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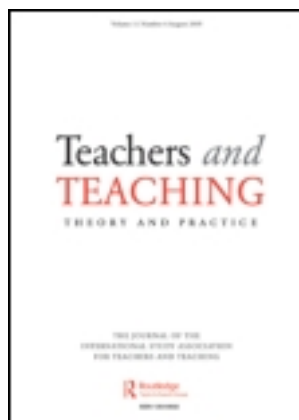
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## **A grounded theory of new Aboriginal teachers' perceptions: the cultural attributions of Medicine Wheel Teachings**

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The stress and anxiety of new teachers is a pervasive problem that impacts upon teacher preparation and retention. Although new mainstream teacher concerns and experiences have been readily discussed in the literature, the same attention has not been invested for new Aboriginal teachers. In Ontario, Canada, in excess of 60% of the Aboriginal population live off-reserve and reside in urban communities. Well over 50,000 Aboriginal students attend publicly funded kindergarten to Grade 12 schools that are governed by the Ontario Ministry of Education. There is a growing socio-political awareness that Aboriginal epistemologies are distinct from colonial paradigms, and that Aboriginal knowledge has been dismally underrepresented in Ontario schools. The intent of the Ministry of Education's creation of the Ontario Aboriginal Education Office (2007) is to remedy the chronic shortage of Aboriginal teachers and in the process offer professional support to new teachers as an incentive to keep them in the profession. It has been suggested that teaching Aboriginal languages and socio-historical values to Aboriginal students is integral to their self-identity as Aboriginal peoples. The purpose of this research was to examine new Aboriginal teachers' thoughts and experiences during their induction into the profession and to articulate a descriptive theory of these perceptions. This grounded theory study employed a volunteer and purposive sampling that included six new Aboriginal teacher participants. Analysis of the data resulted in a grounded theory of participants' experiences that were rooted in the cultural attributions of Medicine Wheel Teachings. The three categories grounded in the data include 'sense of vulnerability', 'commitment to students', and 'identity formation'. These represent the first stage of participants' reflections as novice teachers. In the subsequent stage, identified as 'Introspective analysis,' participants' innate beliefs and traditional values were embedded in healing and spirituality. The paper discusses how the grounded theory saturated the categories and properties of the two developmental stages and represented a means of new Aboriginal teachers' sense of experience in a culturally responsive context.

**Keywords:** new teacher perceptions; Aboriginal epistemologies; Aboriginal teachers; grounded theory

### **Introduction**

In Ontario, Canada, in excess of 60% of the Aboriginal population live off-reserve and reside in urban communities (Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001). Well over 50,000

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Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> students attend publicly funded kindergarten to Grade 12 schools that are governed by the Ontario Ministry of Education. These students represent the fastest growing demographic in the province. The Ontario government has made a public declaration to encourage more Aboriginal peoples to become teachers, and has recognized the pressing need to effectively train and retain new Aboriginal teachers. There is a growing socio-political awareness that Aboriginal epistemologies are distinct from colonial paradigms, and that Aboriginal knowledge has been dismally underrepresented in Ontario schools (Battiste, 2002; Hill, 2000). In fact, it historically has been perceived as a means of domination by an imperial presence over Aboriginal peoples' lifestyle (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Further, the research has made clear that Aboriginal teachers have a positive influence on Aboriginal students in mainstream schools (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Aboriginal teachers, according to the literature, are more apt to employ culturally sensitive pedagogy into their classrooms, identify traditional teachings, and heighten students' esteem by promoting an inclusive learning and social environment (Duquette, 2000; Neegan, 2005).

