, and Tanya). They ranged in age from their late 20s (Jocelyn) to their mid-40s (Drew and Louise).

Invitations were sent out to early-career Aboriginal teachers from across Ontario. Ten teachers accepted our invitation, but only six were able to attend due to inclement weather. This group of teachers willing to travel great distances and devote a weekend to this research was particularly able and committed. Although the small number in attendance is a limitation of this study, they did offer a diversity of experiences based in terms of identity, sex, and school settings. Although the voices and experiences contained in the 134 pages of transcripts collected over 10 hours represent a rich resource, we recognize the need for a wider study of the experiences of Aboriginal teachers in their first years of practice.

In December 2007, participants attended a three-day Wildfire Gathering (Hodson, 2004), a series of talking circles, at a location of symbolic and spiritual significance to local First Nations people. The Wildfire Research Method (WRM, Hodson), which involves participants in a Talking Circle, is a semi-structured format that invites participants to share their experiences and observations in an informal conversational style. As a method that respects the traditional and cultural beliefs of Aboriginal people and the importance of one's relationship with the land, WRM established a communal and sacred research environment in which participants were comfortable sharing their experiences with each other and the mainstream researchers who were present. The facilitator, an Aboriginal educator sensitive to Indigenous knowledge, used a range of general questions related to participants' experiences—for example, experiences that led them to become teachers, teacher education experiences, supports as new teachers, concerns as Aboriginal teachers—to guide discussion. An Elder played a crucial role, modeling interconnectedness, respect, and the wisdom of the Indigenous intellectual tradition (Goulet & McLeod, 2002). Also participating were non-Indigenous academics and graduate students. These members of the research team sat in the circle alongside the participants, but were largely silent during the Talking Circle discussions. This

is consistent with Cajete's (2000) observation that "Indigenous educational research is best performed when an Indigenous view and purpose are represented in the conceptualization, development, and implementation of research" (p. 204). In analyzing the data, the research team borrowed tenets of grounded theory to develop categories of information, build a story that connects the categories, and develop a set of findings (Creswell, 1998). Members of the team identified emerging patterns in the data while considering individual responses as "textual wholes, not as reflecting some reality outside the spoken words" (Hilden & Honkasalo, 2006, p. 44). Codes, categories, individual stories, and the Aboriginal context were juxtaposed and discussed by the team collectively in order to identify key themes. In presenting evidence, we sought to maintain the distinctive voices of Aboriginal participants while modifying details that might reveal the identities of participants. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the research all played crucial roles in interpreting statements in an Aboriginal context, and the paper was vetted by participants.

#### *The Teacher Education Experiences of Early Career Aboriginal Teachers*

The Aboriginal teachers in this study experienced a number of challenges in their teacher education programs and in their first years of teaching. These arose from their own difficult learning journeys, inadequacies in their teacher preparation, the normal challenges of beginning to teach, tensions between mainstream and Aboriginal ways of knowing, and the adverse conditions in many of the communities in which they taught.

#### *Challenging the Training Model*

Three participants were enrolled in Native Teacher Education Programs (NTEP) in Ontario. NTEP is a short-duration and intense program designed to prepare Aboriginal people with limited or no postsecondary education to teach the mainstream curriculum to Aboriginal students. These three expressed profound concerns about their programs, particularly the focus on training them to teach the mainstream curriculum conventionally. The two participants who attended mainstream universities, although they received little or no preparation for teaching Aboriginal students, were pleased with the deeper understandings they received over the course of their five-year teacher preparation programs. The final participant, who was not a certified teacher, offers an interesting alternative perspective on becoming a teacher.

Tom, who lamented the loss of 80% of his classmates, was the most vocal in criticizing the NTEP program he attended:

I remember the first project we had to do at NTEP. Everybody went really creative! Some were frustrated by the instructions and kept calling the instructor to find out what was expected. Actually, it was very simple, but apparently I was the only one who got it.... So if you weren't willing to ... cut and paste you weren't going to survive. So I would take lessons that already existed and just throw out "Aboriginal" and put in "Ojibway": ... That's how I got my degree. They ignored the creativity ingrained in us. They said that they didn't want this here, just reinvent the wheel. Those who chose not to do that didn't survive.

