

**"WALKING BALANCED": CULTURALLY CENTRED ABORIGINAL EDUCATION**

**“WALKING BALANCED”: CULTURALLY CENTRED ABORIGINAL EDUCATION**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

Utilizing an interpretive/feminist qualitative framework and consulting a wide array of Aboriginal education literature, this thesis seeks to explore the issue of culturally centred education for Aboriginal people as a relevant learning tool and ultimately a vehicle for self-determination and decolonization on a more global scale. While recognizing and respecting the vast diversity in Aboriginal people, the foundation is set for understanding the Aboriginal peoples' experiences by illustrating some of the historical and contemporary policy directions and decisions around education. Then through an examination of the wide body of literature, what it is that Aboriginal people need in order to benefit from education is explored. How is education to be made, not only culturally sensitive, but culturally- centred? Next a review and discussion of the thoughts and stories provided by the participants from two culturally centred educational programs is considered followed by a review of the broader implications of culturally centred education with an emphasis on self-determination and decolonization. Finally, in consultation with the literature and the words of the participants, eight recommendations for more relevant Aboriginal education are proposed.

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- 11/10/18  
SCE meeting - drawing of layout showing 1948  
Hatched blue = 1948. Hatched red = 1948  
Hatched green = 1948. Hatched yellow = 1948

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## **1. Introduction**

Education is a crucial part of the Canadian social ethic; at its best it assists individuals to develop a critical analysis of society, how it is structured and maintained. In its most basic, access to employment and thus, income, rest on a person's ability to successfully navigate through education systems. Unfortunately, these systems can be fraught with barriers that impact on groups of people beyond basic educational attainment. Aboriginal people comprise one such group. With a unique (and often tumultuous) historical and contemporary policy relationship with the Canadian state, Aboriginal people have long endured racism and colonization efforts in the places meant for learning.

I will examine the experience of Aboriginal people participating in a formal, adult education experience constructed to be culturally centred. This concept of cultural-centredness in education rests on the fundamental difference between including elements of the culture in mainstream education as opposed to centring the cultural experience within the educational experience (Castellano, 2000; Haig-Brown, 1995; Hampton, 1995; Leavitt, 1995). According to Leavitt (1995), it is important to “base education *in* Native culture, rather than simply including components of material culture as content” (126). Through the qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with past participants of the Community Health Worker Training program at the Anishnawbe Health Centre in Toronto (in affiliation with George Brown College) and the Native Community Care Counseling and Development program at Mohawk College in Brantford, it is my

intention to analyze connections between culturally centred, technical education and Aboriginal decolonization. I hope to explore this educational experience as being a site of resistance and resilience for Aboriginal people.

It is crucial to note here that while the intention of this thesis is to seek out the ways in which Aboriginal post-secondary students seem to learn best, Aboriginal communities are very diverse. Because of the relatively narrow scope of this thesis, I will inevitably miss facts, blur understandings and generalize culture. It is not my intent to suggest that all Aboriginal people experience and respond the same way to mainstream or culturally centred education. In fact many of the themes that emerge in the literature and through the interviews are themes from which mainstream education could benefit. However, my focus here is Aboriginal education and I do believe the themes that emerge are consistent with Aboriginal culture and in no way are meant to suggest stagnation or lack of growth in Aboriginal culture. Nor is it my intent to suggest that all Aboriginal people have the same culture, however, I do believe that there are some fundamental Aboriginal philosophies and I will try to distinguish moments in the writing when those global philosophies potentially do not pertain. It is important to me that I make explicit that I understand and appreciate the vast diversity that exists among Aboriginal people<sup>1</sup>. While there are some fundamental ideologies connecting many Indigenous groups (Alfred, 1999), there are cultural, traditional, linguistic and other variances that must be

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<sup>1</sup> Not only does there exist diversity in terms of geography, culture, nation and language (for example Ojibwa, Cree and Mi'kmaq), there also exists diversity in the "administrative identities" imposed by the Canadian government through the Indian Act (i.e. Status, non-Status, Registered, etc.) For more information on the legal definitions of Aboriginal people, see Frideres, 1998, pp. 6-17.

respected (Smith, 1999). Through the research I have kept this in mind and attempted to understand how and if I can make my research meaningful on a broader scale.

It is my intention within this thesis to set the foundation for understanding the Aboriginal peoples' experiences by illustrating some of the historical and contemporary policy directions and decisions around education. I will then examine the wide body of literature exploring what it is that Aboriginal people need in order to benefit from education. How is education to be made, not only culturally sensitive, but culturally-centred? Next I will examine the thoughts and stories provided by the participants from two culturally centred educational programs in relation to the context set. Then, the broader implications of culturally centred education will be explored with an emphasis on self-determination and decolonization. Finally, in consultation with the literature and the words of the participants, eight recommendations for more relevant Aboriginal education will be proposed.

## 2. Context Setting

### *Historical relationship between Aboriginal people and the state*

The reality of Aboriginal people in Canada is one of continuous conflict and resistance. Framed by a history of colonization, attempted assimilation and cultural genocide<sup>2</sup>, the Aboriginal nations of this country face harsh social problems in an often racist and hostile system (Frideres, 1998). Soon after contact, the rights of Aboriginal people began to be consistently and systematically stripped away. The fact that settlers of Canada engaged in a bid to colonize and “civilize” the Aboriginal population is now being realized more and more and the ramifications have been enormous. In discussing the process of colonization, Indigenous author Jeannette Armstrong comments,

*in North America this has been to systemically enforce manifest destiny...In the 498 years of contact in the Americas, the thrust of this bloody sword has been to hack out the spirit of all the beautiful cultures encountered, leaving it its wake a death toll unrivaled in recorded history. This is what happened and what continues to happen (Armstrong, 1992, p. 239).*

The ways in which this continuing colonialism manifest are staggering. The endured experience of forced resettlement, residential schools and other educational policy directions are examples of modern day colonization tactics. In 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott expressed his desire to see the Aboriginal population assimilated, “I want to get rid of the Indian problem...Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in

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<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive account of this colonization, attempted assimilation and cultural genocide see Carndinal (1969) *The unjust society*; Churchill (1998) *A little matter of genocide: Holocaust and denial in the Americas, 1492 to the present*; Alfred (1999) *Peace, power and righteousness: An indigenous manifesto*; Berger (1999) *A long and terrible shadow: White values and native rights in the Americas since 1492*.

Canada that has not been absorbed into the b  
quoting Scott, 2000, p. 58). In the words  
the Department of Indian Affairs, we  
Aboriginal people faced and (arguably) a  
Aboriginal people trying to navigate the systems  
government can be seen as a modern day form of colon

### ***Policy relationship between Aboriginal people and the Canadian state***

Aboriginal peoples' relationship to governmental policy at the federal level  
Canada has generally been a negative one. The *Indian Act* of 1876 saw the formalization  
of the perceived superiority of Western European dominance and hegemony and had the  
potential to dominate nearly all aspects of Aboriginal public life including land, housing,  
citizenship and economic development among others. Within these many areas of policy  
involvement, The *Indian Act* detailed the federal government's jurisdiction in Aboriginal  
education.

One of the first, and most brutal, Aboriginal education policy directions adopted  
by the Canadian federal government was the introduction of residential schools for  
Aboriginal children. It is important to understand the perception of Aboriginal people  
leading up to the highly contested *Indian Act*. According to Friesen,

Government leaders saw them (Aboriginal people) as unfortunate victims of the  
times, settlers perceived them as inconvenient occupants of desirable lands and  
do-gooders saw them as strangers within their own country. They suddenly  
became the "white man's burden", desperately in need of civilization which was  
possible through His Majesty's Christian influence... These attitudes inducted the  
first formal campaign to educate the Indian in Canada (Friesen, 1991, p. 104).

3 through 122 of the *Indian Act* give the federal government legal jurisdiction over Aboriginal education to the responsibility of churches and government (Barnes, 1998, p. 173). Thus, starting in the 1870's the residential school system sought to fulfill a state obligation outlined in the *Indian Act*: to provide education and to aid Aboriginal people in the integration into Canadian society. The combination of these two aims had ultimately detrimental, and some would argue, genocidal impacts (Ibid., p. 175). Stripped of identity and culture, the children who endured the residential school system returned to communities lacking knowledge around ceremonies and tradition and with a difficulty in communicating in traditional languages (Bernard et al., 2003, p. 40). In addition to the enormous implications of the assimilation of Aboriginal people, widespread sexual and physical violence have been identified as other traumatic experiences in these schools. According to the Report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,

children were beaten for speaking their own language, and Aboriginal beliefs were labeled 'pagan'. In many schools, sisters and brothers were forbidden social contact, and the warmth of the intergenerational Aboriginal family was replaced with sterile institutional child rearing...The effects of these coercive efforts at social engineering continue to be felt generations later (INAC, 1991, p. 3).

This supposed education was clearly used as a tool to repress Aboriginal culture, ultimately serving in the assimilationist strategies of the Canadian state.

### *Aboriginal education policy in Canada*

Pre-contact, Aboriginal people in Canada had vibrant and sustainable cultures and communities (Lee, 1992). Education was at the centre of many of these cultures with elders holding the most respect in many communities as the bearers of knowledge and wisdom (Weenie, 1998, p. 62). Children, young adults and adults alike were encouraged to access this sacred knowledge and the learning process was treated with reverence and respect. Centuries of colonization have impacted on this educational relationship. Many young people are increasingly unable to communicate and learn in their traditional languages and the ageist ideology that pervades mainstream culture has been adopted in many Aboriginal communities (Ermine, 1998). Elders are increasingly being disrespected by youth, creating a divide between the generations and a loss of crucial, traditional knowledge (Ermine, 1998; Medicine, 1987). In addition, policy has had potentially enormous impacts on traditional education systems.

Despite the closing of residential schools more than twenty years ago<sup>3</sup>, the realm of education policy has not improved drastically for Aboriginal people. The *White Paper* of 1969, a federal policy document which suggested the full integration of Aboriginal people into Canadian rights and responsibilities, ushered in a renewed energy in looking at education issues for Aboriginal people (Friesen, 1991). This document spurred the important message delivered from the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) on behalf of

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<sup>3</sup> The majority of residential schools closed in the mid-1970's and the last federally run residential school in Canada closed in Saskatchewan in 1996 (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat)

Community  
Diversity

Aboriginal people in Canada titled, *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972). In this policy paper, the NIB definitively stated their need for “radical change in Indian education. Our aim is to make education relevant to the philosophy and needs of the Indian people. We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity...” (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 3). This, they suggested, would be achieved only through local, Aboriginal control of education. While the federal government responded quickly by accepting the National Indian Brotherhood statement, it was soon realized that bureaucratic barriers existed that meant “its internal mechanisms were not in any way prepared to implement Indian control. Problems arose with the departmental interpretations of the objectives, delivery methods, and financial expectations of the policy” (Longboat, 1986, p. 25). For over thirty years, this has been, and continues to be, the prevailing policy relationship between the Canadian state and Aboriginal people.