### Conceptual framework

Various faculties of education across Canada, including Ontario, have created Native Teacher Education Programs (NTEP) to prepare prospective Aboriginal teachers to teach in public school boards and in First Nations schools (public education in Ontario is governed by the Ontario Ministry of Education. The federal government of Canada presides over First Nations schools). NTEP tailor their curriculum to enable prospective teachers to learn culturally sound and sensitive knowledge and pedagogy in order to engage Aboriginal student motivation and potential (Cohen, 2001; Kavanaugh, 2005). By infusing linguistic and socio-cultural traditions into NTEP, prospective teachers become more proficient in managing the difficulties of bolstering Aboriginal student identity into the classroom (Witt, 2006). The intent of NTEP, and even more recently with the Ministry of Education's creation of the Ontario Aboriginal Education Office (2007), is to remedy the chronic shortage of Aboriginal teachers and in the process offer professional support to new teachers as an incentive to keep them in the profession (see, e.g., Morgan, 2002). It has been suggested that teaching Aboriginal languages and socio-historical values to Aboriginal students is integral to their self-identity as Aboriginal peoples (Norris, 2006). Aboriginal teachers can contribute to school environments that honor linguistic and cultural traditions and Aboriginal worldviews to further enable Aboriginal student success (Hilberg & Tharp, 2002; Swanson, 2003).

Although there is research in the area of Aboriginal student achievement and culturally informed teacher knowledge and pedagogy (Goulet, 2001), there has been a profound lack of attention on how new Aboriginal teachers have fared during their induction into the profession (Cherubini, 2008). The same cannot be said for the availability of the literature that discusses new mainstream teachers' experiences during their first to third year in teaching. New mainstream teachers' struggles have been documented to include managing student misbehavior, the complexity of programming for exceptional students (Linton, Eberhard, Reinhardt-Mundragon, & Stottlemeyer, 2000), coping with fragile professional self-perceptions (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000; Brott & Kajs, 2001), negotiating their roles in complex social school cultures (Daley, 2002; Moir, 2003), and understanding the

implications and dynamics of organizational culture as a novice teacher (Zachary, 2005).

### ***Purpose of the study***

Effectively supporting new Aboriginal teachers in their first three years of practice assists in their retention in the profession and improves Aboriginal student success in public and First Nations schools across Ontario (Anderson, 2004). The over-arching objective of this study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of new Aboriginal teachers in Ontario, Canada, during their professional induction. Analysis of the data resulted in a three-stage grounded theory of participants' perceptions and experiences that were rooted in the cultural attributions of Medicine Wheel Teachings. The categories and emergent theory represent the distinctiveness of new Aboriginal teachers' voices and identities and are testament to the diverse support they deserve during their professional induction.

### ***Methodology***

Grounded theory transitions from data collection in a substantive subject to the emergence of a conceptual theory. It is an inductive qualitative approach that facilitates the exploration of critical themes as they contribute to core categories and eventual theory (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### ***Participants***

Using the non-probability techniques of purposive sampling (Chinn, 1986), participants were determined for their potential contribution to the area of research. Participants were recruited by the Center for Aboriginal Research and Education that was affiliated with this project. The target population included new Aboriginal teachers in their first to third years of teaching in Ontario, were representative of the four dominant Aboriginal groups in the province, and who taught in either publicly funded or First Nations schools. Six individuals participated in the project, including Anishinabe, Hotinonshonni, Nishnawbe-Aski, and Métis teachers. Of the six new teachers, two were male and four female. They ranged in age between 23 and 48 years. Three of the participants taught in public schools and three in First Nations schools. Each of the participants represented different schools of varying socio-economic student demographics across the province.

### ***Data collection***

Participants were interviewed in a traditional Talking Circle format that represents Aboriginal values of holism, inclusivity, and respect. The Talking Circle was a semi-structured format that invited participants to share their experiences and observations in conversational style. There were a range of questions that dealt primarily with participants' experiences as teacher-professionals, their formal teacher education, and their induction. Some of the questions included:

- What experiences contributed to your becoming a teacher?
- How has your formal teacher preparation prepared you for the realities of the classroom?

- What kinds of support have been afforded to you as a new teacher?
- What are some of the most significant concerns that you have as a new Aboriginal teacher?
- Who has been particularly instrumental in supporting your professional growth?

This format yielded a proportionate combination of interview and observation data throughout the three-day focus-study gathering. The participants, an Elder, Aboriginal researchers, and mainstream university faculty met face to face at a venue in central Ontario in the traditional territory of the Wendat Confederacy (Cherubini, Niemczyk, & McGean, 2008). Brief notes were scripted by the university faculty researchers after each of the respective sessions (typically within one hour of their conclusion) to assist in the theoretical saturation process of the constant comparison analysis. Grounded theory was ideally suited to the research context because it identified the emergence of issues as they were grounded in participants' responses (Glaser, 2003).

