

# **Living Alongside: Teacher Educator Experiences**

## **Working in a Community-Based**

### **Aboriginal Teacher Education Program**

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#### **Abstract**

Aboriginal education in Canada needs to shift away from the assimilative model to a model of culturally responsive pedagogy. Teacher education programs that serve Aboriginal teachers have an important role to play in developing an education system that both meets mainstream and Indigenous criteria for success. This paper examines the experiences of teacher educators working in a community-based Aboriginal Bachelor of Education program that was developed through a university-community partnership. Through interviews with eight teacher educators working in the program, five themes emerged as important in effective and culturally responsive practice by teacher educators working with Aboriginal teacher candidates.

#### **Précis**

L'éducation des Autochtones au Canada a besoin de s'éloigner du modèle d'assimilation à un modèle de pédagogie adaptés à la culture. Programmes de formation des enseignants qui servent d'enseignants autochtones ont un rôle important à jouer dans le développement d'un système d'éducation qui répond à des critères à la fois traditionnels et autochtones de la réussite. Ce document examine les expériences des formateurs d'enseignants travaillant dans un baccalauréat à base communautaire autochtone du programme d'éducation qui a été développé grâce à un partenariat université-communauté. Grâce à des entrevues avec huit formateurs d'enseignants qui travaillent dans le programme, cinq thèmes ont émergé aussi important dans la pratique, efficace et adaptée à la culture par des formateurs d'enseignants travaillant avec les candidats enseignants autochtones.

**Living Alongside:  
Teacher Educator Experiences Working in a Community-Based  
Aboriginal Teacher Education Program**

**Introduction**

International Indigenous education research offers “growing evidence that the culturally responsive model does, in fact, improve academic success” (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009, p. 31) for Aboriginal learners. This is borne out both by mainstream criteria, such as higher standardized test scores, and Indigenous criteria, such as the preservation of language, culture, and sustaining the self-determination movement (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009). The engine that drives this emergent consensus among Indigenous peoples can be best described as education that embraces a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations rather than the assimilative model of the past and the present (Author, 2009). This notion of a “culturally responsive pedagogy of relations” is defined by Bishop, O’Sullivan & Berryman (2010) as:

...education in which power is shared between self-determining individuals within non-dominating relations of interdependence; where culture counts; where learning is interactive, dialogic and spiral; and where participants are connected and committed to one another through the establishment of a common vision of what constitutes excellence in educational outcomes. (p. 20)

Supporting a pedagogic shift of this magnitude presents significant challenges for existing Indigenous teacher education programs as many continue to be assimilative in

orientation. In ideal circumstances, the shift towards a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations in teacher education will be achieved through the work of credentialed teacher educators who are culturally/linguistically proficient members of Aboriginal communities. Universities seeking to create culturally responsive teacher education programs—or revise programs that are assimilative in nature—confront one of the legacies of colonization: that individuals who combine professional credentials with competency in language and culture are not readily available. In Canada and elsewhere, Aboriginal education must of necessity begin with available human resources and help them to become agents of culturally responsive education for Aboriginal youth.

A new 5-year Bachelor of Education Primary/Junior (Aboriginal) program (BEd) administered by a southern Ontario university in partnership with the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council in northwestern Ontario faced such challenges as it sought to identify and support teacher educators in its program. The instructors who taught courses in the program were a varied group that included a Nishnawbe-Aski educator, other Aboriginal educators, Euro-Canadian university professors with teaching and/or research experience with Aboriginal peoples, and experienced Euro-Canadian educators.

This paper, which is part of a larger study of this program, focuses on the experiences of this group of eight teacher educators in the BEd program. Through an analysis of interviews conducted with those educators, we identified five themes as important in effective and culturally responsive practice by teacher educators working with Aboriginal teacher candidates:

- Relational knowing,
- Promoting self-identity and cultural identity,
- Teaching through language and culture,

- Curriculum and pedagogical expertise
- Epistemic conversations with Aboriginal staff.

While many participants lacked the background to be truly culturally responsive—in the sense of teaching through language and culture—they enjoyed success due to their ability to *live alongside* teacher candidates. These five emergent themes are highlighted to explore what it means to live alongside Aboriginal teacher candidates and how culturally responsive teacher education programs can benefit Aboriginal peoples. .