Clare and Louise, who attended other NTEP programs, echoed Tom's concerns. All three, however, praised the dedication of instructors, particularly the

time and effort they put into teacher preparation. Although Tom regarded weeding out as a systemic process based on mainstream values, he too viewed his instructors as well-intentioned individuals. Their dispute was not with individual instructors so much as the assimilationist elements of the training model.

Louise asked, "Is it Indian education or is it educating Indians?" She then answered, "It's the same old system and the system's a problem in the mainstream society." Louise observed that Aboriginal faculty were "non-speakers ... following the guidelines of the program" rather than adapting it to Aboriginal teacher candidates or students. She wanted the program to prepare her to educate Aboriginal students using Aboriginal educational methods.

The cultural heritage of mainstream groups often took precedence over Aboriginal culture in the curriculum materials presented in classes, according to Tom:

Medieval times, are you serious? You want me to spend a week on medieval times? ... We didn't have a lot of traditional students ... I didn't really see any traditional instructors ... We had no lessons in stories, at all. If it wasn't already written we weren't studying it.

Although there was considerable mainstream curriculum, Tom recalled that Native content and perspectives were largely absent. Louise agreed, noting that only one instructor sought to incorporate Native studies into subjects, and that no accommodations were made for teacher candidates from Aboriginal language-speaking communities. She lamented the departure of five women from remote communities who spoke their languages fluently yet possessed poor English writing skills. Clare, who was steeped in traditional culture, worked hard to promote cultural practices among her peers. This included using circles, smudging, healing guided by Elders, and other traditional ways of learning. She said, "We need to start building our own curriculum, writing it down and utilizing it."

All three, along with other participants, were concerned that they were not prepared to meet the challenges of teaching in Aboriginal communities. Jocelyn said, "One of the biggest challenges I face in my job is getting kids engaged who don't see any reason whatsoever for education." Worse, as many parents and/or grandparents lost their languages in the wake of residential schools, there was often little support in the home and a lack of opportunities to reinforce language-learning in the classroom. As Drew asked, "Where's the hook ... when parents are all still engaged in their own behaviors and attitudes?" These problems, combined with other effects of systemic discrimination, abuse in schools, and multigenerational poverty made working with Aboriginal students challenging.

The two teachers educated in mainstream university programs who had and earned Bachelor of Education (BEEd) degrees had largely positive experiences in teacher education programs that were different from those of other participants. Attending to their stories helps better understand some of the dimensions missing in some NTEP programs.

Jocelyn was educated in a concurrent education program, earning simultaneously a Bachelor of Science degree and a BEEd She was raised in an Aboriginal community by middle-class parents and was proud of her

Aboriginal identity. She said, "I don't have like a big cultural background, I don't speak the language but I went through the system, the mainstream system, got my degree and thought I'd be able to be a role model in the school board." As she was unable to find a school board job, Jocelyn has been teaching in a school on her reserve. Although Jocelyn's mainstream teacher education did not prepare her to work on a reserve, she believed that it did give her the broad understandings necessary to adapt her expertise to the Native context. She recalled:

The program was very big on theory. We did the lesson plans and curriculum and that kind of stuff. The emphasis though was on theory, diversity, and accepting each child as unique. It was more abstract than other programs ... so when I had vastly diverse students ... I wasn't taught directly how to deal with that. But, because I had a lot of different theories to go with, I was well trained.

Theory was combined with intensive observation, time as a classroom assistant, and a teaching practicum to help Jocelyn feel "immersed in the teaching profession" and ready to respond to students' needs. Jocelyn's perspective highlights the importance of developing conceptual understandings and a broad strategy for addressing student learning in particular classroom contexts. This challenges the assumption in many NTEP programs that Aboriginal teachers first need to acquire technical competences such as lesson planning.