### **Data analysis**

Common patterns of behavior were revealed as the participants discussed and reflected upon the personal events that defined their induction into teaching (Glaser, 1998). Each of the three-day focus-interview sessions was audio-taped and transcribed. Participants had an opportunity to member-check the data set. The interdisciplinary research team, consisting of Aboriginal researchers, graduate students, an Elder, and university faculty completed a line-by-line coding of the data to identify basic units of analysis (Chesler, 1987). The coded data were structured according to themes and then into conceptual categories. Memos were recorded by each researcher as the analysis evolved (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). As categories were identified, theoretical sampling allowed for further interrogation and more in-depth analysis (Cherubini, 2007). Throughout the process, categories were constantly compared and eventually saturated (Taber, 2000). The core category, or grounded theory, was distinguished as the category that was common to all the others (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### **Findings**

The inductively derived grounded theory consisted of three stages. Stage 1 of the findings included three categories that were grounded in the data; namely, 'sense of vulnerability', 'commitment to students', and 'identity formation'. Stage 2 was characteristic of participants assuming a more introspective analysis of their perceptions, thoughts, and experiences where they shared innate beliefs and traditional values that were very much embedded in healing and spirituality. The discussion section of the paper presents the third stage of the emergent findings that culminated in a grounded theory that represented new Aboriginal teachers' sense of experience in the culturally responsive context of Medicine Wheel Teachings.

#### ***Stage 1. Emergent reflections***

##### *Sense of vulnerability*

New Aboriginal teacher participants shared their feelings of vulnerability due to the fact that they did not have the same academic credentials as the majority of their

mainstream teacher colleagues. They suggested that mainstream teachers did not 'accept [them] as a teacher' and instead were often distinguished as 'an Indian teacher'. In many instances, this feeling of vulnerability emanated from their own experiences as students when they perceived themselves as marginalized by educators who did not recognize their cultural uniqueness. One participant was particularly candid in suggesting, 'I hated the teachers, I hated the principal, and I hated the professors'. Such experiences resonated for participants in their current roles as they continue to endure the same damaging stereotypical assumptions they did as students. One participant suggested, 'they put us all in the same basket. If they get one [Aboriginal] teacher that is not very knowledgeable and very good at her duties then they lump us all in the same basket'. These experiences heightened participants' sensitivity to the Aboriginal students in their classes who were experiencing the same feelings. A different new teacher said: 'When our kids walk into schools we are well aware that we are seen as poor. And that affects our self-esteem ... it makes the kids feel isolated'. On various occasions, the new teacher participants implied that some mainstream teachers do not identify with being marginalized and have difficulty understanding the anxiety associated not only with learning but also with social environments characteristic of cultural discontinuity. Participants believed that mainstream teachers 'need to feel [the sense of vulnerability] so they know what our kids feel when they walk into that [school] environment'.

Furthermore, new teacher participants' sense of vulnerability stemmed from realizations that the years of cultural genocide inflicted by the residential school experience in Ontario and across the country have translated into the extinction of various Native linguistic traditions that, as one participant suggested, 'makes us a unique society'. Participants' reflections were positioned from an awareness that Aboriginal languages capture the shared construction of meaning and are vital to the cross-generational teachings of traditional values, stories, and teachings. Yet, the fact that their students 'are not retaining any of the language they are learning' merely contributes to the perilous implications of losing their linguistic traditions that are fundamental to social interaction.

### *Commitment to students*

Participants understood that for Aboriginal students to achieve their educational goals, it is the teachers who have to account for students' personal predicaments. Aboriginal students were described as coming from 'a lot of broken homes' and experiencing 'problems reading and writing'. Teachers professed to know that traditional transmission teaching styles do not enhance Aboriginal students' cultural experiences in school, nor do they foster student learning. Instead, participants were committed to culturally rooted pedagogical practice whereby students 'get a chance to talk' in their classroom, interact with their peers, and dialogue with their teachers. They wanted to provide educational experiences for their students that were not driven by Euro-Western practices of formal education. Instead, they often 'talk about choices' with their students in what were commonly described as 'open' and invitational classrooms that respect the cultural distinctiveness of Aboriginal students. Participants were committed to address student learning through Aboriginal culture, and to refute the detrimental practices of the past when Aboriginal children's worldviews were uncompromisingly assimilated to colonial paradigms and practices. They recognized the importance of self-expression on Aboriginal

adolescent development and were committed to honoring their experiences as student-learners.