A current review of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) would suggest a positive progression in meeting the educational needs of Aboriginal people. Often referring to *Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*, INAC positions itself as advocating for radical reform in Aboriginal education. According to INAC's vision statement,

Our vision is a holistic, quality First Nations education system that begins in early childhood and includes adult education and training and post-secondary education, where the weight of education decision-making rests with First Nations in an appropriately funded infrastructure where parents, elders, professionals and leaders in the community, regional and nations level come together to plan their learners' education” (INAC, 2002, p. 1)

This appears to fit well with Canada's Aboriginal population's call for self-determined education structures. This vision statement (and its echoing statements found on virtually



every government website relating to Aboriginal education) has many important policy implications around control, community involvement and adequate funding. However, realistically, even thirty years after their call for control, Aboriginal communities still lack meaningful power; they are under-funded and face major barriers in navigating the education system. According to Frideres (1998), while the Canadian government continues to devote more and more money to Aboriginal education funding, a very small percentage of those budgets are actually directed at Aboriginal communities exercising total control over their education. It is crucial to understand the oppressive relationship that still exists between the Canadian state and Aboriginal people – this is exemplified by the suggestion of meaningful control for Aboriginal people over educational jurisdiction without moving to support that control with real power. According to Longboat, “some Indian bands exercise a degree of control even now, but have achieved this only by stretching a restrictive framework to its limits. In order to pursue their goals, Indian people want real power to make their own decisions and carry out their own plans for Indian education” (Longboat, 1986, p. 25).

In addition to inadequate funding for total control, Aboriginal communities face an additional barrier to education in the lack of infrastructure in many economically depressed areas. Within the mainstream education system (a system which is central to many urban Aboriginal people), the government claims to be making efforts such as “Aboriginal support staff have been hired, curriculum has been reviewed to eliminate obvious racism, alternative programs have been established...and Aboriginal teachers are being hired” (INAC, 2002, p. 6). However, as the neo-liberal climate becomes more and

more keen on standardizing and limiting curriculum, it is troubling to imagine the potential regression of these small steps. So, while there appears to be progress toward more meaningful education for Aboriginal people, it seems to be happening only at a surface level so far. The literature is sparse with a small number of examples of Aboriginal controlled education programs. Unfortunately these seem insufficient and are facing enormous barriers in funding and infrastructure support (Longboat, 1986). Thus Aboriginal people are abandoned to the confines of mainstream education systems. While the provinces typically hold jurisdiction over education, the relationship between the Federal government and Aboriginal people in Canada means that the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development is the core provider/decision maker for Aboriginal students.

Much of the policy information pertaining to the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal post-secondary education revolves around funding. Two major projects at the provincial and federal level respectively impact greatly on Aboriginal participation in college and university. First, the Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy (AETS) is a partnership between the Ontario Ministry of Education and Education Council and seeks to ensure the participation and completion of Aboriginal students at the post-secondary level; to ensure increased awareness in post secondary settings of Aboriginal cultures and issues; and finally to increase Aboriginal decision-making power in post secondary issues (OFIFC, 1995). When established in 1992, the Strategy had an allocation of \$34 million to be spent over seven years on programming which enhances the learning of Aboriginal people at the post secondary level. While important to many

programs, the AETS has been called a “short-term” plan by many Aboriginal education advocates who call for Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education as crucial to success and relevancy (OFIFC, 1995).

The second important government initiative pertaining to Aboriginal post secondary education are the programs in place for student funding. The high cost of post secondary education and the subsequent living expenses can be enormous barriers for many Aboriginal students. The federal government has developed three programs that work to alleviate these financial burdens. All run through the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs - the Post-Secondary Student Support, the University College Entrance Preparation and the Indian Studies Support programs all offer financial assistance to cover tuition, books, travel and living expenses for all levels of post secondary education to Inuit and Status Indian students (Malatest et al. 2004, p. 19). This money is flowed through the band council on each reserve and thus the students are subject to the criteria set out by those councils (Malatest et al., 2004, p. 19). This can create barriers for Aboriginal people attempting to access education money; nepotism, favouritism, delays in receiving the funding and lack of connection to bands have all been cited as reasons why Aboriginal students find this process difficult (DIAND, 2004; Malatest, 2004). Additionally, once the student obtains the money it is often not sufficient. According to Randy Herrman, director of Access Programs at the University of Manitoba, in a study on Aboriginal access to post secondary education, “Indian and Northern Affairs Canada provides funding only for eligible Status Indians and Inuit students to cover tuition, books, travel expenses and a living stipend. In most universities the stipend is barely

enough to live on” (Herrman in Malatest, 2004, p. 19). Financial stress can be a huge barrier to a successful post secondary school experience – a barrier that adds to the additional barriers of isolation, racism and eurocentrism that typically inform an Aboriginal student’s experience. Finally, in addition to the limitations of these funding programs in terms of access to band councils and inadequate funding, the Student Support program does not fund one-year programs, training for trades or upgrading. Thus students accessing these programs must find financial assistance through mainstream funding streams (Malatest, 2004, p. 21).

***Current statistics: Aboriginal students and educational attainment***

While a small body of qualitative research about the Aboriginal experience in mainstream educational institutions exists in contemporary education policy literature, an attempt to grasp the number of students who are successfully completing post-secondary education is difficult to determine. According to Statistics Canada, “undercoverage in the 2001 Census was considerable higher among Aboriginal people than among other segments of the population” (Statistics Canada, 2002). The website suggests that information on areas for which enumeration is not complete does not get tabulated. It also goes on to explain that 30 000 to 35 000 Aboriginal people living on reserves and settlements were not completely enumerated for the Census (Statistics Canada, 2002). There exists a further analysis of the undercoverage of Aboriginal people; census information on Aboriginal people in Canada has always been a contentious issue of citizenship, identity and distrust in governmental initiatives. Much in the same way many Aboriginal people choose not to vote because they do not identify as citizens of

Canada and as an act of resistance to a foreign political system imposed (Alfred, 1999). Thus, the numbers found through Census Canada do not represent an adequate picture. However, these numbers do provide us at least with some sense of the stark difference between the successful engagement in and completion of schooling in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada.

According to the 1996 census, 799 010, or 3% of Canada's population, identified as North American Indian, Metis or Inuit. Education is becoming increasingly important to this population since almost half (48%) of all "Registered Indians" are less than 25 years old (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2002). According to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development in Canada (2001), in 1999 a total of 22 409 Aboriginal people were enrolled in some sort of post-secondary program, with close to half (49.1%) engaging in non-university education (i.e. college, training, etc.) (DIAND, 2003). When examining rates of successful completion (in the form of degrees and certificates) we find that seven percent of registered and other Aboriginal identity groups obtained degrees and certificates as opposed to nearly 30 percent of all other Canadians (INAC, 1996; Statistics Canada, 1996).

The rates of inequality in education are even more stark when examining on-reserve populations' statistics in isolation. According to statistics detailing the Highest Level of Education for people of Aboriginal ancestry, ages 15 and over in 1996, 48.3% of people living on-reserve have less than a high school education. In comparison, only 25.8%, of the total Canadian population have less than a high school education. Conversely, if we look at the highest level of education, of the total population in Canada,

15.1% have a university degree or certificate as opposed to 2.5% of people living on reserve. Therefore Aboriginal people are represented *highest* in having less than a high school education and *lowest* in having a university degree or certificate.

It is crucial to examine the reasons for this inequity in education, since access programs and funding structures (albeit with problems) provide access to mainstream education for Aboriginal students. These statistics are an indication then, at least in part, of the lack of success of the mainstream to provide education that resonates with Aboriginal students. According to authors Charter and Poonwassie (2001),

Recent research has explored the school climate and culture as two critical factors in dropout among Aboriginal youth...Perhaps one of the most detrimental and difficult barriers to overcome for Aboriginal students is racism. They are portrayed in a negative way in the media and in school textbooks, and their culture is often rejected by the schools they attend; they tend to be viewed as slow, “disadvantaged”, or “culturally deprived” by teachers and peers (124).

These statistics are troubling particularly because we know that the students who are struggling through this system are not being offered viable alternatives in the Native community particularly because of the lack of meaningful funding and infrastructure support. In his critical work, *Towards a redefinition of Indian education* (1995), Aboriginal author Hampton offers another interpretation of these statistics, particularly if mainstream educational systems are believed to be assimilative tools. Hampton (1995) writes, “the failure of non-Native education of Natives can be read as the success of Native resistance to cultural, spiritual, and psychological genocide.”(7) However, for this to be truly a successful resistance, more meaningful, relevant educational systems must be set up in order to ensure that Aboriginal people are meeting their potentials and surviving and thriving in a system that deems education so crucial.

***Contributions to meaningful education experiences for Aboriginal people***

If we are to understand education as a potential vehicle for the decolonization process of Aboriginal people, many changes need to occur, transforming the current state of learning. Sorely lacking in the mainstream educational contexts, this sort of discussion, integrated into learning could work to ultimately begin the decolonization process crucial to the strength of Aboriginal people. I have come to learn about this concept of decolonization through the wisdom, analysis and teaching presented in my degree in Indigenous studies. Decolonization at its most basic can be understood as a process “to free from dependent status” (Dictionary.com). However with the complexities of colonization occupying many spaces for Aboriginal people (i.e. land, governance, education, identity), the process of decolonization is complicated and dense. No neat, comprehensive definition of decolonization exists in Aboriginal literature, but the discourse abounds. Intertwined with messages of resistance, self-government, self-determination and survival, author Alfred (1999) writes that the ultimate aim in the decolonization process is “ending the colonial relationship and realizing the ideals of indigenous political thought: respect, harmony, autonomy, and peaceful coexistence.”(2)

How this decolonization process happens is also complex. This process must happen in many different realms, with individuals, families, communities and more globally, indigenous society (Alfred, 1999; Smith, 1999). Hawaiian scholar Laenui (2000), after extensive consultation with elders, maps out a five stage decolonization

process. Despite its oversimplification of a complex subject, it at least recognizes the importance of such a venture being process-oriented rather than results-based. According to Laenui, Indigenous people begin the decolonization process with a rediscovery of culture, followed by a mourning of culture and identity lost. He calls the next phase, dreaming, “the most crucial for decolonization” (155), in which colonized people imagine how the culture that was rediscovered fits into their lives, bringing this culture into their contemporary realities. He then goes on to describe the commitment stage, which needs to be adopted in an organized, communal way. While it is important for individuals to sense this commitment, the next stage, action, will only be effective if the colonized people are ready to create change. Finally, in the action stage, Laenui writes that this can “incorporate the full spectrum from a call to reason on one end to a resort to arms on the other” (158). Laenui does put great onus on the colonized people to affect this change and does potentially oversimplify his five stages, but ultimately this process offers hope in the quest for decolonization.