Although Tanya also earned mainstream university degrees, she faced the added challenge of a learning disability. Her struggle to overcome this challenge, with the help of her parents who lived in a largely mainstream context, sensitized her to the needs of diverse learners and drew her to a career in special education. Despite these challenges, Tanya was pleased with the quality of the mainstream program and felt well equipped to work as a special educator in a mainstream school board. Both were able to benefit from BED programs that stressed deep understanding of diversity issues and myriad ways that teachers could adapt their teaching to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms.

Drew, an uncertified teacher hired to teach Aboriginal language classes, lacked both the training of NTEP graduates or the broader education provided in university degrees. Drew said,

I'm not a certified teacher. I don't carry credentials ... When I look at it, when I think about the philosophy I bring to my classroom I've been preparing for this all my life ... So I came in through Aboriginal counselling programs.... Nobody taught me how to do things; you did it and if you made a mistake, well then you embraced the learning and don't make that mistake again the next time. And then over the years you just accumulated tons and tons of tricks and stories. I entertain my kids sometimes; I discipline them other times ... I don't know if I've actually prepared any formal lesson plans yet because I have such a diverse group. They're there, the structure and the format that I use is there, but I don't necessarily use this learning strand, writing strand, or reading strand. All the nice stuff they put in books frankly I find onerous and more of a challenge to fill out than the lessons are themselves ... So as far as prep, you do what you have to do and you rely on the tool box that your mistakes have given you in life to get through.

Drew's comments offer interesting perspectives on teacher education for Aboriginal teachers. Although he admits to lacking the lesson-planning skills developed by the certified teachers in this study, he accumulated a range of teaching strategies and developed a coherent philosophy of education. The many "tricks and stories" he acquired as a counselor in Aboriginal centers seem well adapted to Aboriginal learning contexts, and the challenges of working in such environments have prepared him to deal with almost any situation. More significantly, through these experiences he seems to have developed a strong vision of Aboriginal language and culture that guides his practice. Although he admitted to having much to learn about teaching and spent long evenings developing original lessons, his ability to draw on his experiences seemed more akin to the education acquired by Jocelyn and Tanya than to the training received by Tom, Louise, and Clare.

### *Weeding Out*

Whereas the training models used in NTEP programs were deemed problematic by participants, the weeding out of nonconforming teacher candidates was a greater concern. Tom claimed, "In the program you witnessed the weeding out and you knew why they were weeding out certain people for, because they thought, deemed them to not be appropriate." For Tom, weeding out was a systematic process through which mainstream cultural assumptions about the teaching of Aboriginal students were imposed on Aboriginal teacher candidates. The skills required for mainstream success were honored by the instructors, whereas knowledge of Aboriginal language and culture seemed secondary in importance. Rather than being a liminal space in which they could develop the skills to renew their people, many participants regarded their teacher education programs as forces of colonization that further undermined Aboriginal culture and renewal (Brayboy, 2005). This was compounded by prejudice and discrimination in school settings.

In explaining his success when so many opted out or failed, Tom related:

Differentiated instruction has to be implemented at the adult level as well with kids ... I witnessed the instructors weeding out people they deemed as not appropriate. So seeing that, I brought out my street smarts. To survive I gotta start doing what they want me to do, jumping through some hoops to get this credential. The best thing at graduation wasn't receiving congratulations or receiving my diploma. It was when a friend and mentor asked, "They didn't get you did they?" "No," I replied. And that's the bottom line. I jumped through the hoops ... but as I was doing it, I kept my self-identity. Other people who were part of the program weren't willing to play the game ... For example, M.S., fluent speaker in two languages, got weeded out. He got like 60% because he was so frustrated with the program, which geared everything to Ontario curriculum not on language and culture, where he excelled. It was sad to see so many go, but I can understand totally why they bailed.

Tom's survival skills enabled him to adapt to assimilationist expectations while maintaining his identity. At the same time, he lamented the loss of classmates with strong cultural backgrounds: "When a student fails, we're all accountable. When 80% of students fail we are definitely accountable. If this happened in medical school, there'd be huge changes." Although the level of weeding out was not as dramatic for Clare's and Louise's classes, they too identified heavy

workloads and systemic insensitivity to Aboriginal ways of knowing and living as contributing to attrition.