### **Theoretical Framework**

From the point of contact, teacher education has been the primary site in the struggle of Indigenous people to free themselves from assimilative forces and assert their right to self-determination (Smith, 1999). This goal is evident from the Coolangatta Statement (1999), a declaration of the educational rights of Indigenous peoples endorsed by the World Indigenous People Conference on Education. In addition to asserting the right to self-determination by Indigenous people in the establishment of schools, design of curriculum, and promotion of language, this statement identified Aboriginal participation as crucial in teacher certification and selection. This principles gained international credibility with the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). Article 14.3 states:

States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living

outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

Both Coolangatta and the UN Declaration reflect an emergent consensus that teacher education has a critical role to play in the success of “Indigenous peoples in (re)claiming and (re)creating their lives, languages, and futures” (Deyhle, Swisher, Stevens & Galvan, 2007, p. 330) and therefore must change to incorporate a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations.

TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), is a useful framework for critiquing existing approaches to teacher education, is also helpful in examining culturally responsive alternatives such as the BEd Program in Sioux Lookout. TribalCrit helps reframe issues in ways that are respectful of the lives of Aboriginal peoples. It recognizes that colonization is endemic to North American society and that there have been “systematic assaults on [Aboriginal] languages, religions, and communal ways of being” (Deyhle, et. al. 2007, p. 330) by colonizers in the Americas and throughout the world. These assaults have eradicated Aboriginal populations, displaced them from their land, disrupted their traditional ways of life and their heritage epistemology. Teacher education programs that are built on normative assumptions and judgments, such as many of the Native Teacher Education Programs (NTEPs) in Canada, have failed to account for “the multiple, nuanced, and historically - and geographically - located epistemologies and ontologies found in Indigenous communities” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 427) and have led to assimilative approaches to education that are not responsive to the cultural traditions of Aboriginal students (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Such colonization means that Western epistemic

knowledge and power structures predominate, leading to the dismissal of Indigenous ways of knowing and furthering the colonial agenda.

It is important to recognize that university policies and practices, like those of other public institutions, are rooted in a history of imperialism (Brayboy, 2005). Canadian Aboriginal peoples, as community leaders acknowledge, face considerable challenges such as distressingly low educational outcomes due to colonization. Statistical evidence on Aboriginal academic outcomes in Ontario demonstrates the futility of maintaining the pedagogic status quo for the 55,000 Aboriginal students enrolled in the province's elementary and secondary schools (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2007). Almost half of all Aboriginal peoples aged 15 years and over have less than a high school diploma (OME, 2007). Over 42% of 15 to 25 year olds left school with less than a high school education (Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001). Aboriginal leaders also worry about the declining health of their communities and the decline in knowledge of language and culture among their young (Statistics Canada, 2003). For example, the proportion of North American Indian children with an Aboriginal mother tongue fell from 9% in 1996 to 7% in 2001 (Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001). Also, more than 12% of Aboriginal Canadians between the ages of 15 and 29 drop out before Grade 9; and 37.5% of 15 to 24 year olds are neither in formal schooling nor employed in the workforce (Robertson, 2003). These indices reflect a socially constructed reality that is often ignored by those charged with the responsibility for public education. Acknowledging these realities is a first step in re-establishing liminal spaces in which Aboriginal people can reclaim self-identity, self-determination and tribal sovereignty (Brayboy, 2005).

Indigenous scholars have an important role to play in developing deeper understandings of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and how it might be integrated into

educational processes to create “fresh vantage points from which to analyze Eurocentric education and its pedagogies” (Battiste, 2002, p. 5). Battiste (2002) argues that IK must be integral part of meaningful Aboriginal education. While she acknowledges that IK varies greatly between and within nations,” she accords schools a vital role in reintroducing children to local Indigenous knowledge through the teaching of language. Through her work with the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Network she has played an important role in identifying promising practices (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000).

Aboriginal leaders advocate for curriculum that addresses culture, language, history and intellectual traditions to ensure high quality Aboriginal education (Anderson, *et. al.*, 2004). For example, the Chiefs of Ontario (2005) identify Aboriginal teachers as critical to preserving Indigenous languages and culture. According to one paper included in their manifesto:

A foundational element of a high quality First Nations education system is the presence of teachers and educators who understand First Nations history, culture, intellectual traditions and language. They must also comprehend First Nations relationships with the land and creation. (Anderson, Horton & Orwick, 2004, p. 2)

This manifesto speaks to the importance of preparing Aboriginal teachers so that they both understand their languages and culture and have the skills to teach through culture and the ability to teach Aboriginal languages through immersion.

To help achieve this global vision of renewed Indigenous communities that have reclaimed their IK, languages and cultures, Aboriginal teacher education must prepare

decolonized teachers who understand the intricacies of balancing the greater vision with Euro-Canadian curriculum. But this is no easy task given the many stylistic and epistemic differences between Indigenous ways of living and knowing and those of teacher educators from Euro-Canadian cultures (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009).