Crucial to this decolonization and resistance struggle is the reclamation of traditional ways. In his important work, *Peace, Power and Righteousness*, Taiaiake Alfred talks about the place of potential change and resistance happening in contemporary Aboriginal communities. In order to realize decolonization, Alfred argues that Aboriginal people must utilize the teachings of the past in order to inform the current and future struggles for self-determination. He writes, “a focused recommitment to traditional teachings is the only way to preserve what remains of indigenous cultures and to recover the strength and integrity of indigenous nations” (Alfred, 1999, p. 29). He is



careful to explain that in order to be truly effective, this reclamation of culture and tradition must occur in a contemporary framework, understanding the current Aboriginal reality. Lanuei (2000) creates a framework for decolonization which follows closely to that proposed by Alfred. According to Lanuei, in order to reach a place where the decolonization of indigenous nations can happen, Aboriginal people need to look back to traditional teachings and culture. This traditionalism as a form or expression of resistance and decolonization has a place in the Aboriginal education movement both in terms of content and structure. Many scholars agree, that traditional, cultural education for Aboriginal people would benefit from elements of contemporary, mainstream educational pursuits in order to ensure success in an ultimately education-driven society (Alfred, 1999; Charter & Poonwassie, 2001; Ibister, 1998; Malatest, 2004; Stiffarm, 1998).

### *Culturally relevant content*

Native people have long endured erroneous, stereotypical or totally absent representations of their culture in many aspects of public life (media, education, → employment, etc.). This is particularly true of educational curriculum as Aboriginal<sup>®</sup> people often do not see themselves, their stories or their role models represented in their educational contexts. In mainstream settings this absence allows for stereotypes and therefore, often racism to be perpetuated. In articulating the current reality of Native people experiencing mainstream curriculum, Whitfield and Klug write,

The images portrayed of their peoples have been predominantly negative, for example as savages, heathens, or uncivilized persons. The opposite portrayal, that of the noble warrior, was just as damaging for Native people as they faced the

reality of their present conditions on and off reservations (Klug and Whitfield, 2003, p. 42)

An active part of learning is the ability to draw parallels with one's own experience and engage with the material being taught in a relatable way. Unfortunately for many Aboriginal learners, this relationship can be strained and confused by alienation. This contrasts sharply with students from dominant social locations who tend to be able to navigate this system more readily with all of the familiar cues in place. The potential detriment of this lack of culturally relevant content and learning cannot be understated. Eber Hampton, in his powerful chapter on redefining Aboriginal education writes, "it must be straightforwardly realized that education, as currently practiced, is cultural genocide. It seeks to brainwash the Native student, substituting non-Native for Native knowledge, values and identity" (Hampton, 1995, p. 10). Even after the closing of residential schools, many Aboriginal people see the assimilationist, genocidal intentions and outcomes replayed in mainstream educational contexts.

In addition to culturally appropriate content in educational settings, many Aboriginal students would benefit from learning that is *structured* to incorporate and represent Aboriginal world-views and methodologies.

### ***Culturally relevant structure***

Some of the ways that centred structural elements of learning that show up in the literature include holism, community, language and spirituality.

## **Holism**

While Aboriginal peoples have varied and unique cultures, there are a few global, Indigenous fundamental values. One certainly is around holism and relationship. Many Indigenous cultures believe in the interconnectedness of all things, creating a universe based on reciprocity and connection (Calliou, 2000; Colorado & Collins, 1987; Deloria Jr., 1994; Hampton, 1995; Nathani Wane, 2000; Stiffarm, 1998). Definitions and articulations of holism show up in the literature taking on many incarnations. Writings on Aboriginal science often centre the concept of holism as a foundation for understanding the natural world. According to influential Oneida author Colorado,

Indian science, often understood through the tree, is holistic. Through spiritual processes, it gathers and synthesizes information from the mental, physical, social and cultural/historical realms. Like a tree the roots of Native science go deep into the history, body and blood of the land. (Colorado and Collins, 1987, p. 56-57)

The concept of holism emerges in literature beyond Aboriginal science. Literature around education also embraces the concept of holism (Battiste, 2000; Goldin Rosenberg, 2000; Hampton, 1995; Weenie, 1998). According to Cree educator and author Weenie (who borrows from Lightning),

In the Aboriginal world-view, the learning process is viewed holistically. The learning process is described as ‘a process of internalization and actualization within oneself in a total way’ (Lightning, 1992, p. 243). It is this philosophy that informs our approach to teaching (Weenie, 1998, p. 59).

It is argued, however, that this philosophical underpinning is rarely nurtured in mainstream educational contexts which tend to be accused of being based on objective, evidence based learning (Bailey, 2000). In a provocative article written on her experiences of teaching Aboriginal students at a mainstream university, non-Native author Bailey struggles with the barriers she sees in this setting every day. She writes,

Typically our courses fit into a program. However, each course is taught in isolation from the other courses...This in itself is another concern for our Aboriginal students...being forced to learn within a non-indigenous world view, where one context does not relate to other causes, at best, bewilderment and at worst, resentment (Bailey, 2000, p. 132).

Understanding the relational dimension of the things that students are expected to learn is important to integrating an Aboriginal worldview in teaching. In discussing this, author Leavitt (1995) uses an example of learning about “fish spawning”. He writes, “knowledge about ‘fish spawning’ for example, is acquired not by taking biology or zoology, but through participating in what English-speakers might call travel, fishing, aquaculture, storytelling, economic development, history, art, environmental studies...” (179). While this statement speaks to the highly experiential component of Aboriginal traditional learning, it also shows us how in mainstream culture, educators might attempt to break up the whole of “fish spawning” into compartmentalized ideas. Therefore, a holistic, relating structure between the student and the material, his or her identity and his or her community could have an impact in honouring a crucial aspect of many Indigenous cultures.

### **Community**

Another seemingly global facet of Indigenous culture, related to holism, is community. According to Lee,

First Nations of Canada have lived for centuries as people of community (Keeshig-Tobias and McLaren, 1987:22) That is, the focus for the life of most people was, and is, the relatively small collectives in which individuals acquire and express their identity. (Blanchard & Barsh, 1980:351)...Native identity, culture and values tend to be transactive with life within a community context. For Native people it is important to understand where one comes from, to whom one is related. (Lee, 1992, p. 212)

If we understand community to exist at the heart of traditional Aboriginal social organization, it becomes a critical factor in the culturally centred structuring of education. The sense of bringing community into the classroom is threefold. First, the literature states that it is important for educators to work on building a sense of community within the classroom; among students, with teachers and administrative/support staff (Bailey, 1999; Haig-Brown, 1998; Hampton, 1995). Hampton, through his interviews with Aboriginal students engaged in the American Indian Program at Harvard, learned that the formal and informal gatherings often had the most impact. According to one of the participants, the potluck dinners were an important part of his/her experience,

Everybody bringing something that they think other people are going to want to eat and that they're going to want to eat themselves. And some people getting here early and some people getting here on time and some people getting here late. And everybody being pretty happy about it. Teasing everybody around about this or that, kind of catching up a little bit. Just a chance to get together and share a bit of our lives. I feel good about being a part of a community. (Quoted in Hampton, 1995, p.30)

This community building is crucial for breaking down isolation, for providing and receiving support in lives that are imbued with multiple complexities and for the exchange of and support in knowledge gathering. According to Haig-Brown (1998), “education becomes a creation and recreation of knowledge in the social interaction of the classroom” (106).

Another crucial element of community in a classroom meant to honour Aboriginal culture, is a fluid interaction and connection with the outside community of elders, parents, families and neighbourhoods (Bailey, 1999). This is particularly important because of the closeness of these communities often due to size (on reserve there is a

certain proximity) or because of isolation (in urban centres there is a certain solidarity). Bailey (1999), again relating to her experience teaching Aboriginal students writes, “In my classroom I have had respected Elders, Teachers, and Storytellers. If the space is opened up for them, they will bring their considerable gifts to the class and enlighten and deepen our work” (137).

Finally, the literature cites the importance of connecting the material being learned to the community realities and experiences lived by the students. Crucial in any educational setting, a connection to lived experiences makes teachings more powerful and relatable. According to Bailey (1998), “not only are we delivering education in a discordant fashion, we are asking people to learn what we think they need to know, in a context divorced from the world in which they will have to work” (132).

### **Language**

Language holds a powerful place in the culture of a people. With its ability to convey cultural messages and define identities, there exists an entire movement of scholars who believe that the reclamation of language is crucial to the resistance and decolonization of Aboriginal people (Alfred, 1999; Ermine, 1998; Henderson, 2000; Smith, 1999). Unfortunately many Aboriginal communities are losing their languages, as older people pass away they take with them the linguistic legacy that holds great importance for culture retention and understanding.

According to 2001 census data, both Aboriginal language knowledge and people who identify an Aboriginal language as a mother tongue have declined since the 1996 census (Statistics Canada, 2002). In addition to knowledge, there was a decline in the

number of people who reported Cree, Ojibway and Blackfoot as mother tongues. Clearly, with its importance to the culture and its decline in many communities, language has a place in education.

Many writers cite attention to the teaching of Aboriginal language as crucial to a meaningful educational experience (Battiste, 2000; Fettes & Norton, 2000; Hebert, 2000; Leavitt, 1995). When writing about resistance and reclamation of culture, Alfred (1999) suggests,

Native languages embody indigenous peoples' identity and are the most important element in their culture. They must be revived and protected as both symbols and sources of nationhood...communities must make teaching the Native language, to both adults and children, a top priority (136).

### **Spirituality**

If there was one message imparted to me in my time in Indigenous Studies (particularly by Dawn Martin-Hill and Jan Longboat) it was that spirituality, as a connection to the Creator, a connection to the land and a connection to all living things, was at the core of everything. Of all of the sections of this context setting, using my words in the spirituality section makes me most unsettled. Here, as a white woman and as a person who respects Aboriginal spirituality I will not write much. However since it is so crucial and could have such a meaningful impact on the educational experience of Aboriginal students I include it, however I do so using mostly other's words. African author Wangoola provides a rich definition of a global, indigenous spiritual worldview,

At the centre of African spirituality was the unshakable belief that humans were but a weak link in the vast chain of nature, which encompassed the many animals, plants, birds, insects and worms, and indeed inanimate things such as stones and rocks. The world was not for conquering, but for living within adoring harmony and reverence. According to African spirituality, being is the perpetual flow of

energy among animate and inanimate things and between all of these things and the gods (265).