Mainstream teacher education programs in Ontario have low dropout rates (Kane, Siam, & Conner, 2008), which suggests that they focus primarily on supporting teacher candidates in order to assure their success as teachers. Our participants, on the other hand, noted that there were high dropout rates from NTEP programs and expressed dissatisfaction with their teacher preparation. This suggests that institutional discrimination may be thriving in the tacit assumptions of the mainstream university administrators who manage such programs, the mainstream and Aboriginal instructors who teach in such programs, and a provincial curriculum that does not reflect Indigenous ways of knowing.

The two BEd graduates did not experience weeding out or discrimination in their programs. Although this was made possible by their ability to adapt to mainstream norms, it also reflects a major difference between the prescriptive training models in Aboriginal teacher education programs and the more intellectually open teacher education approaches employed in mainstream BEd programs. Although mainstream teacher education programs may not directly address Aboriginal concerns, quality programs are more grounded in theory and offer teacher candidates a wider range of pedagogical approaches (Cohen & Ball, 1999). Ironically, in these respects, mainstream programs that employ strategic pedagogical approaches to accommodate student diversity and deep learning through reflective practice may be more liberating for some Aboriginal educators than NTEP programs geared specifically to serving Aboriginal populations.

Tanya, although often perceived to be White, experienced insensitivity and discrimination due to her disability. The diminished expectations of her teachers, rather than causing her to settle for Bs, caused her to aspire to greater success:

So as much as I hated the teachers or I hated the principal or I hated the professor at the time, I think it was a good ... to drive me forward, to keep going on my education just to prove them wrong. That I could do it. So I do have my teaching degree.

Her experience of prejudice and discrimination, however, profoundly shaped her identity as a teacher and contributed to the development of her sense of Aboriginal identity.

Jocelyn, who had been socialized to work well in a mainstream university environment, experienced no prejudice or discrimination in her BEd program. Instead, the program's commitment to diversity prompted others to value her knowledge of Aboriginal learners.

All participants expressed concerns about discrimination against Aboriginal people in the school system. Clare recalled an NTEP field experience:

We have a very rich culture and background, and it has nothing to do with money. But when our students walk into schools we are very well aware that we are seen as poor. And that affects our self-esteem and the kids' self-esteem.... If we could educate these non-Native teachers to see that our

culture is equal and valuable ... it would really benefit our kids and their self-esteem.

In response, Jocelyn suggested, "A vast majority of teachers have no idea what it is like to be a minority, let alone Native."

Prejudice and discrimination extended to the treatment of Aboriginal teachers. Jocelyn said, "They treat us like we're not real teachers." Drew felt he was being watched and "was carrying the entire burden of Indian groups on my shoulders." Clare found the mainstream teachers unwelcoming, recalling that only the custodian greeted her in the morning, whereas "the other staff would go quiet" when she walked into the staffroom; also, she was only provided with a tiny workspace at the back of a classroom. Drew felt that equality with other unionized teachers was "on paper only," and regarded "overt and covert discrimination" as a constant burden. Tom, who recalled a teacher calling him "Tomahawk Man" and telling "Wahoo" jokes, wondered why Aboriginal teacher candidates were not taught "how to communicate with other teachers and show us how different we see things than they do."

Institutional discrimination was a particular concern for Jocelyn, who aspired to teaching mathematics in a local public school and being an academic role model to Aboriginal students. Along with other mainstream-educated Aboriginal teachers in her area, Jocelyn was unsuccessful in obtaining a teaching position locally. She suspects that Aboriginal teachers are consigned to Aboriginal language courses and have few opportunities to teach academic subjects. As she lacked fluency in a Native language, Jocelyn was not qualified to teach Native languages and was insufficiently mainstream in background to be hired to teach mathematics. When she raised these concerns with a school district official, she felt that his defense of board hiring practices was patronizing.