In turn, participants discussed how the Aboriginal students commissioned to their care motivated them to provide optimal learning conditions and engaging lessons. One participant referred to the sustaining force of 'see[ing] the kids, those students hoping to learn' as a substantial motivation to her commitment. Another suggested that Aboriginal students have 'a whole richness to [them] that has nothing to do with how poor or rich [they are] or what they have at home', and that this is an essential consideration for enhancing their educational experiences. Participants felt compelled to assume, learn, and practice culturally sensitive teaching in order to create a learning environment that represented Aboriginal values and traditions. By bringing 'their own [culturally responsive] stuff' into the classroom, participants readily shared their resolve to resist oppressive dominating practices that have historically silenced Aboriginal students. This is not to suggest that participants neglected their responsibility to address standardized Ministry of Education curriculum; instead, it is to underscore new Aboriginal teachers' commitment to a teaching practice that is respectful of traditional Aboriginal linguistic and cultural customs.

Woven throughout the data are references made by the new teacher participants to 'instilling something' in Aboriginal students' character development that is enduring and memorable. Participants agreed that 'it is more than about teaching these students ... the skills we equip them with are so important'. Participants suggested that students who feel disenfranchised from the political and social realities of schooling cannot learn successfully and, therefore, it was imperative that they remain committed to addressing the idiosyncratic needs of the Aboriginal learners despite the challenges of being a new teacher themselves. For each participant, 'those little brown [student] faces', although described differently in the various accounts, sustained their commitment to student success, increased their political awareness of schooling, and forged a sense of consensus among other Aboriginal educators of their inherent social responsibility as teachers.

### *Identity formation*

Participants indicated a disciplined commitment to self-identify as Aboriginal peoples first, and then as new Aboriginal teachers. Fully aware of their new educational roles, participants were inspired to explore, research, create, and recreate their identities as Aboriginal peoples in order to fully understand the influence of their past experiences upon their present realities. They unanimously suggested that in order for them to serve as a wellspring for their students' formative identity development, they had to animate what it meant to be a distinct Aboriginal person, learner, and teacher. For all of them this meant 'living the language', as it was considered 'the fundamentally important piece' of their self-concept. Participants discussed the meaning of identity and how these understandings contributed toward their decisions to become teachers.

Those new teacher participants who were graduates of mainstream education programs were, however, challenged by the discontinuities of Aboriginal student epistemologies. Although themselves Aboriginal persons they claimed to be unprepared during their induction into teaching to negotiate this epistemological paradigm shift, let alone to authentically incorporate it into practice. For these participants, 'that was the biggest thing [during their] first couple of years' since they were forced to, as this



individual stated, 'put aside all [their] experiences and ways of seeing education'. They admitted that these efforts added to long hours of work after the school day had concluded. In many instances, this exasperated their own professional development as new teachers particularly because of the lack of support from school administrators and school board services. All participants strove to establish their identity in order to better cultivate their students' identity formation as Aboriginal peoples. Participants considered themselves to be 'role models' to whom Aboriginal students could 'identify' and garner a 'feeling of belonging'. They saw their own emergent self-identities as a revitalizing force in their students' efforts.

In the context of various experiences, participants described how their assuming 'many roles ... as Aboriginal educators' made it especially important that they remained flexible and tolerant in light of the unpredictability of student and school dynamics. They understood their pivotal role to assist students in their formative development both within and apart from the broader classroom context. Their resolution was to engage themselves and their students in language reclamation. Participants insisted that Aboriginal students recognize the innate relationship between linguistic traditions and Aboriginal identity. The conceptual force of this ever-recurring phenomena of identity transcended participants' descriptions of the challenges they faced as novice teachers (lack of curricular support, special education programming for specific students, to name only two) and became articulated as their belief that Aboriginal students need only be given 'the tools [and] they can learn'. Such tools, according to participants, included a self-determined curriculum that accounted for Aboriginal worldviews and how Aboriginal students 'learn differently' from their mainstream peers. Participants suggested that a curriculum that is responsive to Aboriginal epistemologies could lend itself to strengthening Aboriginal identity, sustaining traditional teachings, and engaging the community-at-large in formal schooling practices. Despite their inexperience, the new teacher participants felt strongly that they could 'no longer wait for somebody else' to revise the curriculum to include culturally sensitive nuances. As this participant stated on behalf of the others, 'the educators, whether it be [through teaching] language or whether it be culture ... need to get curriculum out'.

