

# Experiences of Beginning Aboriginal Teachers in Band-Controlled Schools

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Compelling evidence points to the need for higher education, and especially teacher education, to become better informed about the concerns of Aboriginal peoples and to be more responsive to their needs. With this focus in mind, we had conversations with 30 beginning First Nations teachers, graduates of a teacher education program in Saskatchewan, as they reflected on their university preparation and their beginning years in band-controlled environments. We identify issues and challenges that teachers faced in making the transition from the academy to the classroom and in applying theory to practice. We stress that much of what we report is not new to teacher education. What we want to convey is that in most cases, the weaknesses of our current teacher education programs and the challenges of beginning teachers appear to be even more relevant to the experiences of beginning First Nations teachers in band-controlled schools. The teachers in our study spoke positively about their experiences as students in their teacher preparation programs. A particular strength was their cohort experience. Although feeling well-prepared in some professional areas, these teachers all indicated that they could be better prepared for working with the day-to-day realities of band-controlled schools, the lack of collegial support, and the high demands and expectations placed on them. Many expressed a desire to have formal mentorship and all wanted more "hands on" experiences. They also expressed uncertainty about how to deal with the complexity of working in tightly knit communities.

Key words: Aboriginal teacher education, teacher induction, teaching in band-controlled schools, teacher education in Saskatchewan

Des données probantes montrent comment l'enseignement supérieur, notamment la formation à l'enseignement, doit prendre mieux en compte les préoccupations des populations autochtones et mieux répondre à leurs besoins. Dans cet esprit, les auteurs se sont entretenus avec trente nouveaux enseignants d'origine autochtone, diplômés d'un programme de formation à l'enseignement en Saskatchewan, et recueilli leurs réflexions sur la préparation universitaire qu'ils avaient reçue et leurs premières années comme enseignants dans des écoles de bande. Les problèmes et les défis auxquels les enseignants font face en passant de l'université à une salle de classe ou de la théorie à la pratique ont ainsi été identifiés. Les auteurs soulignent qu'une bonne partie de leurs observations sont déjà connues dans le monde de la formation à l'enseignement. Ils espèrent faire ressortir que, dans la plupart des cas, la faiblesse des programmes actuels de formation à l'enseignement et les observations sur les difficultés éprouvées par les nouveaux enseignants semblent être encore plus pertinentes quand on analyse les expériences des nouveaux enseignants autochtones dans des écoles de bande. Les enseignants sur qui cette étude a porté ont parlé en termes positifs de leurs expériences comme étudiants dans leur programme de formation à l'enseignement, notamment comme membres de leur cohorte. S'ils estiment avoir reçu une bonne préparation pour certains des aspects de leur vie professionnelle, tous ces enseignants ont signalé qu'ils pourraient être mieux préparés pour faire face aux réalités quotidiennes dans une école de bande, que le soutien de leurs collègues fait défaut et qu'ils font l'objet de demandes et d'attentes élevées. Un grand nombre d'entre eux ont exprimé le désir d'avoir un mentor attitré et tous souhaitaient des expériences pratiques de travail. Ils se disaient en outre incertains quant à la façon de faire face à la complexité d'un travail dans des communautés étroitement soudées.

Mots clés : formation des enseignants autochtones, insertion professionnelle du nouveau personnel enseignant, formation à l'enseignement en Saskatchewan.

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In the early 1970s, as a part of a larger national and international trend, Indigenous<sup>1</sup> groups within Saskatchewan asserted their rights to control their own education. First Nations peoples in Saskatchewan established band-controlled school systems both to improve educational attainment among Indigenous peoples and to serve as a vehicle to revitalize and

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, we use the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous interchangeably. The term Aboriginal is used in policy documents and in the University of Alberta's Aboriginal Teacher Education Program.

transmit languages, cultures, and world views of Aboriginal groups (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). As St. Denis, Battiste, and Bouvier (1998) write: "Thus began the proliferation of Aboriginal teacher education programs across Canada; in particular, Saskatchewan became the site for at least four distinct Aboriginal teacher education programs" (p. 4). The College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan established the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP) in 1972 in response to the demand for qualified Aboriginal educators<sup>2</sup>. To date, ITEP has graduated over 1,000 students who now form a considerable part of teaching and administrative staffs in band-controlled school systems in Saskatchewan and beyond. Legare (2007) noted that despite its longevity and influence, little research has been conducted to date on ITEP or the experiences or accomplishments of its graduates.

For two years, we worked on a federally funded research project (a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [SSHRC] grant) to explore the experiences of beginning First Nations teachers who graduated from ITEP at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S) in the years 2005-2007. This article provides an overview of the context of our work, presents what we learned from the research, and discusses implications of this research for Aboriginal teacher education. This article is particularly appropriate for this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Education* because it provides perspectives emanating from the experiences of 30 beginning First Nations teachers. Many Canadian universities are challenged to seriously consider how to work with Aboriginal peoples in higher education and are in the midst of reconsidering the challenge of preparing teachers for the twenty-first century and specifically in teachers' work with Aboriginal learners.

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing this article, there are five sites for Aboriginal Teacher Education in Saskatchewan. These include three Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Programs (SUNTEP) located in Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert; the Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP) offered in La Ronge; and ITEP program affiliated with the University of Saskatchewan. The First Nations University of Canada also offers a teacher education program.

## CONTEXT

The four people who worked on this project come from two universities in western Canada. Two of the researchers are graduate students and staff members in the ITEP program; the other two are faculty members. We have worked extensively in teacher education and have been involved in Aboriginal teacher education at each of our universities.