The weeding out of Aboriginal teachers in NTEPs is part of a larger process of institutional discrimination that needs to be scrutinized if Aboriginal teachers and students are to be successful. Tom summed up these issues nicely when he said:

If we as professionals are feeling discrimination from peers, from administrators, and from boards ... what kind of message are the students getting? And their parents, who have already had bad experiences in the educational system? How do they feel walking into the school if our own teachers can't even comfortably walk into the staff room and feel like a part of the school? So how are the kids expected to feel like they belong?

#### *Self-Knowledge and Cultural Identity*

Participants came to teaching with many life experiences. Although their experiences as Aboriginal people were not examined explicitly in their programs, most participants drew on rich life experiences in preparing to teach. Drew's story as an uncertified teacher illustrates the power of self-understanding and drawing on personal experiences to become an effective teacher. Although he had no formal preparation, his grandparents had taught him his traditional language and culture, and working in social service settings provided him with teaching skills and an understanding of realities of Aboriginal life.

Understanding themselves and their backgrounds was identified as critical to understanding their students and the communities in which they taught.

Louise's family background, which included many hardships, helped her relate to similar experiences among her students. Clare's healing journey helped her see each student as special in the eyes of the Creator. Drew thought that as an Aboriginal teacher he expected more of students. All believed that they could draw on their experiences to become models of resilience and success.

Clare's story illustrates the power of coming to know oneself in an Aboriginal context. Abused as a child and adrift in her early adult years, Clare said:

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

These experiences led Clare toward a career in education and inspired her to teach using Indigenous approaches to learning through and about culture. She learned to begin with individual and collective healing, "because our children are still hurting," as the first step in reclaiming their culture. This is consistent with traditional Aboriginal practices that stress individual and community health as critical to the establishment of "wholeness, connectedness, and balance" (Regnier, 1995, p. 318). Culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth draws on Aboriginal culture to empower both the individual and the Aboriginal community (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

This commitment to reflection was shared by participants less immersed in language and culture. "I am healing every single day," said Tom. "I can better understand our youth and their past, present, and future." He was learning his Aboriginal language that had been taken away from his father and hopes to teach it in the near future. Reflective practices also helped them honor Aboriginal understandings. Clare said:

I think that's where the medicine comes in, when the Elder is present, providing a safe environment and opening those doors ... This is essential because our children are still hurting, and if we can't identify as educators, then their learning is going to stop somewhere. They need to acknowledge that it's happened, it's time to let go, and it's time to look at things positively to move forward to college and university.

### *Discussion*

The participants in this study raise important questions about preparation of Aboriginal teachers for public and reserve schools. In particular, they question teacher education practices that replicate mainstream knowledge while weeding out Aboriginal teacher candidates committed to their own cultural development and to teaching through culture. Instead, the participants advocate teacher education that helps them build on their personal experiences as Aboriginal people in order to promote more authentic language and cultural learning for Aboriginal students. The participants' viewpoints are consistent with best practices in mainstream teacher education (Bransford et al., 2005) and the positions advocated by Aboriginal thinkers (Battiste, 2002; Ermine, 1995) and leaders (Chiefs of Ontario, 2004). In this section, the responses of participants are situated in these two discourses.

*Shifting Perspectives on Teacher Education*

The teacher training models employed in many Ontario NTEP programs, which were criticized by participants, have also been challenged by both mainstream and Aboriginal critics. The National Academy of Education's Committee on Teacher Education, argues, "To meet the expectations they now face, teachers need a new kind of preparation—one that enables them to go beyond 'covering the curriculum' to actually enable learning for students who learn in very different ways" (Bransford et al., 2005, p. 2). As participants noted, conventional conceptions of curriculum and schooling are not appropriate to either their students' socioeconomic circumstances or their Aboriginal cultural traditions. Aboriginal critics extend this critique further by challenging mainstream education as "hostile in its structure, its curriculum, its context, and its personnel" (Hampton, 1995, p. 37). Hesch (1995) argues that embracing mainstream teaching approaches is often traumatizing given how Aboriginal families and cultures have been victimized by residential schools and schooling generally.