Participants considered unresponsive mainstream educational practices to be merely contributing to neo-colonial practices that suppress Aboriginal student identity. By being underrepresented, participants suggested that Aboriginal students often succumb to the self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. Aboriginal students, as one participant aptly summarized, 'do not even expect to get through high school'. Participants felt commissioned to foster Aboriginal student self-identity in order to, as one individual stated, 'build up that self-esteem [and] build up that self-worth as Aboriginal people, as a human being first, and instill a sense of identity so that they can walk proud down the hallway'. By reinforcing student identity, the new teacher participants could serve as the role models and conduits for Aboriginal students to understand their beliefs, values, and discourses as distinct peoples, and enable them to articulate an authentic voice.

### *Stage 2. Introspective analysis*

The three categories became theoretically saturated into conceptualizations of healing and spirituality that represented new Aboriginal teachers' thoughts on their personal and professional development.

*Healing*

Emerging from participants' introspective analysis was a sharpened insight on the importance of not only recognizing one's vulnerability but of having a deliberate obligation to acknowledge the importance of healing. Participant shared stories of how important it was to heal from the fragmented events of their past as they were developing as novice educators. Common to the majority of experiences was this participant's description: 'I know some people are still healing. I am healing every single day [while doing the] really tough job' of teaching. Interestingly, their professional growth as new teachers was not framed in a different context from their personal formative development. They considered it most significant to share their widespread past experiences, and believed that they needed to heal in order to better understand their present role as Aboriginal persons and new teachers. There were clear implications that if their professional roles are to have any effect on Aboriginal students, they had to arrive at a sense of self-understanding. One individual's statement in particular met the approval of all the others: 'Healing is an essential component of teaching. Our ancestors insist on it. Our past injustices must be acknowledged so that we may move ahead to build a better future for our nation and I incorporate that on a daily bases into my classroom'.

This decision to be deliberate in their healing constituted a vital point of new Aboriginal teacher development. Some participants recognized this dimension in previous course work claiming that the theme of the Aboriginal Adult Education program 'was heal the teacher before they go out into the community ... that was exactly what I needed and it was just wonderful'. Participants described on many occasions how they had to 'just work through it' and how they felt compelled to make sense of past relationships and circumstances to make better sense of their present. They considered healing to be especially redemptive in times when their induction into teaching was marked by stress and demoralization. As participants pushed to think critically of the multiple realities of what it means to be an Aboriginal person and new Aboriginal teacher, they framed their references in words that were dialogically determined to convey their belief that teachers, as one individual adamantly stated, 'need to heal'. Participants situated and contextualized their imperativeness to heal according to student welfare and development. They professed a profound awareness of understanding and living in the context of history, and resolved themselves as novice teachers to orient their practice and philosophies in a particular ideological direction. One participant summarized the view of most when she said, 'our children are still hurting. They are still suffering and if we cannot identify with that as educators then their learning is going to stop'. The weight of the past, and the hurt it continues to inflict, has to be brought to the fore according to these new teachers in order for students and teachers alike to heal. 'It is time', as one individual expressed, 'to let it go [and] to look at the positive information that is not going to hold them back'.

*Spirituality*

For the new teacher participants, it was integral that the learner be always present in the process of decolonizing knowledge to better understand the historical implications of the past. For these new teachers, the spirit of 'the ancestors insist' that traditional knowledge and language resides in them and on the very land that students and teachers inhabit. Spirituality cultivates the scope of the school day and is a routine part of spiritually driven practice. One new teacher shared, 'we do not open [opening

ceremony of the school day] with Oh Canada. We open with Anishinabe prayer in Ojibwa ... that is how we begin our day'. Spirituality is not removed from the context of what is taught. Another participant shared how this practice manifests itself in her classroom. Students are invited to share the events, concerns, and circumstances of their lives at the start of the school day, or at least 'as much as they feel comfortable with sharing', so that the intentions can 'go up in smoke to the Creator and then they [the students] can have a real good and open day into learning'. The spiritual dimension that the participants incorporate into their teaching affords students the freedom from repressing bothersome thoughts. Spirituality is intricately connected to addressing their sense of vulnerability as novice teachers, their commitment to students, and to the formation of their identity as Aboriginal peoples and new Aboriginal teachers.