Many authors write about the deeply personal, sometimes difficult journey of coming to understand their place in their culture's spiritual context. Hampton (1995) writes,

'Pity me...for all my relatives.' The first time I fasted for a vision I remember that prayer working on me, defining me, creating deep within me an identity as an expression of my people. The prayer seemed at the same time to exalt and humble me as an autonomous individual in union with and able to work for my people. (20)

Important author and educator, hooks (2003), talks about the difficulty she found in negotiating spirituality in places of post-secondary education, "studying and teaching at elite schools I learned early on that it was only the work of the mind that mattered, that any care of our souls – our spirits – had to take place in private, almost in secret" (179). It must be difficult then, for Aboriginal students who feel a connection to their spirituality but see it divorced, detached from their educational pursuits. So central to Aboriginal culture, what impact can spirituality make in Aboriginal education? According to a number of authors, spirituality must be central in both the structure and content of the learning (Bailey, 1998; Haig-Brown, 1995; Hampton, 1995; hooks, 2003; Regnier, 1995). Author and former educator at the Joe Duquette High School, Regnier (1995) writes about the way spirituality is maintained at this groundbreaking culturally centred school in Saskatoon,

The school's spiritual perspective is sustained by daily sweet grass ceremonies, feasts on special occasions, special ceremonies, and sweat lodges. Teachers conduct talking/healing circles to build communities of trust so that students can speak about their feelings and lives...Drumming and dancing circles introduce students to aesthetic dimensions of culture that unify psyches and social relations through celebration. (315)



*The call for self-determined education*

Ideally, an education system controlled by Aboriginal people, which would frame learning in an Indigenous-centred worldview, is essential to the active and meaningful power and knowledge building of Aboriginal students. First and foremost, an Aboriginal controlled education system would centre on content that is meaningful and accurately representative of Aboriginal reality. This system would also be structured to run counter to mainstream education in the ways mentioned above. Perhaps most critically, Aboriginal education would be structured in a way that is holistic, relating learning and concepts so that they are meaningful and rich. It would incorporate community and relationships in lessons and in the way learning is arranged. Aboriginal education would centre spirituality and life experience at the core of its methodology. Finally, Aboriginal education would be structured in a way that is flexible and adaptable to the needs of the learners. It must be understood, however, that these are ideals. Hundreds of years of colonization have created internalized oppressions that make this sort of transformative revolution of education particularly challenging.

In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) released a paper titled *Indian Control of Indian Education* which called on policy makers to reform education for Aboriginal people in order to enrich their lives and work toward the ultimate goal of self-determination. In their statement of values, detailing their vision of Aboriginal education, the NIB write,

We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honoured place in Indian tradition and culture. The values which we want to pass on to our children, values which make our people a great race are not written in any book. They are found in our history, in our legends and in the culture (2).

According to the authors, this reformation of education would come in the form of reclamation and control over Aboriginal education for Aboriginal people. Thus, local control, administered through band councils<sup>4</sup>, would operate and develop education systems with funding from the Federal Government. As detailed in the Indian Act, the Federal Government holds legal jurisdiction over the “protection” of Aboriginal people (NIB, 1972, p. 5); however the NIB saw this responsibility as only financial in nature.

This highly important policy document remains crucial to the struggle for Aboriginal control over their own education since it was the first time this struggle was aimed in such a poignant way at policy makers. Although this struggle continues, the Federal Government did begin to work with Aboriginal communities to develop more inclusive education development programs.

With the Aboriginal education context set, the next sections focus on how the interviews that I conducted at the Anishnawbe Health Centre in Toronto and at Mohawk College in Brantford lend further understanding and texture to this issue.

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<sup>4</sup> Band councils remain a controversial governing tool for Aboriginal people. Imposed by the Canadian government, many scholars believe band councils to be a colonizing tool of the Canadian state, existing in contradiction of traditional and more culturally-appropriate forms of Aboriginal governance (Alfred, 1999, p. 24-25).

### 3. Methodology

#### *Interpretive approach*

In order to sort out the methodological underpinnings of my research I looked first to Neuman's concepts around Interpretive Social Science (ISS) and Neysmith's discourse around Feminist research. Like most social research, my approach would not fit into one neat category; therefore, I looked at elements of Interpretive and Feminist methodologies to inform my research. Interpretive Social Science, according to Neuman, seeks to understand social phenomena from the perspective of the people who live them; thus context and subjective human experience are fundamental to the ISS approach (Neuman, 1997, p. 68). A nice articulation of this theory can be found in the question Neuman poses, "How do people observe ambiguities in social life and assign meaning?" (72). So, from this I understood that I wanted to hear peoples' stories, try to understand their experiences of education from the people who were living those experiences. This, however, did not feel like it adequately described the way I hoped to enter into the research. Neuman offered no analytical element to this approach. Nowhere did it invite the change and critical discourse crucial to understanding and shaping the political nature of Aboriginal education.

***Feminist/critical approach***

Neysmith (1995) brings the critical edge to storytelling that I was seeking in her work on feminist research methodologies. According to her, these more political ways of approaching social science research assume that it is used to deconstruct dominant power structures, to change something, to look at society in a broad way, while maintaining a structurally-situated understanding of the systems in society. In her article *Feminist Methodologies*, Neysmith writes,

Feminist research practices rest on a critical analysis of what is knowledge, how we recognize, who are seen as experts in society, by what means someone acquires this status...feminist scholars are interested in research practices that can facilitate our understanding of social reality as experienced by various groups of women (Neysmith, 1995, p. 101).

I think that there is something fundamentally critical about centring on the voices of the people who live the experience and furthermore to let those voices resonate in a way that affects change and challenges oppression. It was with this philosophical underpinning that I decided how I wanted to approach the work of examining how cultural-centredness is perceived to impact on Aboriginal peoples' educational experiences.

***The historical context of Indigenous research***

Another methodological concern arose before the research could begin. The fact that I was a white woman doing research on Aboriginal issues and the tension around that was not lost on me. Research about Aboriginal peoples has long been met with distrust and contention (Smith, 1999, p. 1). This concern has come from centuries of colonialism perpetuated through the research process by way of racism, exclusion and misrepresentation. Perhaps one the first instances of "research" articulated was by Juan

Sepulveda, one of the first Spanish colonizers. Through observation of the native people he encountered, he determined that they did not have souls and thus, “natives were among those who had been meant to be subjugated” (Deloria Jr, 1994, p. 257). It was his contention that this “soullessness” justified the containment and slavery of Indigenous peoples.

According to Dickason (1997), further north, in Canada, British colonizers were doing their own “research” through observation of the Native people they met. Mostly curious accounts, they wrote home to their families and friends accounts of the “savages” they were encountering. While not affecting the same implications as Sepulveda, this representation manifested in the notions of the colonizing people. This legacy of misrepresentation, starting upon contact, has morphed in many ways, but still has impacts on present-day racism and distortion of Aboriginal identity. According to Smith (1999), “what may have begun as early fanciful, ill informed opinions or explanations of indigenous life and customs, quickly entered the language and became ways of representing and relating to indigenous peoples” (79).

More contemporary research practices do not show signs of much progressive change. In 1977, author and scholar, Trimble, was providing social scientists with commentary around research in indigenous communities. He called the researchers entering into Indigenous communities for the purpose of research “sojourners” – which fits with the historical notion of the fanciful, unserious English “commentators” of the contact period. It was his contention that these “sojourners” do not invite Indigenous people into the research discourse. He writes, “explanations of theory, hypothesis,

technique, and analytical procedures are infrequent since the Indian community participates in just the data collection procedure. Few respondents have had the opportunity to participate in the full venture” (Trimble, 1977, p. 159).

Even more contemporarily, the Human Genome Diversity Project demonstrates a vivid example of the way in which Indigenous people are “being researched”. Funded in large part by the Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health in the United States, the aim of the project is to map and sequence the human genome and to “characterize the genetic diversity of the worlds people” (Dodson and Williamson, 1999, p. 204). Scientists would travel to remote areas to encounter Indigenous people who did not have much contact with outside people and thus did not have much genetic mutation from outside influences. They then take blood samples from the Indigenous people in order to understand their genetic codes and to help with pharmaceutical progress (Dodson and Williamson, 1999). Dodson and Williamson cite two problems with this research, the first that the scientists do not necessarily have the consent of the people who are giving their blood. Author Awang (2000) illustrates the gravity of this,

Even as Indigenous peoples were condemning the Human Genome Diversity Project, the United States government was applying for world patents on the cell line of a 26 year old Guaymi woman from Panama who had not been informed of this action. (130)

The second problem raised by Dodson and Williamson is around the inaction of the researchers. The authors write,

Researchers come face to face with poverty and deprivation when they collect samples and can recount these stories at dinner parties, but remain untouched in real terms, because they are inactive at correcting these injustices because they do little or nothing to facilitate change and they contribute to the continuation of the shameful status quo (1997, p. 207)

It is through these examples that we can understand why Linda Smith, in the introduction to her book, *Decolonization Methodologies*, writes, “The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful” (Smith, 1999, p. 1).

### ***Insider/Outsider issues***

There has been a lot of very important work on the ‘insider’/‘outsider’ debate which helped me to understand my position and responsibilities in doing this research (Acker, 2000; Banks, 1998; Devault, 1999; Harding, 1991; Hennessey, 1995; Martin-Alcoff, 1995; McIntosh, 1989; Narayan, 1994; Smith, 1999; Smith, 2000). My first introduction to these concepts came from Uma Narayan’s article, *Working Together Across Difference* (1994). She speaks to the challenges of communicating across difference and sheds important light on the insider/outsider realm. Narayan defines an insider as a member of an oppressed group and an outsider as a “non-member”. While simplistic and lacking in the complexities, overlaps and nuances of peoples lives, Narayan says that these terms do have “a disadvantage as they lack an explicit sense of hierarchy, but have the advantage of reversing conventional ideas of what is central and what is marginal” (Narayan, 1994, p. 177)

Banks (1998) helps to create movement and some openness in this seemingly rigid insider/outsider realm. He takes the sometimes limiting confines of this debate and contends that there are four (not two) types of insider/outsider. There are the Indigenous

insider, the Indigenous outsider, the external insider and the external outsider. The Indigenous insider and external outsider lie at two ends of the spectrum. I found this useful as it provides room for grey areas – aspects of a researcher that feel particularly inside while other aspects are obviously not. The external insider is defined as someone socialized in a cultural context “adopting” the values and beliefs of the different culture in a research relationship. Often this means rejecting many of the values and beliefs of his or her own culture (Banks, 1998, p. 10). I would consider myself an external insider. Since considering doing this research I have been counting all of the ways in which I have demonstrated that I am sensitive enough to do it – my degree in Indigenous Studies, my volunteer experience, community experience and work experience all contribute to shaping my worldview and value system. Therefore I can place myself in Banks’ external insider category. Though these categorizations are not that simple since Banks’ writings around Indigenous and external outsiders seem to miss a crucial element of power and race.