The efforts of teacher educators to meet the needs of Nishnawbe-Aski teacher candidates from Northwestern Ontario are examined using TribalCrit as a frame for understanding.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Interviews**

This paper gives explicit attention to the experiences of eight teacher educators who taught in the first three years with the first cohort of Nishnawbe-Aski teacher candidates in a five-year BEd program.

Interviews were semi-structured and participants were encouraged to expand on their answers and offer specific examples. Questions focussed on their approach to teaching, how they adapted their teaching in this program, their greatest rewards and challenges, and their perspectives on the learning of teacher candidates in the program. Interviews were approximately one-hour in length and were conducted in locations near the residences of instructors. One of the authors (Julian) also taught in the program and is included as a participant. Two were professors in a faculty of education with extensive experience as teachers and teacher educators (Julian and Jason). Three were contract teacher educators who had retired after lengthy careers as teachers and administrators before serving several years as teacher educators (Brad, Maureen and Susan). Two were



academics from other areas of the university were experienced university instructors. The final participant (Peter)—and the other instructor, who was not available to be interviewed—were experienced teachers who had taught in band-controlled and public schools in the Sioux Lookout district. Most were Euro-Canadian, yet all had experience working with Aboriginal learners. Three (Julian, Dale and Sylvia) had several years' experience researching Aboriginal education, and each had previously taught courses geared to Aboriginal university students. Three had family connections to Aboriginal communities: two were Aboriginal (Maureen and Sylvia), and one had extended family who is Aboriginal (Susan). One (Paul) and the non-participant (no longer living in the community) taught Nishnawbe-Aski students for many years in their communities and in Sioux Lookout. One (Brad) had taught in a Native Teacher Education Program (diploma program), while one (Jason) attended a secondary school in the north which was 25% Aboriginal.

### **Analysis**

In analyzing the data, the research team borrowed tenets of grounded theory to provide “a procedure for developing categories of information, interconnecting the categories, building a “story” that connects the categories, and ending with a discursive set of theoretical propositions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, as cited in Creswell, 1998, p. 150). Members of the team identified emerging patterns in the data while considering individual responses in their cultural context. Codes, categories, individual stories and the Aboriginal context were juxtaposed and discussed by the team collectively in order to identify key themes derived from the interactions of the six participants. Aboriginal members of the team played crucial roles in providing a cultural context for statements

made by participants. In presenting evidence, we have assigned pseudonyms to individuals in order to protect their anonymity; some details have been modified that might otherwise reveal the identities of participants. In the spirit of respectful inquiry, this paper has been reviewed by the bi-epistemic research team and quotations have been vetted by participants.

Finally, both authors have been involved in the program as well. Julian Kitchen, who has a long standing interest in issues associated to Aboriginal teacher education, has taught a course in the program. John Hodson has had a long time involvement in the program from conception, that began with an extensive community consultation, the accreditation process and the ongoing management of the program.

As stated earlier in this paper this research is nested within a larger two-year study of the BEd program, which includes a Talking Circle with teacher candidates, interviews with university staff and community members, an analysis of program documents and curriculum resources, and a Talking Circle with teacher candidates. The Talking Circle, which employed the Wildfire Research Method (Kompf & Hodson, 2000), was a semi-structured discussion in which teacher candidates were invited to share their experiences and observations in a communal and sacred research environment respectful of the traditions and cultural beliefs of Aboriginal people and the importance of a relationship with the land. The session was run by John Hodson, an experienced Aboriginal facilitator who understood the crucial role the importance of interconnectedness, respect, and the wisdom of the Indigenous intellectual tradition (Goulet & McLeod, 2002).

## Findings

An analysis of the teacher educator interview transcripts, which were triangulated with teacher candidate feedback collected during an earlier Talking Circle, led to the identification of five key themes that must be in play if the vision of a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations is to become a reality in the 24 schools in the Sioux Lookout district (see Figure 1, Model for Culturally Responsive Aboriginal Teacher Education).

### Relational Knowing

The most significant theme to emerge from the research was the importance of *relational knowing*. All eight participants, whether they taught one or multiple courses stressed the centrality of relationships, as did the teacher candidates in their Talking Circle. The primacy of knowing in relationship to students is a central ideal embedded at the epistemic heart of all Indigenous cultures on the earth. The term *relational knowing* was first used in the mainstream by Hollingsworth, Dybdahl and Minarik (1993), who identified “knowing through relationship to self and others [as] central to teaching the child” (p. 8). Extending the ideal of authentic relationship into teacher education includes teachers living alongside their students in an effort to dissolve the artificial barriers between instructor and student and by doing so share the passion and commitment in the classroom of the teachers in their study (Author (2005)).