Spirituality, for these participants, was a distinct consideration from the governance of market knowledge and externally imposed curriculum expectations. Instead it helped to solidify their unique experience of identity, place, value, and custom in a collective belief system. From this perspective, some participants distinguished their feeling of being 'prepared spiritually to go into a Grade 7 and 8 class [that includes] 27 different types of Aboriginal people from all over'. On many occasions they credited the Creator for the spiritual guidance that sustained them through not only the unpredictability of being a novice teacher, but also through their life-journey in becoming an Aboriginal person and teacher. In fact, they unanimously credited the presence of the Elder at the Wildfire Gathering for 'providing that safe environment [to] open these doors' where participants could partake in ceremony to share their experiences of struggle, hope, alienation, and collectivity. Participants were critically conscious of their 'spirituality [that] assisted [them] on [their] journey to teaching' and as one individual concluded, it was 'through my openness to learning and my willingness to share – to learn to deal with things so that they are not affecting my interaction with the school and with the students'. Participants described how spirituality was critical in their negotiation of the dual realities of Eurocentric schooling practices and Aboriginal epistemologies. They considered the wisdom and spiritual traditions as the frameworks for creating classroom environments conducive to learning. Participants attested to the fact that the spiritual dimension must maintain the distinct integrity to which it is entitled. Common in the discussions within the Talking Circle were participants' reflections on the role of spirituality as a culturally affirming presence on students' realities in schools. For this reason, they expressed their profound resolve to 'teach culture and spirituality', as this participant stated, given the large circle of influence it has on fostering identity, contextualizing learning, and reaffirming their own identity as Aboriginal peoples and new teachers.

## Discussion

This research examined new Aboriginal teachers' perceptions and experiences during their induction into the profession. Three categories emerged and were identified as Stage 1 of the inductive analysis. Stage 2, Introspective analysis, was grounded in participant's beliefs, thoughts, and values that were embedded in concepts of healing and spirituality. The categories and properties of the two developmental stages were saturated into a grounded theory of participants' experiences that were rooted in the cultural attributions of Medicine Wheel Teachings.

Medicine Wheel Teachings are a holistic series of teachings that are conveyed from generation to generation of many Native peoples in the Americas. These ways

of knowing are conceptualized as a series of interconnected circles divided into four equal parts. Each teaching is a self-contained and comprehensive body of knowledge that relates to other circle teachings. The teachings explain fundamental understanding of people and four aspects of self that must be addressed to maintain a balanced life. Typically, the interpretation of the medicine wheel begins in the eastern quadrant and moves around the circle in a clockwise direction. The order in this teaching begins with the spiritual, moving to the emotional, then the intellectual, and finally the physical. Aboriginal teacher (and students) students need recognition of their spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual identity in the school and classroom. Through this harmony Aboriginal teachers and students maintain a healthy self-identity, which naturally contributes to improved teaching and learning.

### *Spirit*

Aboriginal novice teachers patterned much of their cultural practice in classrooms on their own experience of schools and their life's experience of what is necessary to live and be successful in a bi-cultural environment. The teachers declared the necessity of the healing process that leads to an increased sense of well-being and individual pursuit of self-identity. This pursuit cannot be imposed as residential schools were imposed. It has to occur by creating classroom space that encourages self-determination. Teachers frequently referred to their own healing journey and the position that identity played in that journey to interrupt the cycle of dysfunction in their lives.

Aboriginal teachers collectively spoke of the importance of their spirituality and how it was directly connected to their relationship with the land, and how from this relationship their traditional values, beliefs, and epistemology emerged. The pursuit of spirituality is not a separate entity; it can only develop while effectively and tunefully entwined with the other aspects of the medicine wheel.