As a research team we strove to maintain consistency between the manner in which we worked together and the cultural teachings of ITEP. A unique feature of ITEP is the possibility of cross-cultural learning and relationship-building afforded by the presence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together. Randy and Mike, established scholars, continue to learn about, and understand, appropriate relationships with, and research practices of, Aboriginal communities through their extensive work with Louise and Yvette, two beginning Aboriginal scholars. Mike and Randy consider it a privilege to mentor Louise and Yvette in the ways of the academy and in supporting the pursuit of their graduate degrees. During Mike's time with ITEP, he has learned a great deal about respectful interaction with Aboriginal people and has also become aware from his Aboriginal colleagues both of the similarities and differences between Aboriginal culture and his own culture.

### *Purpose of the Research*

The research project explored the experiences of ITEP graduates during their first two years of teaching in band-controlled environments. By recording and analyzing their reflections related to their experiences, we identified some of the issues and challenges faced by beginning Aboriginal teachers in making the transition from the academy to the classroom and in applying theory to practice.

*Purpose of This Article.* We have written this article with a goal of informing educational research that will affect the policy and practice of community education of Aboriginal people and university-based teacher education<sup>3</sup>. Here we present themes taken from our conversations with

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<sup>3</sup> The project from which the data for this article comes is situated more broadly within the following goals: (a) informing educational research that will affect the policy and

beginning First Nations teachers as they reflected on their teaching experience of their first two years in band-controlled schools. Our immediate hope is to contribute to teacher induction for band-controlled schools and to Aboriginal teacher education. We specifically intend this work to add to the multiple sources of input universities are collecting to revise and reform their teacher education programs. This article is the first in a series of papers and conference presentations where we continue to address this goal as well as the other project goals.

### *Significance*

The reality of current demographic patterns in Canadian schools suggests a compelling need in higher education, including teacher education, to become not only better informed about the concerns of Aboriginal peoples but also more responsive to their needs. Tymchak (2001) stresses that a significant change is taking place in many parts of Canada with respect to the growth in numbers of school-aged children of Aboriginal ancestry. For example, Tymchak notes that in the province of Saskatchewan, it is estimated that by 2016, Aboriginal people will represent 46.4 per cent of Saskatchewan's school-age population. There is also a growing universal demand for well-prepared professionals more generally (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Cross & Israelit, 2000; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2008). Communities within society delegate to those responsible for professional education the task of preparing professionals such as teachers, doctors, and lawyers; today's professionals have achieved increased status and responsibility (Aguayo, 2004; Cochran-Smith &

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practice of community education of Aboriginal people and university-based teacher education; (b) advancing Aboriginal scholars' research careers and modeling how research efforts may be organized for, and by, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars to meet the needs of Aboriginal communities; (c) helping to fulfill the need for scholarship aimed at the academy to be better informed and better positioned to respond to the reality of current and future demographic patterns and community needs in teacher education; and (d) appreciating and better understanding the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and between their respective intellectual and cultural traditions through collaboration between scholars and partnerships between Aboriginal communities and universities.

Zeichner, 2005; Ziv, 2002). This imperative is particularly evident in the preparation of Indigenous teachers or in the preparation of non-Aboriginal teachers to teach an ever-increasing, diverse, Aboriginal population (Herbert, 2003; Heimbecker, Minner, & Prater, 2000; Hill, 1998).

*The Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP)*

ITEP was established in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan in 1972 in response to a mandate articulated in the Indian Control of Indian Education Policy Paper (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972) which identified the need to prepare Indigenous teachers for band-controlled and public education systems in the province of Saskatchewan. Responding to this mandate, ITEP has developed over the years a unique program within the mainstream program of the College of Education. Although ITEP students complete the program for the Bachelor of Education degree, it is unique in several aspects.

Specifically, ITEP, a direct-entry program, has admission policies to encourage access for Indigenous pre-service teachers. Once in attendance, ITEP focuses on student retention and persistence by providing many different types of support and services. For example,

- (1) ITEP students take classes as a cohort especially in the first two years of the program.
- (2) ITEP classes offer First Nations Aboriginal course content and perspectives.
- (3) Elders from the First Nations communities participate in many different ways in the program.
- (4) Students are also supported with ongoing personal, academic, and counselling services.
- (5) ITEP students, who participate in a student council to maintain a connection with the Aboriginal community, provide for many cultural activities and events throughout the school year. The overall structure of ITEP is based on a relationship-building model that develops Aboriginal students' spiritual, emotional, and physical needs as well as their intellectual abilities.

Field experience placements for the program consist of a two-week block of student teaching in students' second and third years, followed by a sixteen-week internship in the last year. These field experiences take

place in both band-controlled schools and in provincially operated schools. The ITEP staff provide teacher candidates with personal and professional support during their school experiences. Personnel responsible for all field-experience placements in the College also arrange ITEP students' field experiences, in consultation with the ITEP staff.

A critical part of ITEP's original mandate is the preservation and revitalization of Aboriginal languages and culture through the preparation of teachers who are well-grounded in these areas. A teaching area in the Cree language has been offered at various times. One of ITEP's proudest accomplishments is the role that its graduates play in the incorporation of Aboriginal culture into school curriculum and the development of Cree language programs, including Cree immersion programs, in many band-controlled schools and in some public education systems in Saskatchewan.

#### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Two conceptual frameworks have guided how we designed our research, analyzed information, and presented and discussed findings. One framework engages Indigenous knowledge systems and the other comes from a more mainstream research tradition. Although we see the two as commensurate and complementary, we stress the existence of some fundamental differences between these approaches. To explain the differences, Wilson and Wilson (1998) remind scholars that "the more we work together, the more we realize that Native researchers and scholars work from a different framework from that of their mainstream counterparts" (p. 155). In later work, Wilson (2001) describes "the identity of Indigenous peoples, whose concept of self is rooted in the context of community and place, differs strikingly from many Euro-Canadians whose concept of self is frequently encapsulated in independence of the individual" (p. 91). In an even earlier work, Hampton (1995) explains that "the depth and breadth of misunderstanding and differences in perspectives between Native and white is little understood" (pp. 40-41). In bringing together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars, we acknowledge that our different ways have presented us with perhaps the greatest challenge in our work together. We also proudly admit that this has been

the most powerful part of our learning. We describe the theoretical orientations to our work in the following ways.