I am white and that whiteness brings with it many benefits seen and unseen. In her article, *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack of White Privilege*, McIntosh ventures beyond the common notions of power and hierarchy when looking at race privilege. It is possible to find people talking about the hardship that many racially marginalized people face in our communities (economic, employment, education, etc.) One rarely hears, however, that this oppression comes in the interests of someone’s power and privilege. McIntosh (1989) writes, “I realized that I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white



privilege, which puts me at an advantage” (10). It is crucial that I recognize, name and be explicit about my whiteness in this research that I am doing. Because of the place of historical power that that privilege affords me in many research/researched contexts and because my participants will likely be acutely aware of the privilege that my whiteness has afforded me in contrast with their potential experiences of racism.

One of those privileges is the privilege to engage in this research. There is a sentiment in some research writing that suggests it is time for Aboriginal people to be doing research about Aboriginal people (Smith, 1999; Swisher, 1996). Swisher takes this argument further to suggest that only Aboriginal people should be doing Aboriginal education research. She writes,

If non-Indian educators have been involved in Indian education because they believe in Indian people and want them to be empowered, they must now demonstrate that belief by stepping aside. They must begin to question their motives beyond wanting to do something to improve education for Indian people. In writing about Indian education, they must now defer to Indian authors...(Swisher, 1996, p. 85).

I can appreciate this argument presented by Swisher. White researchers have too long been talking for Aboriginal people; have been defining, naming, renaming and gaining legitimacy from their oppression and struggles. However, I am doing this research which means that there must be some part of Swisher’s argument that I do not agree with.

Revisiting McIntosh’s *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, she makes a point that resonated with me and allowed me to feel more comfortable in this research.

According to McIntosh,

It is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage, and whether we will use any of our

arbitrarily-awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base (McIntosh, 1989, p. 177).

With these issues in mind I set out to develop a list of questions to remember through the research that would help to be certain that I was being as ethical as possible in this research venture.

### ***A framework for ethical research with Aboriginal communities***

#### **Starting Out**

Research does not begin with interviews and data collection. The researcher has processes she must go through and questions she must ask that will inform and direct the research. These questions help the researcher to understand where the communication challenges will be and help to problem-solve them ahead.

*Where am I coming from? What is my social location? Where does my life experience intersect with the lives of the people I am researching with?*

*Why do I want to do this research? What is my impetus to speak?*

#### **Participation**

A researcher must also look at the involvement/role of the participants. There needs to be decisions made around how the researcher will access information – interviews, focus groups, surveys, etc. In addition to what kind of input – a researcher needs to think about who much input they want to have from participants.

*How much participant input will I require/want/have? Who will control the research?*

*How will I listen for translations<sup>5</sup> in the research? How will I clarify them?*

*How will I speak the research back to participants? How much input will they have in directing changes?*

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<sup>5</sup> In her book, *Liberating Method* (1999), Marjorie Devault suggests that the researcher must be aware that by virtue of the researcher/researched relationship, marginalized people often feel compelled to “translate” their experiences and lives in order to be heard. According to Devault, “as they do so, parts of their lives ‘disappear’ because they are not included in the language of the account” (Devault, 1999, p. 66).

### Ownership

Ownership is a very important issue when doing research with Aboriginal community groups, especially with the movement to retain and sustain Indigenous knowledge. A researcher must be clear from the very beginning of the research who owns the information and how that relationship will work.

*Who owns the research?*

*Who am I accountable to?*

*If I, the researcher, does not own the research, how is that negotiated, how does that work?*

*How often should I “check-in” with my findings and interpretations?*

*Is the research conducted in a holistic way?*

### Reciprocity

Reciprocity is integral to a respectful and fair research exchange. The participants will have given their time and their stories and should be thanked accordingly. In Aboriginal culture, reciprocity is crucial. This reciprocity not only thanks a participant for their time but validates their words, stories and knowledge as important and respected.

*How can this research be used? How can I ensure that it is useful?*

*How can the research be something that gives back to the community? How can I show respect and gratitude for access to peoples’ knowledge?*

### Broader Implications

Research in Aboriginal contexts is never apolitical and it always can have broader implications for the promotion and respect of Indigenous knowledge. In a time when the Aboriginal movement is gaining momentum, working on decolonization and healing strategies and reclaiming their voice, it is important that research be situated in these wider spaces.

*Are there opportunities to promote empowerment through research?*

*How can I articulate respect for Indigenous knowledge and cultural property rights in a way that is meaningful and accessible to participants?*

*Does the research in any way impede the goal of self-determination for Aboriginal people?*

(Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2000; Fundacion Sabiduria Indigena and Kothari, 1997; First Nations House of Learning, 2001; Piquemal, 2000; Smith, 1999).

The eight interviews that I conducted all helped give shape and rich texture to my understanding of the Aboriginal experience of post-secondary educational programs constructed to be culturally centred. Based on the work that I did in looking at my approach, I recognized that work had to be done to make explicit and work on issues of power, control, ownership and race. The interviews were conducted in a variety of settings and the participants had the power to choose where we would talk. This sent me to coffee shops, restaurants, places of work and school settings. The participant was told that the interview schedule was a guide for our conversation and was provided with the questions in advance and at the interview. They were allowed to refuse to answer any questions or ask why the question was being asked. In many of the interviews I took time to first talk about being white and implications that might have for the research. Many of the participants engaged in conversation about this with no one expressing any real concern. I tried to go into the interviews with humility. I recognized that I could not do this research without the stories these people were telling me. I had so much to learn and my youth and my whiteness all contributed to a feeling of needing help to understand. I was grateful to find out that my participants were willing to be open and wanted to help.

After the interviews were finished, I transcribed them verbatim and sent a copy to each respective participant. They had the opportunity to read the conversation, delete anything they did not want in the paper and add to or clarify their discussion. This step

was critical as it sought to give the participants some control over how their words were used and which words were used. The participants knew before the interview would start that they would have the opportunity to exclude anything at all.

### *Methods*

In order to learn about the lived experience of Aboriginal people engaging in culturally centred education I decided to interview past participants of two college-level programs. The first was the Community Health Worker training program run out of Anishnawbe Health in Toronto, Ontario. Here, every year (October to August) a group of 5-6 Aboriginal people engage in a training program that centres on Aboriginal content and structure. It is a bridging program which helps set the foundation for a second year at George Brown College in the Community Development stream. With the help of the coordinator of the program, I recruited 3 past participants who would contribute to my research by engaging in a conversational style interview based on a set of questions (see Appendix 2). I interviewed two women and one man who were all Anishnawbe.

The second site for this research was the Native Community Care Counseling and Development program at Mohawk College in Brantford, Ontario. In order to learn more about this program I again, interviewed three past participants with the same interview schedule. I interviewed two women and one man; while their specific nations are not known, all were Aboriginal.

In addition to the six past participants, I also interviewed the coordinators of each of the programs to collect more information about the history, mandate, funding, course content and structure and success of the programs.

#### **4. Description of the Programs**

##### ***Community Health Worker Program at Anishnawbe Health***

The Community Health Worker program is administered by Anishnawbe Health Toronto. It began in 1995 after the director and some of the board members noticed that there was no formal training for Aboriginal people to work in the area of community health. A former program worker, along with a few colleagues, connected with George Brown College in Toronto to form a partnership that would deliver community health training to Aboriginal people. With funding from Miziwe Biik (an education and training service) which was flowed from Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), Anishnawbe Health sought to create a one-year program that could be bridged to the one-year program at George Brown College. The first year is spent at Anishnawbe Health learning community development, writing skills, communication and presentation skills, advocacy and traditional Native culture. The program runs 10 months, after which the student is encouraged to complete one year at George Brown in order to obtain a Community Worker certificate.

To qualify for the program, a person must be over twenty-one and of Aboriginal ancestry, though status does not matter. Potential students apply for the community health worker program at Anishnawbe Health. After submitting an application, the potential participant may be granted an interview. Once the interviews are complete, six students are chosen based on their compatibility, goals and experiences. Students then

enter into the intensive education/training program and are paid a weekly salary for their involvement. Most participants have not completed high school. While many of the instructors are Aboriginal it is not critical, however, according to Marilyn Johnson, coordinator of the program, “they must have some sensitivity to Aboriginal culture. Most of them have had some encounters either teaching on a reserve or teaching in a different setting where they had Aboriginal students. They have to have sympathy and empathy and some understanding of the issues”.

Crucial to the program is the traditional/cultural component. This is most readily apparent in the Thursday morning sessions when the students have access to elders in the classroom and their teachings. According to Johnson,

The students can pretty well pick whatever topic they want. So they talk about learning about their clans, their colours and their spiritual names. Then, eventually, they all start attending ceremonies – it could be a Shaking Tent or yuwipi<sup>6</sup> ceremony. We’re now bringing people from South Dakota every couple of months, naming ceremonies, sweats, fasts if they’re ready for it. So that’s a big component for them (Ibid.)

In addition to the presence of the elders, each course and area of learning has some connection to Aboriginal cultures. The writing assignment and presentations expected of the students are often based on Aboriginal issues (for example the medicine wheel, fetal alcohol syndrome, Red Hill Valley, colonization). The students are asked to keep journals while participating in the program that are supposed to include reflections on what is being learned from a cultural perspective.

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<sup>6</sup> It is a healing ceremony from South Dakota. Often, the conductor or head medicine man is tied up at the beginning of the ceremony and he has an assistant. Everyone sits on the floor around the “altar” with sacred objects. The lights are turned out and the helper spirits of the conductor move around the room and heal emotional and physical issues. Sometimes you see sparks in the air or feel an Eagle’s wing brush your cheek or hear the whistle of a bird (Personal communication with M. Johnson, July 8, 2004)

Funded solely through the HRDC, which flows money through Miziwe Biik, the Community Health Worker program is more or less granted autonomy in how the money is spent.

***Native Community Care Counseling and Development program at Mohawk College***

The Native Community Care Counseling and Development program was founded in 1985 by a group of community workers who were working in the field in community health, mental health and addictions who possessed no formal postsecondary education. The program began with the intention to serve people who were already employed in these social service settings and offer them more formal training in conjunction with their employment experiences. Health Canada picked up on the idea and funded Mohawk College to train all of the people working in Aboriginal communities in the south and Cambrian College in the north. Today, the program director, Rae-Anne Hill Beauchamp states that the program has seen approximately five hundred graduates from nearly every First Nation community from “Windsor over to Akwesasne and up to Parry Sound in the north”. The program is run out of the Brantford, Ontario campus of Mohawk College. It is a two year program in which the students are asked to specialize in Community Care or Mental Health and Substance Abuse. Until recently the program offered two different experiences in the Distance Education Delivery stream (in which students come already working in the community and spend 5 weeks per semester in class) and the Regular Delivery Stream (in which students with less working experience attend classes daily for the fourteen week semester). Recently the Regular Delivery portion of the program has been discontinued.