### *Emotion*

The greatest single factor in Aboriginal academic achievement is the ability of teachers to connect to their students to create honest trustworthy relationships (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2007) that often reject the notion of professional objectivity and hierarchical authority. Instead, what is valued within Aboriginal societies is the ability to build relationships that are respectful of young people and understand them to be capable human beings. In many Aboriginal traditions, young people are seen to be the most precious gift and as a result are given the freedom to explore their worlds and express themselves and their emotions. This understanding is often undermined in schools through what is essentially an epistemic clash, which results in a weakened self-identity.

Aboriginal people teachings emphasize the importance of understanding who they are in order to know where they are going (Anderson, 2002). Just as the novice Aboriginal teachers indicated their own need to connect with their roots and discover their identity, they emphasized the essential need for Aboriginal students to make sense of their past experiences. From this perspective, education was perceived as complimenting and supporting rather than undermining and discrediting Aboriginal children's culture and traditions. A nurturing collaboration between the institution of education and the traditional knowledge acquired through the culture of families and communities becomes the essential component to self-identity and emotional well-being.

### **Physical**

The physical act of teaching is about taking action that seeks to improve the conditions in which Aboriginal students learn. In fact, this research project becomes the medium for change and an element of action. The inevitability of change emerges through the voices of knowledgeable novice Aboriginal teachers, who through their narratives, warn of a continued stream of children trapped and inevitably forced out of schools by the very nature of schools. Participants made clear that it is only when teachers act from within a bi-epistemic practice that the aspirations and needs of Aboriginal children will be fulfilled.

The priority for the novice teachers, their main action, was to invest time in healing the wounds of their spirits in order to prepare and to heal the wounds of the next generation. In spite of numerous obstacles during the educational journey and subsequent induction to the profession, Aboriginal novice teachers committed to the support and encouragement of their students. To achieve this goal, Aboriginal teachers began by taking ownership of their own futures and investing in their own healing journey to establish an epistemic center from which to work that reflected their traditional values and beliefs.

### **Intellectual**

All the novice teachers collectively reported that the primary goal of Aboriginal education was to prepare students for a future life in a complex society, by encouraging and enhancing their self-identity. They unanimously believed that they were responsible for the transmission of Aboriginal knowledge such as language, traditions, values, and spiritual beliefs within their teaching practice. Furthermore, they emphasized that students need to be knowledgeable about their self in order to be independent and self-reliant in a bi-epistemic world.

It was evident to the teachers that the learning process must include and acknowledge an authentic history, which has dramatically affected the contemporary reality of Aboriginal peoples. Through their practice, teachers struggled to provide a learning environment that was based on their epistemological foundation. They took ownership of this role since it was not reflected in the mainstream curriculum. The teachers repeatedly described how they took responsibility to affect change in the realities of Aboriginal students knowing that, due to limited support and resources, they could not rely solely on schools to account for this change. This sense of responsibility was actualized in their commitment to expanding their language proficiency, as well as their traditional skills and knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

The new Aboriginal teacher participants did not discredit the value of the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum that existed outside of Aboriginal knowing. Their voices indicated the need for restructuring the relationship between schools and Aboriginal worldviews for the well-being of Aboriginal students. Aboriginal teachers accentuated Aboriginal students' need to know about their past in order to understand their present socio-political reality and to locate themselves within it, and also to extract the best of what the mainstream has to offer.

Through the collective narratives, the participants presented a holistic understanding of Aboriginal education that embraces and balances the spiritual, emotional,

intellectual, and physical aspects of self that are fundamental to Aboriginal student success. Their common goal was liberating themselves from oppression by acknowledging their past, rebuilding their self-identity, and looking toward a brighter future for the next generation. The Aboriginal novice teachers' goal was to make school a friendly environment where Aboriginal students can feel safe and valued. It became clear that the process necessary to change the present reality of Aboriginal peoples entails changing the classroom practices and experiences of Aboriginal children in school.

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### Note

1. The use of the all-inclusive word 'Aboriginal' signifies or implies any form of generic, one-size-fits-all approach to the realities of Aboriginal academic achievement in Ontario schools. On the contrary, it must be recognized that the Anishnabe, Haudenosaunee, Inuit, Métis, Mushkeygo, and Nishnawbe-Aski peoples that call Ontario home are highly diverse in their cultures, languages, values, beliefs, histories, contemporary realities, and aspirations.

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