### *Relationality*

We built our work on the principle of connectedness or relationality which is central to Aboriginal epistemology. Wilson and Wilson (1998) describe this characteristic as a worldview where an individual is related to all living organisms. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Battiste (2000) both tell us that Indigenous Peoples identify themselves in relation to their ancestors and situate themselves in relationships to their relatives or even the geography of their traditional lands. LaDuke (2005) goes so far to say that we are nothing on our own.

We were invited and permitted to conduct this research because of the respectful relationships we have established with ITEP students who are now beginning teachers, school administrators, graduate students, and community leaders. Our research intentionally engages Indigenous knowledge systems in its approach. In keeping with the respect that is due to the knowledge holders, our beginning teachers, we sought to let the knowledge be told, to reflect on it and understand it, and then to integrate that learning into teacher education. We believe our approach to be fundamentally different from more mainstream academic paradigms where researchers discover or create new knowledge, based on their inquiry with research participants. Rather, we believe our approach acknowledges First Nations beginning teachers as experts in how beginning teaching, both in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal contexts, is experienced and how it can be supported and improved. Moreover, the knowledge held by knowers is seen as a gift that they give to us. As researchers, we did not know what these beginning teachers knew; we accessed this knowledge only by listening with respect and humility.

### *Constructivism*

From a more mainstream perspective, our research is qualitative in its approach. The underpinnings of constructivism guided our thinking and how we make sense of what we learned. We drew on the principles of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in the research design for



this project. More discussion of the use of narrative inquiry in this work appears in the next section entitled Methods.

Several scholars have defined constructivism in research which we contrast with Indigenous explanations of relationship. "The central purpose [of constructivism] is that educational research should consider the participants' views, describe them within a setting or context (e.g., a classroom, school, or community), and explore the meaning people hold for the educational issues" (Creswell, 2002, p. 49). Guba and Lincoln (1998) describe the methodology of constructivism as dialectical. In relation to our study and phrased in simpler terms, constructivism recognizes multiple realities, although Guba and Lincoln acknowledge that "elements are often shared among many individuals and even across cultures" (p. 206). From an Indigenous perspective, Wilson (2001) remarks that "all knowledge is affectively loaded: there is no such thing as objective truth where truth is always interpreted from a personal perspective" (p. 67). As researchers, our findings come as we listened and considered what these beginning teachers told us and hope that our work is giving voice to these beginning teachers. Guba and Lincoln (1998) provide support to this approach. They state, "the investigator and the object of investigation are linked so that 'findings' are *created* as the investigation proceeds" (p. 207). They go on to say that "individual constructions come only through interaction between and among investigator and respondents" (p. 207). Finally, for Schwandt (1998), a constructivist approach has an emphasis on "the world of experience as it is lived, felt, undergone by social actors" (p. 236).

Taken together, these methodological perspectives underpin both how we designed this research project (more elaboration is provided next) as well as how we made sense of what we learned.

## METHOD

### *Ethical Approvals*

Respecting the protocols of the Cree-speaking people of Saskatchewan, we began our work with an offer of pipe and a Sweat Lodge with an Elder and community members, followed by a feast where our work received much guidance, approval, and support. We began our collective work time with prayer. Ermine (1995) tells us that "In Aboriginal

epistemology, prayer extracts relevant guidance and knowledge from the inner-space consciousness" (p. 109). The project also received approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board.

#### *Sites*

At the study's inception, we intended to work with band-controlled schools within the Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC), a research partner for this study. When we designed our research project, we knew who would be graduating from ITEP that spring, but we did not know where they would be teaching. In the fall, we found only two beginning ITEP graduates placed in the PAGC area, an insufficient number of participants for our research. Thus, we expanded the geographical area to include as many of the ITEP graduates who were teaching in band-controlled schools as possible. We were able to organize the sites into what we describe as three 'travel loops' or geographical areas that enabled us to travel among schools. These loops were all located in north-central Saskatchewan.

#### *Participants*

We agree with Clift and Brady's (2005) assertion that the voice of students needs to be heard in educational reform research. With this in mind, we invited 44 former ITEP students (now beginning teachers) to participate in this study; initially all agreed to participate. In the end, 30 of these teachers took part in the study. They were all First Nations graduates of ITEP. Each had been teaching for two years and each was employed in a band-controlled school in north central Saskatchewan. It was with ease that we made contact with these teachers and garnered their interest in our study. When Randy expressed a curiosity about how easy it seemed to make contact with the teachers (it had been his experience with other research projects that it was often difficult to make contact with beginning teachers who had left university), Louise replied that this is how the 'moccasin telegraph' works. The sense of connectedness among our participants (i.e., instructors and former students, their families, friends, and community members) became immediately apparent in our work together.

*Conducting the Conversations*

We describe the information gathered from the teachers as conversations rather than interviews. In most cases all four researchers were present and each person took an active role in the conversations. This approach is consistent with how other research in Aboriginal education has been conducted where “conversation with Aboriginal teachers is a useful way to gain insight into the stories about their lives and how their lives impact upon their teaching because it is based on a two-way flow of ideas and does not place the researcher in a position of privilege” (St. Denis, Battiste, & Bouvier, 1998, p. 19). Hampton (1995), who admits that his first efforts to interview American Indian Program participants was problematic, describes how after the first two interviews, “The happy solution was to drop most of the interview questions and encourage the participants to elaborate by his active listening and co-participation” (p. 12). Guba and Lincoln’s (1998) description of the dialectical nature of constructivist methodology (as we referenced above) adds further support to how we collected information. Citing the work of Clandinin and Connelly, St. Denis et al. (1998) explain that “The use of experience as a legitimate basis of making meaning is well documented and supported” (p. 19). Although we draw on some of the principles of narrative inquiry (namely the role of story and experience in educational research) we do not want to call our work exclusively narrative inquiry. We acknowledge delimitations in our work, namely the amount of time (but not necessarily the relationship between inquirer and participants) we spent with the participating teachers that cause us to be explicit about not calling this narrative inquiry. There were, however, elements of narrative inquiry that we used to design and conduct this research. These included the use of field texts, the relationship between researcher and participants, and narrative accounts as data.