One way of addressing problems with Aboriginal teacher education is to modify existing programs. Duquette (2003), based on her research on the University of Ottawa program, concludes that NTEPs need to "improve the quality and quantity of ... learning through relevant course work, excellent supervising teacher, and the candidates themselves who are self-reliant, committed, and bring previous classroom experience to their studies" (p. 352) in order to increase the already positive effects of these programs on Aboriginal teachers and their communities. Duquette (2007) made recommendations about how to prepare teacher candidates to become role models and urged administrators to maintain program quality while showing "some flexibility in order to ensure that these students graduate from the program, as successful completion for these teachers appears to be an important element of being a role model" (p. 399). Duquette's inquiries, however, did not address the fundamental issues raised by our participants or Aboriginal leaders. The three NTEP graduates in our study agreed that they were prepared well for the technical aspects of teaching and for survival in the classroom. Although they would also have liked more preparation in becoming effective role models, the concerns of participants went deeper than being models of academic achievement and citizenship. Our participants expressed diverse cultural understandings. The qualities Duquette characterized as self-reliance and commitment were perceived to be signs of compliance. Participants were more likely to praise those who dropped out of the program for their integrity and immersion in Aboriginal culture.

Responding to the critiques offered by teacher participants would entail seismic shifts in NTEPs from training in discrete mainstream knowledge and skills to educating for deeper understandings of teaching and learning generally, and of Aboriginal ways of knowing in particular. The Chiefs of Ontario (2004) offer a stinging critique of current First Nations education and of the preparation of its teachers. In a paper included in the manifesto, Anderson et al. (2004) state,

A foundational element of a high quality First Nations education system is the presence of teachers and educators who understand First Nations history,

culture, intellectual traditions and language, They must also comprehend First Nations relationships with the land and creation. (p. 2)

Crucial to a more effective education system, they continue, is cultural training for all teachers and more teachers able to teach Native languages through immersion.

Overall, there needs to be a radical reconceptualization of Aboriginal teacher education in Ontario. NTEPs need to be overhauled to be more consistent with mainstream best practices and, more importantly, Aboriginal ways of learning and teaching. There is evidence that radical reconceptualization such as the inclusion of Elders and living on the land at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (Goulet & McLeod, 2002; Hesch, 1995) are better ways of addressing the concerns raised about NTEPs. Also, as the Ontario Chiefs recommend (Anderson et al., 2004), there needs to be a greater emphasis on delivering programs that “ensure that graduates receive their undergraduate degrees and full certification” (p. 5). In other words, that they be professionals with baccalaureates in education rather than technicians trained in outdated mainstream pedagogical strategies

#### *The Importance of Understanding Self and Community*

Understanding oneself and being responsive to the needs of Aboriginal communities were viewed by participants as vitally important. By understanding their own stories, they could better understand the stories of others (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). By drawing on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions in authentic classroom situations (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995), they could better adapt their teaching to suit the needs of their students and communities. Jocelyn, who praised her mainstream degree program for helping her adjust her practice to meet the needs of her students on a reserve, is an example of such an adaptive expert. Increasingly, leading mainstream teacher education programs attempt to promote informed pedagogical decisions, reflect on those decisions, and make adaptations (Schön, 1983). One way that mainstream teacher educators promote adaptive expertise is through personal reflections, so that teachers can draw links between their experiences and those of their students. The healing that resulted from participants’ inward personal journeys enabled them to become effective teachers and to relate to their students and communities. The technical nature of the training in NTEPs that lacks the social and cultural mediators in the classroom often fails to harness this most powerful of resources.

As reflection is central to traditional Aboriginal ways of knowing, personal reflection based on Aboriginal healing and education practices would be even more effective in meeting personal and community needs. Aboriginal Elders often draw on personal, spiritual, or political crises to help people heal themselves by returning to traditional teachings and ceremonies (Stiegelbauer, 1996). Clare in particular drew on teachings and ceremonies to heal herself and to teach through culture. Because as Hampton (1995) states, Indigenous education “orients itself around a spiritual centre that defines the individual as the life of the group” (p. 21), it is particularly important that Aboriginal teachers attend to their own healing in order to heal and teach students.