The course load in the Native Community Care program is mixed with both learning from mainstream perspectives and traditional Native teachings. Courses include Traditional Indian Health Practices, Native Culture and Heritage, Anatomy and Physiology, Intro to Substance Abuse, Native Mental Health and Chronic Diseases. According to Hill-Beauchamp, the scope is so broad because the likelihood of graduates meeting clients coming in with a broad base of issues and concerns is great and it is the intent of the program that students graduate with the tools to treat the whole person (spiritually, physically, emotionally and mentally).

The Native Community Care program accepts students who are not of Aboriginal ancestry however preference is given to Native applicants. The program also welcomes non-Native instructors; however the executive and support staff are all of Aboriginal ancestry. Students are required to pay tuition for the program and many Aboriginal people seek funding from their bands. Hill-Beauchamp notes that the amount of funding “varies from band to band. Some get more, some get less and some don’t get anything...some students go through OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Plan). The actual program receives funding for support staff from Health Canada. Mohawk College gets additional funding from the Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy (AETS) to help run the program.

The classes focus on cultural teachings and identity growth and have elders who teach and offer support to the students. The program is organized in a holistic way whereby the students move from a micro to a macro understanding of their work within the two years, starting at working with individuals to working with nations. According to

Hill-Beauchamp, this necessitates and understanding on the part of the student of “where as Aboriginal people, where we’ve come from, so the historical perspective, where we are today and where we are headed”.

***Summary of Program Features***

	Community Health Worker Training Program	Native Community Care Counseling and Development Program
Location	Anishnawbe Health – Toronto, Ontario	Mohawk College – Brantford, Ontario
Number of Students	5-6 per year	50+
Program Funding	HRDC – must apply every 6 months	Mohawk College, Health Canada, Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy - permanent
Program Structure	Ten month program with the intention that each student continue for 8 months at George Brown College to complete the diploma.	Two year program with students in the classroom for five weeks out of each 14 week semester, spending the additional 9 weeks working in their communities.
Student Funding	Students are paid a salary weekly for their participation	Students must pay tuition and can obtain funding through their bands or OSAP
Cultural Content	Elders in the classrooms, cultural content in advocacy, writing, etc.	Elders in the classrooms, integrating mainstream theories with Native issues.

## **5. What I learned about culturally centred education**

Through the interviews conducted five key themes emerged:

discovering/rediscovers spirituality, culture and identity; building community; offering and receiving support; impact beyond education; and foundation setting for future educational endeavours and affecting change.

### ***Discovering/rediscovers spirituality, culture and identity***

One of the first things that became clear when doing the interviews was the resounding message that nearly all of the participants were looking for something to connect them to their Aboriginal culture and spirituality. For many this would be a “new” venture; for others, it meant returning to a culture that had once been known to them but for a multitude of reasons – urbanization, embarrassment, parents suffering from the trauma of residential schools, racism – had lost their cultural identity. Thus, many of the participants explained that they entered into the culturally centred programs in order to seek out their Aboriginal culture, their spirituality and their identities.

I was seeing a counselor at Anishnawbe Health for a little while to help me through my own spiritual crisis because I grew up Catholic and not so much in traditional values – it was there at some point but my mother being from a residential school lost some of those values and brought us up in a Catholic way... That day when I came down to see the counselor, before I came down that morning I said ‘Creator give me something that I need, some kind of connection to this’

I wanted to know who I was as a Native person, I never knew that.

Through traditional teachings, powwow music, ceremonies and discussions with elders and fellow students, many of the participants found at least some, and often a great sense of cultural identity. The importance of this connection to spirit and to culture in education as a basis for identity formation shows up as crucial in much of the literature (Bailey, 1998; Callilou, 2000; Charter and Poonwassie, 2001; Haig-Brown, 1995; Hampton, 1995; Hesch, 1996; hooks, 2003; Regnier, 1995). Hampton articulates the need for this spirituality to exist at the core of Aboriginal education when he writes, “Indian education orients itself around a spiritual centre that defines the individual as the life of the group” (Hampton, 1995, p. 21). Many of the students used allusions to such spiritual symbols as circles, holism and a sense of connection to describe their experiences of discovering and rediscovering their cultural identities.

I finally rediscovered myself; it was the only place where I actually felt I had come in a complete circle. Everything came together. You now how they say your emotions, your intellect and your spirit? It was like the whole process brought it all together, for the first time I was walking balanced.

This was not necessarily an easy transition, with some of the students realizing once in the learning environment just how much of that cultural identity was missing. According to Laenui (2000), after the rediscovery phase of decolonization is realized a profound sense of loss can occur. Laenui (2000) writes, “a natural outgrowth of the first phase is mourning – a time when a people are able to lament their victimization” (154). This loss or mourning can manifest in a multitude of ways including both anger, sadness and shame - all of which were mentioned in the interviews. According to one of the men,

When I got into the program they asked me, do you want to do the smudge and I didn't know how to smudge, I didn't know anything, I didn't know one word and I was embarrassed.

Despite any of the early struggles, nearly all of the participants cited spiritual, cultural growth in their identities as a crucial outcome of their educational experience. This growth was fostered in a number of ways but most often mentioned were cultural teachings, the presence of elders in the classroom and culturally-relevant teaching methods such as story telling, oral traditions, and non-hierarchical sharing. Nearly all of the participants expanded particularly on the critical importance of the accessibility of the elders for relationship building and guidance in the classrooms.

Many contemporary authors agree that Elders are an important and effective link to Aboriginal culture in the classroom (Battiste, 2000; Grant, 1995; Ibister, 1998; Medicine, 1987). Medicine, in her critical look at elders in education in *My Elders Tell Me* (1987), worries about the flippant use of elders in Aboriginal educational contexts. Particularly in mainstream settings, Medicine warns school administrators and teachers not to simply invite elders into the classroom for the sake of the presence. She writes that elders have an enormous amount of wisdom and culture to share and teach, and thus their role in education must be taken seriously. Many of the participants echoed this importance. Ultimately of all the methods of cultural transmission, the presence of the elders in the classroom was a fundamental experience for the participants.

Finding out who I was and having someone talk to me about being Native in such a positive way and to encourage me and to tell me about our culture in such a beautiful way...I was walking two feet taller whenever I met with the elders.

I did a paper on the drum and I learned that our spirituality is through the drum and I didn't believe in anything and then I was I was working with the healers, the elders, taking in that spirituality and it's helped me.

## *Community*

When the community theme emerged in the interviews, it did so in two ways – one which I anticipated and the other which I did not. According to the participants, not only did the culturally centred programs promote the natural Aboriginal community tendency (Lee, 1992), the programs also impacted on the greater Aboriginal community. Nearly all of the participants talked about the importance in their programs of building a sense of community with fellow students, teachers and elders. Crucial to the atmosphere in the classroom were strong relationships imbued with trust and sharing. This is certainly reflected in the literature. Bailey (1999), Haig-Brown (1995) and Hampton (1995) all propose the necessity of community-building in the classroom as a means of creating an Aboriginal-centred delivery of education. As a way of offering support, camaraderie and richer learning and sharing, both programs seemed to seek to create a community within the classroom in order to nurture learning understanding and cultural awareness. To conquer feelings of isolation, to help in the struggle with school work and to honour the Aboriginal spirit of community, most of the participants talked about the classroom environment in a positive way.

It was like family to me and that was good.

That was probably one of the highlights and just sharing with everybody, we talked about different traditional teachings, they're so diverse, eh, understanding different nations and how they do things.

And the classmates, we all got along famously...I still keep in contact with pretty much everybody. I had great friends.

Through my interactions with my peers during my two years, I think I learned more than in the classroom.

In addition to facilitating trust and relationship building, many of the classes had rich diversity that would promote more learning and broader community building. One participant from Mohawk College, where non-Native students also engaged in the program said,

We had Native people and non-Native people, people who lived on reserve and people who lived off reserve. It was a real mixture of different people. We had men, we had women – but to this day, and it's been 11 years since I graduated, I still see the people I went to school with, I still talk to them. When we meet, those are our relations, that was our family for two years.

Many of the participants talked about the careful measures taken to ensure a sense of community was built and maintained in the classroom; according to a participant who now sits in a Support Officer role within the Native Community Care program,

For building that trusting environment, in the first semester there is a course called Personal Growth and Development where they work on trust building, getting to know each other and using the sharing circle...It's not really a healing session per se, the student can share what they want to share, go to wherever they wanted to go and needed to go to help them academically.

The importance of community-building extended beyond the classroom setting after the program to the places the participants came from, to their friends and families. This discourse, which was new for most of the past participants, broadened familial, friendship and professionally based relationships into the realm of Aboriginal identity and rights thus moved the learning into community building through sharing. Initially I interpreted this sharing with family and friends as important but I did not see the bigger picture, the impact that this sharing, even in familial, more intimate contexts had on the larger scope – the identity building and pride in the larger Native community. Virtually all of the participants articulated multiple places that they shared what they were learning

with children, families, reserves, healing circles, addictions support groups, friends and schools. Not only did it seem important to communicate what was being learned, but the participants seemed to want to genuinely share what was being learned.

While the literature certainly supports the impact that education has on the pride and cultural identity of the individual, there was no mention of the impact that the culturally centred education can have on the pride and cultural identity of the larger community. It seemed that as the participants felt the impact that the educational experience had personally, they were motivated by this identity building and pride in their Aboriginal culture to affect the same change in others.

Getting back into community. Community. Because then you start knowing, you start listening to people. There is always within someone, always a draw within a Native person, you know that heartbeat, that drum. That's what I felt, that internal struggle. You need to listen to that and venture outside of where you are sitting. You need to be aware of what's happening in the community.

Now (I share) with my granddaughter, drumming and talking to her about different things. Teaching her about Native people, I think that's my next challenge, making sure she's aware of who she is.

I graduated which was a wonderful thing for my reserve, for everyone. Because for some reason, when I go back to my reserve people are saying, 'that's that woman, she's from Toronto, she completed college' and all of these young people want to talk.

I've sat in circles with women, because I am an alcoholic. I suffer, have been in treatment centres and stuff like that so I've sat with women in a circle and explained to them and try to encourage them.