We framed each conversation around three points that we asked teachers to talk about. These were (a) their experiences as teacher candidates with ITEP, (b) how their first two years of teaching were going, and (c) how well ITEP prepared them for teaching, and how they felt unprepared for their beginning years of teaching. We talked about the three points with the teachers when we invited them to participate in the study, giving them a sense of our research and a framework to think

about the conversations. Although we reviewed these points during the conversations, they did not take the form of interview questions. We sat in a circle and followed no particular order in terms of who spoke. All teachers told us that they were comfortable in having the conversation audio-recorded. This approach is consistent with St. Denis, et al. (1998) who explained that, although in their research in Aboriginal education, “[a]n interview protocol was used to guide . . . the atmosphere could be characterized as a conversation between colleagues, informal yet directed” (p. 19). After one of our first interviews (we had plenty of debriefing time as the distance between most of the schools was considerable), we talked about how to handle the wait time that some of us observed before teachers spoke. We asked each other if we should provide more clarity and ask probing questions when a teacher did not immediately speak. Louise, who explained that she did not observe this wait time in the same way, indicated that for her it was a sign that the teacher was giving much thought to what she wanted to say, and it took time to collect and consider thoughts before speaking. She went on to say that at times it seems that people start responding before a speaker is finished speaking. This abruptness was not consistent with how she had been taught. Hampton (1995) helped us make sense of wait time: “Reflective thinking suggests a habit of mind that thoughtfully considers a speaker’s words and seeks in them for what can be built on. This style of thought may underlie the long ‘wait times’ commonly heard among Indian speakers” (p. 25). Each conversation could last up to two hours, and most took place in the school where each participating teacher was employed. In most cases we met with one teacher but in a few cases, it was the desire of two teachers to meet with us, mainly because of time constraints. St. Denis et al.’s, (1998) notion of informal, yet directed conversations, as well as Guba and Lincoln’s (1998) direction of “linking the investigator and the object of investigation so that the findings are created as the investigation proceeds” (p. 207) are consistent with how we proceeded with the information taken from the conversations.

### *Analysis*

We took the information and knowledge shared by the teachers to develop four themes through thematic analysis. Again, making use of the

travel times between schools, the four of us talked about what we heard. As the conversations increased in number, we began to develop preliminary themes. When all conversations were completed, three of the researchers listened to the tapes and created notes containing key points they had heard. The tapes and these notes became what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe as *field texts*, the term they used to describe "data collected in the field" (p. 4). This process was similar to that of St. Denis et al. (1998) where "Each interviewer performed a preliminary content analysis of the interviews" (p. 19). Because Randy was not in the same location, and because we were uncomfortable in transporting the tapes to another location by mail or courier, we decided that he would take on the role of doing a further preliminary thematic analysis of the notes made by the other three researchers. This decision seemed appropriate given his considerable experience with thematic analyses. However, the analysis did not end there. After several months with each of us reflecting on the preliminary analysis, we spent several full days together in a circle, again listening to the tapes, stopping frequently to talk about what we were hearing, and talking about the themes we had developed and of their appropriateness. After this intense time together, all four of us were in agreement with the four themes and we were confident in the analysis.

## FINDINGS

Overall we found that the participating teachers spoke positively about their experiences in ITEP. One teacher began our conversation by stating "*you [ITEP] did an excellent job . . . I wouldn't be here otherwise. You stood by me through thick and thin.*" Many identified the cohort dimension as the most important component because it provided a critical mass of Aboriginal students to create a degree of safety and security, akin to a sense of family in "*learning with your own people.*" Another teacher remarked, "*I've loved my first year of teaching and have nothing but good things to say about where I am and how I got here.*" Others mentioned that the small class size and the close personal relationships with ITEP staff provided academic and personal support that was critical to success. During one conversation a teacher said, "*I enjoyed my one-on-one time with professors and I knew*

*exactly who I could go to for help. Just knowing this got me through a lot of my struggles."*

Many mentioned that the general environment of ITEP was culturally affirming, a reality that helped these beginning teachers to be more confident to assert their presence on campus and to feel proud of their culture within the larger campus environment. Several teachers made comments similar to one teacher who said, *"I like how the Aboriginal protocols are a part of how ITEP works."* Aboriginal protocols are personal respects to people or events and ceremonies which demonstrate an act of humility when asking for something. They are expected social behaviours which are taught in the family and/or community. Many identified their peer relationships and the friendships that developed as an important supportive legacy for their beginning teaching careers. Although they completed their research in the context of Aboriginal teachers' work in provincial schools, St. Denis et al. (1998) reported similar ideas:

The academic and social support provided by the TEPs [Aboriginal Teacher Education Programs in Saskatchewan] was instrumental in many teachers deciding to become a teacher as well ensuring their completion of the program. Experiences in the TEP programs were described as enriching, transforming, and necessary as a result of their attention to and support of Aboriginal issues and their cultural content. (p. 42)

The four specific themes we identified and discuss in the following section are (a) preparedness, (b) "hands on" learning, (c) collegial relationships/mentorship, and (d) community/parent relationships. We have intentionally reported our findings not to include many of the very rich personal quotations (particularly the overly negative ones) that the teachers made. In mainstream qualitative research, we would say that adding such quotations from individuals and including more of their personal stories would add depth and richness to how we report our work. However, in doing so, we would run the risk of identifying the participants and making them even more vulnerable as beginning teachers and community members. We make explicit to readers this delimitation of how we present these findings.