A sense of moral agency in collaborative professional communities (Bransford et al., 2005) has been identified as increasingly important in

mainstream teacher education. When adaptive experts “use knowledge about the social, cultural, and language backgrounds of their students, the academic achievement of students can increase” (Banks et al., 2005, p. 233) and disparities can be eliminated. All participants in this study felt a strong sense of moral agency, as was evident in how they modeled resilience and cultural pride in the face of family and economic hardships brought about by colonization.

In order to become whole themselves and to heal their communities, participants turned to traditional Aboriginal knowledge. Unfortunately, their teacher education programs were not equipped to provide them with Aboriginal knowledge or pedagogical approaches. NTEPs, which favor mainstream training processes, largely disregarded this knowledge and often discarded teacher candidates best able to teach through culture. The mainstream degree programs that Jocelyn and Tanya attended did little to acknowledge Aboriginal knowledge, but at least did nothing overt to suppress their traditions. Aboriginal scholars and leaders are increasingly promoting traditional Aboriginal education as effective in meeting the needs of students in their communities (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). The medicine wheel, which offers wisdom and explains relationships at the personal, social, national, global, and cosmic levels of understanding and spirituality (Calliou, 1995), is an Aboriginal pedagogical approach that has been found useful in bridging self and community for Aboriginal teachers. Two examples of effective methods are the involvement of Elders and the use of Talking Circles (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). For Aboriginal teachers to succeed, they need to become cultural brokers able to “synthesize traditional and formal teaching” (Stairs, 1995, p. 149) in themselves and then in their students. Aboriginal students can be most successful in both cultures when their teachers draw on Aboriginal pedagogy while making links to complementary mainstream approaches (Stairs).

### *Conclusion*

Our study of six early-career Aboriginal teachers from varied backgrounds revealed shared understandings about the preparation of Aboriginal teachers. Participants were critical of programs focussed on technical training rather than education that developed adaptive expertise. They all perceived that they had experienced discrimination as teachers in their education and employment. Many perceived that institutional discrimination accounted for the weeding out of teacher candidates or limited hiring prospects. Although all brought rich experiences to their teaching, they felt that their programs should have done more to build on how their personal experiences could help them grapple with the issues facing their students and communities. Finally, as they constructed meaning from their identities, each expressed a wish for teacher education programs that were more deeply grounded in Aboriginal languages, culture, and ways of knowing.

These understandings, which are consistent with a TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) analysis of Aboriginal education, could form the basis for a reconceptualization of Aboriginal teacher education in Ontario. Rather than tinkering with outmoded training programs that weed out promising Aboriginal teachers, alternatives need to be implemented that develop the capacity of

Aboriginal teachers to promote Aboriginal understandings of learning and living. As the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) states, academic environments should promote “the development of a positive personal and cultural identity, as well as a sense of belonging to both Aboriginal and wider communities” (p. 8). Appropriate mainstream approaches can inform the design of such programs for Aboriginal people with Aboriginal people so that students develop “the traditional and contemporary knowledge, skills and attitudes required to be socially contributive, politically active, and economically prosperous citizens of the world” (Ontario Ministry of Education, p. 7), but programs must first be grounded in Indigenous world views and culturally responsive approaches to Aboriginal education (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Equally important, such arguments and evidence could be used to articulate how Aboriginal teacher education can serve the self-determined needs of Aboriginal peoples in Ontario and other Canadian provinces.

#### Acknowledgments

This research was supported by a two-year Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant from the Canadian federal government.

The authors acknowledge members of the research team: Michael Manley-Casimir and Joseph Engemann (faculty); John Hodson, Sarah McGean, and Nikki Shawana (Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education); Ewelina Niemczyk and Christiane Muir (graduate students); and Walter Cooke (Elder).

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