This phenomenon which was articulated over and over in the interviews did appear in the literature. According to both Bailey and Hampton, the motivation for many Aboriginal students engaging in education is the goal of eventually bringing this learning back to their communities. This relates to the concept of placing the education in an



Aboriginal context; making education related and based in the reality of contemporary reserve and urban Aboriginal life. Freire (1972) addresses this in his “banking concept” of education when he writes, “implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between man and the world; man is merely in the world, not with the world or with others; man is a spectator, not re-creator” (62).

For many Aboriginal students situating education “with the world” is crucial to its intent. Most people would cite future success as a prime motivator for engaging in post-secondary work. However, many authors concur that Aboriginal students often seek out additional learning in order to help their communities. Hampton (1995), in his discussion around Aboriginal education writes,

the prayer for one’s self is an expression of the people’s life is a crystallization of one of the most powerful forces of Indian cultural identity. And it is expressed in service ‘for my people’s sake,’ that my people may live,’ and ‘for all my relatives’ (20).

One participant who works as an FAS/FAE assistant in an Aboriginal community health setting, when asked if working in her community was important and something she planned to do long term, she answered,

It’s like I have an opportunity to give back. I feel like I’ve been given a gift, and with that gift I have to give back. It’s been told to me over and over again, through so many things that have happened over the last couple of years.

This message of using the gift of education to help the participants’ communities was reiterated a number of times through the different interviews.

Taking what we’ve learned back to our communities, I work with some First Nations out by London, Ontario so I can work with Aboriginal communities in that area. If I can I volunteer and do anything that I can to bring something back to my community.

There are a lot of issues that have never been looked at before like Aboriginal homelessness because they are so hidden in the margins that people just don't want to look at it or are afraid to look at it. So, I want to bring those out to the forefront and make sure people are looking at them.

### *Support*

While not necessarily indicative of only Aboriginal culturally centred education, the participants agreed that support was an important component of their experiences at Anishnawbe Health and the Native Community Care programs. The students at Anishnawbe Health benefited from a wide range of accessible people for support, but this did not occur in a formalized way. Teachers, administrators, elders and other staff in the building were made accessible to students for academic and personal support. The Native Community Care program, potentially because of its different structure and more stable and greater amount of funding do in fact have a formalized support system. Two staff are employed specifically for the purpose of providing support to students when needed.

Despite these differences in delivery and formality, participants of both programs mentioned the importance of the support they received in navigating their educational experiences. Often this was the first time in many years that the participants were engaging in educational pursuits and most found it crucial to have the support of teachers, administrative staff, elders and fellow students. Linked to community, the participants discussed the importance of “sticking together”, creating a sense of solidarity in an experience that sometimes proved difficult.

We always came together (classmates), whether it was due that day and getting together at lunch to say, okay, this is what I thought of it. We'd go for lunch and hang out and talk about what is going on.

Luckily I had a girl from the program (at George Brown College) and lucky we had each other to support. And she went through her rough times too and I was there to help her out, so I was glad that we had each other.

While the students created among themselves an important and helpful support system, the participants also discussed the crucial role of their teachers in successfully navigating their educational experiences.

Really good, they were really supportive. That's probably what got me through the classes was their support and encouragement.

I always knew that my learning abilities were a bit lower than the average joe, and not realizing that there is actually a condition out there, about dyslexia until I talked to (a teacher) and that the learning process is so much different for me.

Researcher Malatest (2004), in the report, *Aboriginal peoples and post-secondary education: What educators have learned*, found that "aboriginal students, accustomed to close-knit communities with more one-on-one time with teachers, can find the formal and impersonal atmosphere of large universities intimidating" (37). Therefore, she suggests, Aboriginal students would benefit from support services that are accessible and open but unfortunately finds these programs hugely lacking in post-secondary programs across Canada. She does, however, cite a couple of examples of successful support programs for Aboriginal students in a small number of universities. A few of the elements of support provided are housing support, financial support, peer support, academic counseling, personal counseling, advocacy, tutoring, orientations, healing circles, newsletters and employment support (Malatest, 2004, p. 38-39).

For the participants the support they found in their programs extended beyond the realm of school work. For some, this support came at the critical juncture when the participant was embarking on their cultural journeys, sometimes for the first time and sometimes, with trepidation. A participant explained the first time he was offered the opportunity to smudge in the program and he had never done it before and didn't know how to do it.

They said, it's no problem, we'll show you how and I think if it was a non-Native environment, they'd just be like, you don't know how to smudge, it's your culture, what's wrong with you? But they didn't judge, they know people have had different experiences.

Again related to community building in the classroom, the participants talked about the value they experienced in being able to offer support to other students in the class.

Bailey (1999), in her experiences teaching Aboriginal students in a university, writes about the conflict she felt between the traditional university setting which seems to value independence and competition versus the interdependence and supportiveness she was witnessing among her Aboriginal students,

Thus I am faced with a clear clash of cultural values. On the one hand are the requirements of the institution for which I work. These requirements do not value group work. They are predicated on each individual forging her/his lonely way through the accreditation process. On the other hand is a group of people which values connections, one with the other, in a quest for community wholeness, and which demands relationships of personal respect (Bailey, 1999, p. 133)

The participants from both programs talked about how they offered their support to other students (and continue to offer their support now).

If anyone was struggling, I could identify that and intervene and I could help and say, hey do you want to come work with me? So, that's how I would participate, mostly in peer support, being there for other students...Once I had it figured out, I could help someone else.

I give my card and number out to all kinds of people – I get emails all the time, ‘did you have to go through this, getting your calendar screwed around?’ because they take it personally. And often I tell them, don’t take it personally, it’s just the size of the college, the number of students, it has nothing to do with you, have a little bit of patience and if you connect with the right people it will fall into place.

*<sup>centred\*</sup>  
Culturally centred programming as a foundation for further education and for affecting change*

Another surprising discovery was the assertion on the part of the past participants that these programs laid the foundation for future educational pursuits, often in mainstream settings. I might have suspected that after learning in a context where culture is central, a person might feel frustrated, isolated and uncomfortable returning to a mainstream setting. This did not appear to be the case. That is not to say there were not struggles. Many of the students expressed feeling shocked and ill-prepared for the difficulty, lack of support and amount of work when entering into the college program out of the Community Worker training program at Anishnawbe Health. However, once the foundation of cultural rediscovery and identity growth happened, the students I spoke with were prepared to move on. The past participants that I spoke with had entered college and university and those that had not were intending to pursue further education. Couture (2000) reviews this phenomenon in his writing about Native Studies programming. Crucial to his argument is that students are engaged in culturally centred education when he writes, “the more one enters traditional sources, the more one perceives their world view concepts and values as foundational – as able to incite and guide an entire continuum of aboriginal development and learning needs” (158).

Through the interviews it seemed that this motivation to pursue education further coincided with a new sense of power to affect change.

I think that's why our program has been successful. It gives the student those tools and builds that self so that they have the confidence to move on, to go to university or college or whatever.

Haig-Brown writes about a similar experience in doing her research with the Native Education Centre in Vancouver (a culturally centred, adult learning centre). She writes, "while only occasionally using words like power, in a variety of ways study participants said that they had plans which would affect mainstream society" (Haig-Brown, 1995, p. 223-224).

I just want to get the education to go after it because the way they're encroaching upon our lands...I just want to get the education to be able to help. Our forefathers said the seventh generation is when it's going to change and it's the seventh generation, that's why I want to stay in school and I want to learn the language...I want to stay in Toronto and I want to get into law or social work.

I've always been an activist but now I've become a better activist.

In addition (and some times attached) to these messages of power to affect change were messages of strength, resilience and ultimately hope from the participants. Black feminist author bell hooks creates a discourse of hope in education in her book, *Teaching Community*. In this she writes about her experiences in teaching students outside of the traditional, white, upper-middle class realms as being the most hopeful, meaningful of her career. The participants spoke to this hope that hooks talks about. Often showing up at the end of the interviews, the participants talked frankly about the survival of Aboriginal people in the face of great adversity and how that propelled them to continue the struggle.

...we are the ones to change. This struggle has been going on for years and years, hundreds of years. And knowing that we are strong people, that we are here surviving everyday. We haven't given up. So obviously there is a road where this struggle will end.

...just trying to take care of ourselves as best we can because we've endured, we've survived through all of the things we've been faced with as Indigenous people. And we'll continue to survive. We're survivors and we'll keep doing it.

### ***Impact beyond education***

The final theme to emerge from the interviews was surprising to me. When asked about the impact of each respective culturally centred program, the participants' answers resounded with the same powerful message – their educational pursuits in the Community Health Worker and Native Community Care programs changed their lives. Beyond identity, cultural awareness and activist pursuits, I got the sense from the participants that the way they lived their lives since engaging in the programs was fundamentally different. More than any of the other themes, this one was the most powerful, touching and engaging. I was frustrated to find that this did not appear in the literature, since it seemed to be the message that was articulated throughout the interviews. However, in some ways I am happy that I can leave this message of hope, without any analysis and just let the participants' words demonstrate the importance and significance of Aboriginal culturally centred education on a personal level.

It's just added to everything in my life. Since taking the program, my self-esteem, my confidence level is up in all the different areas...And I learned I always have to look at my, myself, my duty – the big key to it is just that, identity. And basically that's what it is day to day, just try to live the best as I can.

At that point [enrolled in the NCC program], I was doing a lot of that healing within myself because I had changed my whole outlook on life, like what I wanted to do, my career change, everything...

It was really overwhelming at times with the knowledge I was learning, what I was getting from it all. It really changed my way and my way of thinking and living, I think. It brought out more of a sense of pride for me of who I was and where I come from.

The first time I listened to powwow music, I used to hear it before when I was drinking and say, oh what's that?, but then when I actually sat down sober at my house and when I actually listened to it, I started crying, tears were just coming up in my eyes, I didn't even get up because I felt like I should have been drumming. I felt the connection to that.

Everything. From the people that I talk to today, from even the way I live my life at home now and having more cultural experience now and wishing that it was more that way – learning more so I can teach my kids.

It's (the CHW program) had a tremendous impact; it's totally changed my life. It's helped me steer clear of alcohol...I walk down the street every day with my head held high. I'm learning the language slowly. I have a jingle dress being made for my daughter. I want to learn to sing and drum...it's kept me really focused, kept me balanced, taught me to respect everybody, it's taught me to fight for the little guy, help out, volunteer.



## 6. Broader Implications: Self-determination and decolonization

*We didn't know for a long time that we were equal. Now we know, and there's no stopping us any more. We had forgotten our Story. Now we're starting to understand.*<sup>7</sup>

Both the Native Community Care and Community Health Worker programs exemplify Aboriginal culturally centred education programs that appear to have enormous impacts on their participants. After looking at the interview transcripts, however, I began to wonder, what impacts do these educational models (and other similar models) have beyond personal change? Does culturally centred education impact on the greater struggles and movement in Aboriginal self-determination and self-government?