*Preparedness*

All the teachers, who felt that ITEP had prepared them well for the academic aspects of teaching, said that they experienced difficulties in adjusting to the day-to-day realities of teaching in band schools. They explained that teaching on a reserve presents unique challenges stemming from (a) a pervasive culture of poverty, (b) educational disadvantage and scarcity of resources, (c) the complex dynamics of small, close-knit communities, and (d) the pressures of working in an educational environment that is often highly politicized, where teachers and administrators rarely enjoy stability or security. Consequently high teacher turn-over is common. During a conversation with two teachers, both agreed that *"if you work in a school where you have relatives, things quickly can become sticky."* In a similar way, another teacher said, *"it's like a family in these schools but that gets people into trouble as well. It's easy to get sucked into things."* We note here that the teachers often used the family as a metaphor, which we expand on later in the presentation of findings. In another conversation, a teacher said that *"teachers know the politics but don't know how to work with the effects of politics in the classroom and school."*

Many teachers expressed concern about the volume of extra-curricular activities that was expected of them both in the school and the community. A striking comment made by more than one participant was that *"teachers are expected to be slaves to the community."* Another remarked, *"If you work in a band school you are paid less to do more."* These high levels of demands on Aboriginal teachers appear not unique to teaching in band-controlled schools. St. Denis et al. (1998) state, "this unrealistic and insensitive demand is reported widely" (p. 4). They cite the earlier work of Bouvier (1991) where she notes "that Aboriginal teachers are held to very high expectations, and are expected to be able to solve all the issues facing the community" (p. 4). We note to readers here that St. Denis et al.'s (1998) research was concerned with the experiences of Aboriginal teachers who were teaching off-reserve whereas our study was about teaching experiences on-reserve. Although we recognize that what the teachers were being asked to do was different, the point we raise here is that higher expectations and demands are placed on beginning Aboriginal teachers regardless of where they are teaching.

Yet despite these challenges and frustrations, all the teachers expressed high levels of job satisfaction, felt that teaching was the right career choice for them, and took great satisfaction from contributing to the development of the youth in their community. Either directly or indirectly, many teachers expressed a belief that teaching in a band school was part of a larger purpose of taking care of Aboriginal peoples' children. As we concluded a conversation, a teacher said, *"I love being with the kids. I take my energy from them and they rejuvenate me. I know this is what I want to do even though teaching wasn't my first career choice."* The love, care, and respect of these teachers toward the children they worked with, which was clear and consistent in every conversation, did not differ between females or males. We can understand these teachers' notions of love and care for children beyond what we have come to expect from teachers in general. Like St. Denis et al. (1998), we found these teachers described their relationship to students as "special." Here, the metaphor of family and the role of advocacy are particularly helpful. Again we draw on the work of St. Denis et al. who found that "Aboriginal and minority teachers describe their work as a form of advocacy" (p. 7). They go on to say, "The family serves as a source of inspiration and understanding in the work of Aboriginal and minority teachers" (p. 7).

Many valuable, more specific comments in the area of teacher preparation came forward from our conversations with the teachers. Although most of the beginning teachers said that they felt well prepared in the areas of lesson and unit planning, they did not say the same about preparedness in creating yearly plans. In this part of the conversation, we note that in most cases, these beginning teachers had to provide more evidence of planning to their school administrators than is the case for other beginning teachers we have worked with in provincial school systems. One teacher remarked that, *"We have to write so much down for every class we teach. We are told to do this, so I do it not knowing if anyone really reads them. The expectations for writing plans are much higher for reserve schools."* Another teacher offered the following: *"Planning on a reserve is different than in provincial schools. As teachers, we know that doing so much paperwork and planning is a reality for how our schools are funded."* We talked about what the teachers were referring to here. We related this point to what we knew about how band-controlled schools were funded (directly



from the Government of Canada and not through provincial governments) and from other experiences we had with band-controlled schools needing to regularly provide evidence of planning and other forms of accountability to their funding agencies.

Many beginning teachers stated that a disproportionately high number of students in band schools experience learning difficulties. These teachers felt they should have been better prepared to work with students with special learning needs, to teach to multiple grade levels, and to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of all learners. They identified assessing and evaluating student learning as a major challenge because of the wide range of skill levels in their classrooms and the prevalence of social passing. Although ITEP provided some preparation in the area of student assessment, many of these teachers felt that they would benefit from more emphasis on assessment. In particular, many teachers said they were not well prepared to work with learners who were functioning well below grade level. In addition, because of the high number of students designated with special needs, many of the teachers have teaching assistants (TAs) available to them. However, most felt unprepared to work with other adults in the classroom. Statements from the teachers to support this include, *"I found it difficult to work with TAs," "Their role is a little foggy to me,"* and *"Working with a TA was really foreign to me in my first year of teaching."* They also acknowledged the complexity of working with TAs who were both parents of the children they taught and also members of the community where the teachers worked and lived.

More specific to individual courses, the teachers indicated that the ITEP program could have made coursework in educational administration, law, and ethics more relevant to the reserve school system because the courses they completed did not prepare them well enough to deal with the complexity of professional and ethical issues they encountered both in schools and in the community. One teacher explained that *"what I learned in my Ed. Admin course didn't happen in reality. Instead, we should have learned about specific protocols for dealing with ethics and legal issues in band-controlled schools."* Some teachers commented that their beginning teacher education could be expanded to better prepare them to teach in secondary education and in Cree language instruction.

*"Hands On" Learning*

From the literature and from our work in teacher education, we consistently hear from both teachers and undergraduate students that one of the most valuable learning experiences in teacher education is the field-based component, often referred to as student teaching or practicum. At the U of S, the term student teaching refers to the short, largely observation experiences in schools. The longer (16 weeks) of more sustained field experience is referred to as the internship. All the beginning teachers commented extensively on their field experiences. Here, too, the comments ranged from general to specific, with many offered as suggestions to improve the ITEP program. All the teachers recognized the valuable experience of the internship, and most indicated that there should be more opportunities for "hands on" experiences in schools. The participants used the term "hands on" consistently. Some said that, in addition to assigned placements, there should be more opportunities throughout the program to visit a wider variety of educational settings, which could be in urban, rural, or band-controlled settings. One male teacher's comment represents those of many others: *"In addition to the internship and student teaching, it would have been good to visit different communities because we know that there is not one typical reserve."* Although the participants generally agreed on early student teaching experiences, their comments specific to the existing two-week placements were mixed. There were several comments such as the following:

*To be honest, the two weeks of student teaching wasn't really helpful and I didn't learn a lot. I feel it needs to be a lot longer and earlier in the program. When I did it, I felt more like a visitor at a school and not a beginning teacher.*

*I knew well before student teaching that I loved teaching and loved working with children . . . I knew teaching was my passion . . . so let me enjoy my passion as early as I can.*

Some teachers indicated that the ITEP program placed too much emphasis during student teaching on observation; they wanted more hands-on time with students, teachers, and teaching assistants. Some of the more practical aspects of teaching in which some teachers felt they could be better prepared included setting up a classroom, finding re-

sources, maintaining a student register, doing report cards, communicating with parents and resolving conflict, and maintaining an effective learning environment. Again, although observation may assist in coming to terms with these tasks, the teachers indicated that “hands on” time would offer a more valuable learning experience. Moreover, because of expectations for today’s beginning teachers, some participants suggested that expectations for the internship and student teaching experiences should be made higher than currently is the case. A more in-depth discussion of the theme of “hands on” learning appears later.

#### *Collegial Relationships/Mentorship*

We note many times how the teachers experienced a great deal of support from their peers in ITEP, which was a significant part of their success in completing their teacher education program. In our study, we learned that many of the teachers indicated that the relationships developed in ITEP extended to their lives as beginning teachers although most were not teaching in the same schools. Much of our conversations dealt with the nature of support from colleagues in schools, new relationships they were establishing in schools, and how they were being mentored in their beginning years of teaching. What we learned in this regard is less positive than what the teachers told us about their experience while in ITEP.

The teachers talked a great deal about how they would like to have more supportive relationships from other teachers and school administrators, especially in times of need, such as being asked (or told) to transfer to another school. This concern was particularly evident when the decision to transfer was not instigated by the teacher. Nearly all wished that they had more mentoring available to them, particularly from more senior teachers. Some of our conversations mentioned the desire for a more formalized mentorship program for teachers of Aboriginal students. One of the teachers explained that “*It was only in my mainstream education courses where they spoke about the importance of having a mentor as a beginning teacher.*” We also learned that our participants expressed much interest in becoming a part of the provincial teachers’ association, because teachers employed in band-controlled schools are not members of the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation. One of many examples in

support of this comment was *"In a band-school you don't have the nice big union like teachers do in provincial schools. We really need some kind of professional representation."* Many teachers believed that support from school administration and leadership is critical to their success as beginning teachers. Some indicated that they did receive some support from school administrators; many indicated that there could be more. Hesch (1995) helps make sense of what we learned here. In his study of SUNTEP (Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program) interns, he found *"the sharing culture and relatively egalitarian social relations of SUNTEP were replaced by an unequal binary relationship between intern and supervising teacher"* (p. 185). We note here that Hesch's work was with interns and not beginning teachers. Nonetheless, his work adds understanding to what we learned. In his work, Hesch notes *"teachers operate in comparative autonomy"* (p. 185). We recognize that this reality is widely recognized in teacher education. However, because of the strength of the cohort experience that teachers in our study had come to know and rely on, the loss of a sense of support from others is significant. Here, too, we provide a deeper analysis of cohort support later as discussion.

#### *Community/Parent Relationships*

The final theme that we address continues with relationships, which is specific to what the beginning teachers experienced in their relationships with parents and other community members. Many teachers in our study spoke about the complexity and challenge of dealing with members of the community and parents. Although this issue is part of the dynamics of many beginning teachers' workplace, band-controlled schools have a unique dynamic because most First Nation communities are small and closely knit. The teachers we worked with recommended that ITEP give much more attention to help teachers deal with the dynamics of teaching in band schools. They suggested that beginning teachers in band-controlled schools would find value in a *"life skills"* course to address the complexities and challenges of working in politicized environments. In many cases they wished for more parental involvement in schools. In cases of conflict with parents, many of the teachers indicated that they wished they were better prepared to deal

such conflicts as they arose. One teacher offered the following as a way for beginning teachers to cope with this complexity.

*I stick to myself when things have the potential to get messy. My teaching and class come first and that's how I believe I make a difference in kids' lives and on the reserve. I work hard at being positive and staying away from the bad stuff. We need to remember that kids come first.*

We are reminded here of what we stated earlier about teachers' advocacy role for children and the metaphor of family.

From our work with many beginning teachers, we regard the level of expectations for beginning teachers in band-controlled schools as unusually high. On the one hand, many beginning teachers said these expectations "felt good." On the other hand, this level of expectation increased work loads, particularly extra curricular activities that were expected of these teachers in the school and in the community. One teacher explained that

*The expectations of beginning teachers to do extra-curricular work are so much higher . . . we sign in our contract that we will do at least . . . hours of extra-curricular both in school and in the community.*

Again, St. Denis et al.'s (1998) work helps us make sense of Aboriginal teachers' relationship with parents and community. They write,

Teachers are tested in multiple ways by both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents and communities . . . in Aboriginal communities they are required to prove themselves as capable as their non-Aboriginal colleagues or they may be challenged in their cultural values and in the personal choices and decisions they make in their own personal professional lives. (p. 56)

## DISCUSSION

In reflecting on First Nations education in higher education, Marker (2004) draws our attention to "a shortage of writing about Indigenous reality in the literature on higher education" (p. 187). We also acknowledge that work such as van der Wey's (2007) adds to our understanding of First Nations higher education. Although our work is set in the specific context of Aboriginal teacher education, we hope that it will help in-

form rethinking of policies and practices in teacher education and in higher education more generally. Our immediate goal is to take what we are learning and share it with places such as the universities of Saskatchewan and Alberta where, like many Canadian universities, teacher education is being re-considered. Although the following discussion makes recommendations, we are not suggesting these findings alone will be used to make policy and program change. Instead, we stress that we hope these findings will be used to help inform the processes of teacher education reform. In doing so, we respond to what is described by the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (2005) as a need for “Canada’s teachers to be equipped to prepare all students in their roles in this diverse world” (p. 1).