Education has the capacity to be a potentially effective vehicle for decolonization, a crucial step toward the ultimate goals of self-determination and self-government for Aboriginal peoples. The most crucial piece to the Aboriginal education framework is the concept of recognizing, naming, discussing and working to understand oppression and resistance. Aboriginal students could benefit enormously from hearing about and being able to name and dialogue around the years of multiple layers of oppression their people have faced. Friere (1972) in his decisive work on education and liberation creates a pedagogical discourse that allows for this. He writes, “dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (76). This dialogical approach is crucial to developing a critical perspective of the world. In an Aboriginal context this is

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<sup>7</sup> (Couture, 2000, p. 161)

so important. As Aboriginal students are faced with the reality of harsh social conditions among their people (homelessness, addiction, poverty, suicide), the space and freedom to interrogate this reality in a context of oppression and colonization should be made in education.

Friere writes about the importance of context in education when he writes, “education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists in a reality apart from men” (69). This dialogical approach to critically understanding the world and understanding the place of oppression and colonization in the contemporary Aboriginal reality is an important step in creating space in education for decolonization.

Inextricably linked to this concept of decolonization is self-determination and self-government. Ultimately, Aboriginal control over education is one facet in the struggle to control and have ultimate power within their own communities. According to Diane Longboat, “the right of a community or its government to control its own educational system is an integral part of that community’s right to exercise other forms of self-determination” (Longboat, 1986, p. 29). What needs to happen to see the realization of an Aboriginal controlled education system and ultimately of self-determination? Alfred (1999) believes that the dismantling of the oppressive, paternalistic *Indian Act* would be a welcome start. The *Indian Act*, which still impacts on most facets of an Aboriginal persons public rights is seen as unable to “give a community any leverage in gaining control over its education” (Longboat, 1986, p.33).

According to Alfred (1999) in his widely revered *Peace, power and righteousness: an indigenous manifesto*, Aboriginal people are looking for re-empowerment to control the redefinition of the determination of their communities. He is clear in his assertion that Aboriginal people, in order to reclaim this self-determination, must utilize a framework based in tradition, ceremonies and culture. In this way, culturally centred educational programming, in its ability to affect personal change in students ultimately works toward the goal of family, group, community and change within nations. Each of the participants helped me to see the possibility of personal change through culturally centred education as a foundation for broader, more global change.

## **7. Personal reflection on the research process**

As I embarked on the research I assumed that my race would present the greatest limitation to gathering meaningful stories from the participants. I would have thought that my whiteness, my outsider status, would have made the conversations stilted, the participants distrustful and the power potentially imbalanced. What I did learn however, was that the research participants were open to talking to me about their educational experiences, despite my whiteness. This concern, although important to consider at the outset of the research, did not present any limitations. That is not to say that the resulting information gathered would not have been better had an Aboriginal person been doing the research. That is also not to say that there are hugely divergent discourses about Aboriginal people doing Aboriginal research and that this is an important and powerful discourse. However, the participants in this research presented themselves as experts on Aboriginal education, having lived the experience and understood that I was there to learn and to listen.

I would have liked the research to have been more participatory. At the outset, I had imagined that I would share my findings back to the collective of participants for feedback and analysis. I had hoped that as a group we could explore the broader implications of the themes that emerged from the interviews. Unfortunately, people lead busy lives and the difficulty of getting everyone together quickly presented itself as a reality. Therefore, although the participants have been consulted about their piece in the research, no collective analysis was gathered.

## **8. Conclusion/Future Considerations**

The history of Aboriginal education in Canada has been tumultuous. Pre-contact, Aboriginal communities had education systems set up that were centred in their spirituality and sense of community. The colonization of the Americas by European settlers started a legacy of oppression that impacted on many Aboriginal systems including education. As these effects are realized more and more, the federal government, which maintains legal jurisdiction over Aboriginal education in Canada, has been attempting to modify its policies to include more Aboriginal control. However, without adequate funding and infrastructure support, these mechanisms are ineffective. The call for Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education has been reiterated over and over by a number of scholars. The government of Canada does not seem ready to relinquish control and thus, Aboriginal people are left with only a small number of choices in pursuing education that is truly consistent with their culture.

Two programs that strive to teach Aboriginal people in a culturally centred way, the Community Health Worker Program at Anishnawbe Health in Toronto and the Native Community Care Counselling and Development Program at Mohawk College in Brantford had success in graduating students who are ready to engage in the struggle for Aboriginal justice in self-determination. Built on foundations of culture, spirituality, community and support these programs graduated students who were confident in articulating themes of life changing impacts and readiness to engage in the larger Aboriginal struggles. Through the literature consulted and interviews conducted, themes

of resistance, resilience and innovation in creating educational pursuits in the confines of bureaucratic government control and spending have demonstrated hope in the realm of Aboriginal education.

The interviews all ended with a question asking the participants, “what needs to happen to make educational experiences, particularly at the post-secondary level, more relevant for Aboriginal people?” Each participant seemed ready and energized to share a number of ideas, all of which were consistent with the elements of their own educational experiences they deemed important and areas that needed improving. It is with the foundation set by the participants themselves, with some input from the literature and my overall analysis from the interview data as a whole that I propose that the following general directions in Aboriginal education need to happen to make educational experiences more relevant, successful and respectful for Aboriginal students.

### ***Recommendations***

1. Consistent with the National Indian Brotherhood’s (1972) policy statement *Indian Control of Indian Education*, Aboriginal people should be free to control their education systems with adequate funding and infrastructure support from the federal government.
2. While not directly dealt with in the interviews it is crucial to the overall realm of culturally centred education that Aboriginal language education be made more accessible. Language is key to the cultural reclamation and survival of Aboriginal people; more money, research opportunities and power must be afforded to the people who are eager to ensure their survival. Aboriginal language instruction should appear in mainstream educational places<sup>8</sup>.
3. In order to raise awareness and combat racism and ignorance, contemporary Aboriginal issues should be introduced in mainstream educational settings.

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<sup>8</sup> It was important to include this despite its controversy and disconnect from the themes of my thesis since each of the participants talked about wanting to learn their language.

Participants talked about the value of the Canadian society at large knowing the “truth” about Aboriginal issues and the impact that this would have in their lives. Not only would it mean that Aboriginal people engaged in mainstream education would be able to see an accurate portrayal of their lives but also, non-Native students would be better equipped to live racism-free if given the tools to appreciate diversity.

4. While the culturally centred programs examined in this paper are important and successful, outreach to younger students needs to happen. Most of the participants I spoke with talked about how different their lives would have been had they entered into these programs from high school or had had culturally centred education in their high school settings. Aboriginal students graduating from high school need to know about these options.
5. Support programs for Aboriginal students need to be better funded in order to provide the services needed to improve recruitment and retention rates.
6. While the realities (poverty, addiction, suicide) affecting contemporary Aboriginal communities are serious and require attention, more space for celebrating resistance, resilience, survival and communities needs to be available in places of learning.
7. *The Community Health Worker Program especially contends with insecure funding.* More needs to be done to ensure that programs such as these have access to core funding and funding that is adequate to run the programs successfully.
8. Finally, further research on the impacts of culturally centred education should be explored with the goal of moving these models to other jurisdictions and other learning places.

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- Neo-Liberalism and Education: The disconnect between standardization and Aboriginal education*, Submitted April 12, 2004
- Understanding Barton's Dancing on the Mobius Strip: Challenging the sex war paradigm within Interpretive and Feminist methodological frameworks*, Submitted, October 22, 2003.
- Understanding my role as an outside researcher in an Aboriginal community group: Creating a "searching" framework for ethical research with Anishnawbe Health Toronto*, Submitted December 8, 2003

## **Appendix 1**

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### **INFORMATION AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

#### **ABORIGINAL EXPERIENCES WITH CULTURALLY CENTRED EDUCATION**

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by me, Jennie Vengris (supervisor, Bill Lee), from the School of Social Work at McMaster University, Hamilton. This research will contribute to my Master's Thesis.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me, Jennie Vengris (905) 525-9140 extension 24858 or Bill Lee at (905) 525-9140 extension 27782.

For this research, I am interviewing you because I want to learn more about how Aboriginal people experience education. In particular I am interested in your training in the Community Health Worker program at the Anishnabe Health Centre. I want to know what it was like learning in an environment like the Centre. I want to know how this culturally-centred education impacted you. From this I will provide an analysis of how culturally-centred education could be of benefit to Aboriginal people in general in the healing or decolonisation process.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- 1) Participate in a discussion or interview with me, Jennie. This interview will happen wherever you choose (a coffee shop, Anishnabe Health, for example). It will take approximately one hour. I will have a list of questions (attached) that I want to ask, but it will be flexible and hopefully work like a conversation. I will ask you if I can audiotape the conversation but only if you feel comfortable.
- 2) When I am done my research, you will receive a copy of the report.

Talking about past educational experiences could be upsetting. If you do become upset at any time in the interview you may take a break or stop participating altogether.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

In my thesis I will use pseudonyms instead of your real name to help ensure your confidentiality. All data that I collect will be locked in a secure desk and the only people who will have access to this data are my supervisor, Bill Lee and I.

I would like to audiotape our conversation. You may listen to the tape at any time. I will provide each participant with a typed copy of the transcript so that you can omit any information you do not want to give. No one other than me, or perhaps Bill Lee, will hear the tape.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may exercise the option of removing your data from the study. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

**You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB). If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:**

**MREB Secretariat  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street W., GH-306  
Hamilton, ON L8S 4L9**

**Telephone: 905-525-9140, ext. 23142  
E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)  
Fax: 905-540-8019**

**SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE**

**I understand the information provided for the study, *Aboriginal experiences with culturally centred education*, as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant or Legal Representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

**In my judgement, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix 2**

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**INTERVIEW SCHEDULE<sup>1</sup>**

*These questions will act as a guide, to direct the discussion. It is flexible and will remain open to changes and interpretations.*

Tell me about your experience in the Community Health Worker Training program at Anishnabe Health/Native Community Cares Counselling and Development Program at Mohawk College.

- Teachings – cultural and non-cultural
- Teachers and Elders
- Environment
- Classmates
- Class work
- Your participation in class

What aspects of the program did you find enjoyable, useful, helpful, interesting, eye-opening?

How did this experience compare to other educational experiences you have had? What was the same about it? What was different about it?

How do you think that your experience in the program has affected your life? Are there parts of it that have affected your personal life (not work or school)? How has this happened?

Have you shared what you learned with other people – how and why?

What do you think needs to happen to make educational experiences for First Nations people useful, helpful, exciting, relevant?

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<sup>1</sup> Each participant received a copy before the interview – each copy had only the name of the participants program.