*Moving Forward with Our Work*

As noted above, Wilson and Wilson’s (1998, 2002) and Wilson’s (2001) works were most helpful to us as we approached this study and as we came to understand what we learned. Their work also guides us in how we share what we have learned and how we move ahead. In doing so, we are committed to a thoughtful, respectful, but cautious approach. Central to this is our sensitivity to what we have learned from the teachers in the study and how we talk about what we have learned. Here, Wilson and Wilson (1998) remind us that “In addition to being related in a kinship manner to all living organisms, there is the added dimension of respect for and taking care of ‘all our relations’” (p. 157). This thought is consistent with how we understood care and respect of the teachers in our study for their students. Wilson and Wilson go on to say that “Every individual is therefore responsible for his or her own actions, but not in isolation” (p. 157). What, then, does this idea suggest in terms of how we move forward?

We honour what our knowledge holders have given us. We also are cognizant of the complex contexts in which they work and live. We are sensitive to what they have given us and how we use that knowledge to make our current programs better to prepare future teachers. We have also committed to the Elder and communities where we worked that we would use what we learned to inform teacher education programs. As teacher educators we need not only report what we have learned but

also take responsibility for incorporating this knowledge into our practice so that our programs provide better learning experiences for beginning Aboriginal teachers and ultimately teacher education more generally. In the fall of 2009, we came to a place similar to where we began this study by sharing what we've learned with Elders and community, the teachers involved in our study, and the universities of Saskatchewan and Alberta. We have a responsibility to take what we have learned and ensure it is a part of current rethinking of teacher education. The Aboriginal researchers on our team say that from an Aboriginal perspective this study promotes the teaching of *reciprocity*, a term we understand as similar to the Wilson and Wilson (1998) notion of "relational accountability" (p. 157). Very clearly, the conceptual frame of 'relationality' or 'connectedness' we described earlier in this article serves as key to make sense of the experiences of the beginning teachers in this study and weaves its way throughout this discussion. Methodologically, this concept has some resonance (but not sameness) to constructivism, which suggests that understanding comes in relation to others. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call this type of teacher knowledge as coming from "social stories" (p. 4).

#### *Cohorts*

From our conversations with beginning teachers, we learned about the profound differences between university learning experiences when the students were in classes with only ITEP students and in other classes with few if any other Aboriginal learners. Frequently, the former experiences were much more positive than the latter. We also heard of a need for more preparation for secondary school teachers and more in-depth content courses for subject matter usually offered outside faculties of education. In larger universities such as the U of S and especially in introductory science classes and some areas of study in the humanities, such classes are typically very large where students do not get to know and support one another. In reality many of these classes, where competition and individualism are more common than support from cohorts, are contradictory to what we learned from the teachers. St. Denis (2004) explains that the term 'culture' has replaced the term 'race'; her acknowledgment supports the argument that there is not social equality

between cultures. For example, Indigenous cultures are positioned on a lower rung in society, at least as the dominant society perceives Indigenous peoples. Although called places of *higher education*, many university classrooms are a microcosm of the reality articulated by St. Denis.

We can make sense of the cohort experience of these teachers through the frame of “connectedness and relationality.” We are also aware that this conclusion is not unlike what we know about mainstream teacher education where there has been a move by faculties of education to organize more programs around student cohorts. Unlike what Mandzuk, Hasinoff, and Seifert (2005) found, the teachers in our study did not talk about competition within cohorts; instead they told us only about how critical the support they received from cohorts was to their success in the program and in program completion.

We also learned that teachers experienced what could be a sense of loss of collegial support when they left the ITEP cohorts for their new lives as beginning teachers. With this loss, we see a need for more support for beginning Aboriginal teachers and a need for more intentional forms of mentorship. Here, too, we are aware that the need for mentorship is not new to beginning teachers. However, because of the complexity of the workplaces of the teachers in our study, we stress that their need for mentorship is greater. We know from our work in teacher induction that teacher educators are calling for an ongoing role for faculties of education and universities to support beginning teachers. Might this idea be applied to places of Aboriginal teacher education? Given Wilson and Wilson’s (1998) notion of relational accountability, how might a process of community education and engagement and an ongoing role for higher education be brought about and facilitated?

In sum, then, ITEP students found cohorts supportive rather than competitive. The learning environments within cohorts provided a sense of safety and built confidence in our beginning First Nations teachers. As these teachers began teaching on their own, ITEP graduates experienced a sense of loss of collegial support. We recommend that Aboriginal teacher education programs maintain cohort approaches and that a mentorship program for beginning teachers in First Nations schools ideally be established collaboratively by the band schools, the teaching profes-



sion, and such programs as ITEP. From an Aboriginal perspective, this promotes *mastery through relationships*.

#### *Field Experience*

We learned that the teachers in our study would like to have more opportunities in their pre-service teacher education for field experience. Although not specific to Aboriginal teacher education, we know from the literature that student teaching is a critical aspect of pre-service teacher education (O'Brien & Elcess, 2005; Zeichner, 2002). Wilson (1999) refers to field experience as the core feature of teacher education. The foundational premise of all practice-based programs is the concept that authentic and deep learning occurs when a learner applies relevant knowledge and skills to solve real-life problems encountered by actual practitioners in the field (Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2004; Wilkerson & Gijsselaers, 1996). Although we are aware of current debates in teacher education around the amount of field experience, we recommend that for Aboriginal teacher education, there should be more and varied field experience opportunities. The Aboriginal researchers on our team say that from an Aboriginal perspective "hands on" practice promotes *learning through experience*. This conclusion is well supported by research outside teacher education. Kolb's (1983) seminal work on experiential learning, together with recent neurological research (Zull, 2004), has confirmed the tenets of field-based education: that the more areas of the brain learners use when solving relevant and realistic problems, the more meaningful the learning will be. Evidence indicates that the nature of teacher education is changing in response to what Darling-Hammond (1999) and others such as Goodlad (1994) have termed a *changing world*. Our work calls for more opportunities for Aboriginal teacher candidates to have "hands on" experiences with children, other teachers, parents, and teaching assistants in a variety of settings both on and off reserve.

#### *Teacher Preparation*

Much of what we have learned from our participants can be immediately implemented into the current practices of ITEP instructors. We take responsibility for doing this. However, other things we have learned from this study are broader and far more complex. In her article *There Is No*

*Way to Prepare for This*, Helen Harper (2000) addresses some of these major challenges. Although we are aware that her work is focused on the experiences of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women teachers teaching in northern Ontario, we find that much of her work resonates with what we have learned. Harper speaks to the complex relationships of teachers to the school and community. She writes about teachers' "difficulty in defining or negotiating their relationship to the community and grounds of engagement with the community on educational matters" (p. 149).

In sum, complex relationships between teachers, schools, and the community are characteristic of band-controlled environments, and although ITEP graduates are familiar with issues in First Nations communities, the participants in our study did not feel well prepared to deal with them as teachers. We recommend that Aboriginal teacher education have as a part of the program a "life skills" training class. The Aboriginal members of the research team suggest that such a class would promote the Aboriginal teaching of *holistic learning* where the focus could be on balancing teachers' professional and personal lives and dealing with issues of physical, mental, spiritual, and intellectual health.

Despite these challenges, we wish to return to what we presented as the first finding in this article: the teachers in this study told us how well ITEP did in preparing them for their beginning years as teachers. Other scholars in the area of beginning teachers in First Nations communities have made a similar observation. Duquette (2000) describes Aboriginal teacher education in northern Saskatchewan as

successful in developing graduates who are role models for their community and who are proud of their culture and their ability to infuse it into the curriculum. These programs are seen as a means of building the capacity to achieve Native control over education. (p. 135)

On this positive note, we end with a summary and concluding remarks.

#### SUMMARY

We have conveyed a few ideas in this article. First and most important, we have given readers an overview of what we have received from this research project: both what we have learned from the 30 teachers who participated in the study and the tremendous learning that has taken

place among the four of us. We have taken some of our learning and discussed it in relation to what the literature says about Aboriginal and mainstream teacher education. Overall, the beginning teachers in our study spoke positively about their experiences as students in ITEP. According to them, a particular strength of ITEP was the cohort experience and the relationship that they shared with their instructors, other members of ITEP staff, and community members involved with ITEP. Although feeling well-prepared in some professional areas, these teachers all indicated that they could be better prepared for working with the day-to-day realities of band-controlled schools. In particular, the teachers believed that they could have learned more about working with great ranges of learning abilities that occur in band-controlled classrooms. In speaking about their work in schools, all teachers in our study spoke about their care and love for the children they work with and how this confirmed their choice of becoming a teacher. The teachers in our study expressed a desire to have a formal mentorship program for beginning teachers in band-controlled schools. All the teachers felt that the demands and expectations placed on them as beginning teachers were much higher than their colleagues in off-reserve schools. Clearly, a major theme we take from all our conversations was that the beginning teachers stressed that longer and more varied "hands on" experiences would have better prepared them for their beginning years as teachers. Finally, the teachers in this study expressed uncertainty about how to deal with the complexity of working in tightly knit communities including working with community members who were also parents of students in schools and employees in schools. Many of these teachers indicated that they were not well prepared to work with teaching assistants in their classrooms.

We have also explained how differing worldviews can come together in respectful and open-minded ways to make sense of others' and our own experiences. Although outside the scope of this article, we begin to share a model of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars and universities and Aboriginal communities working together. This is the subject of our other in-progress work.

We need to stress here that much of what we report as findings is not new to teacher education. What we want to convey is that in most cases,

the weaknesses of our current teacher education programs and the challenges of beginning teachers appear to be even more relevant to the experiences of beginning First Nations teachers in band-controlled schools. We also caution those places currently rethinking teacher education that they pay close attention to the experiences of Aboriginal people. Although most Aboriginal teacher education programs are housed within faculties of education, their relationship with mainstream teacher education varies greatly. Our work serves to add information to teacher education reform by providing much needed Aboriginal perspectives. Finally, although some of our findings point to pre-service teacher education and others are directed at teacher induction, we see the two coming together. Here, we advocate that beginning teacher education has blurred boundaries between what universities do and what schools and community are responsible for in teacher education.

#### CONCLUSION

Like much good learning, we now have more questions than before. We are planning to extend our current work by talking to recent ITEP graduates who are teaching in and around Saskatoon but not on reserves. There are about 10 such teachers, a good-sized group, who have all expressed an interest in working with our project. We feel we will learn a great deal from that group of teachers. We also have plans to extend our current study to continue to look at the experiences of beginning Aboriginal teachers in other contexts to include all of Saskatchewan and Alberta, both band-controlled and non-band-controlled schools, and rural and urban settings. This plan is ambitious, but we feel there is a great need for such an investigation particularly at this time in teacher education.

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