Jason said, “The greatest reward is the relationship I build with students.” In his views, “the early focus has to be on building relationships and incorporating their experiences in instruction.” While this was part of his general philosophy of teaching, Jason noted that this particular group “were looking for a personalized experience” that

was “meaningful in their own community,” while maintaining the rigour of regular program. Brad was able to joke around to break through their reserve in an on-campus course. He recalled, “They got to be very friendly and, as I came to learn, when they tease you they like you. I was teased a lot, and gave it back... You have to be a real person. You have to respect what they are doing.”

The most intense relationships were developed by those who taught at the intense 3-week modules at a lodge near Sioux Lookout. Sylvia said, “The interaction you get from students in such a close-knit group and compressed time is unbelievable.” For Peter, who viewed himself as a coach and model, the “key is the connection with each individual to make the course personally meaningful.” At the lodge, Peter drew on his knowledge of the culture to make personal connections to teacher candidates and their communities and used digital storytelling as a way of sharing.

Maureen, who taught six courses in intensive three-weeks blocks over four years, developed the strongest relationships with teacher candidates. At the heart of her teaching of Aboriginal studies was the question, “How was I going to relate to that person?” She said, “I just learned to open my heart and say come in.” This meant extensive efforts each day to adapt previously prepared lessons to teacher candidate needs. She recalled, “The strength came from identifying the commonalities...I drew strength from that.” As these teacher candidates came from communities facing many challenges, Maureen worked with them as they dealt with “ongoing traumas” and “emotional pain” that resulted from learning about suicides and other tragedies during their three-week residential courses. Throughout, Maureen lived authentically in relationship with teacher candidates, conveying empathy and respect throughout her time with them. This was

confirmed by teacher candidates, who praised her generosity of spirit at the Talking Circle.

Indigenous Knowledge is relational in nature. Teacher educators who view teaching and learning as relational are more likely to be effective with Aboriginal teacher candidates.

### **Promoting Self Identity and Cultural Identity**

The legacy of colonization means that life is often difficult in many Aboriginal communities, including the Nishnawbe-Aski First Nations of teacher candidates in this program. Maureen said:

I think the thing that impacted our classes the most was the on-going traumas that people were dealing with. The incidence of trauma was so much higher [than usual]. In every three-week course I went up for, there would be one to three violent or premature deaths in the communities of the 15 teacher candidate. And these were communities of perhaps 300 people. So these deaths would impact our students - either the person was related or known to them....So I was dealing with people who were dealing with a post-traumatic stress thing that was always there.

These challenges make it crucial that teacher educators are sensitive to community realities and supportive of teacher candidates who encounter these realities in their daily lives. Teacher candidates were pleased that teacher educators in this program were relational in their approach as this helped them deal with crises. A strong theme in

interviews with teacher educators was a commitment to promoting self-identity and cultural identity. To different degrees, all instructors recognized that this program was developed as culturally-responsive and made every effort to adapt their teaching accordingly.

Peter was most eloquent about this: “We need to turn down the ‘stuff’ knob and turn up the confidence ‘knob’. He viewed “all activities, indeed all courses” as “gateways to domain-specific self-efficacy,” and had the cultural familiarity to make learning personally and culturally meaningful. Although their courses were heavily content-laden, both Julian and Susan adapted work to make their subjects culturally meaningful. Julian discussed the importance of probing into their experiences rather than offering rules of practice. Knowing that many teacher candidates had experience with exceptional learners, Susan asked how they went about addressing needs and how Elders viewed the education of these learners. Jason worked to build self-confidence in Physical Education and Health focusing on practical approaches that addressed personal health with an emphasis on nutrition and diabetes.

Teacher educators were very impressed with the character and abilities of teacher candidates in the program. Dale found that they covered “all the content that on-campus students do and, because of the Indigenous coverage, they actually go further.” She then went on to describe how the study of a theorist was enriched by making connections to learning in their communities. Sylvia was particularly impressed by their “sense of responsibility to community, to their children, to their grandchildren—connectedness to a greater good.” Teacher educators worked hard to recognize and celebrate teacher candidates as individuals and the culture from which they came. This was viewed by

teacher candidates and teacher educators as foundational to addressing many of the challenges facing Aboriginal learners and communities.

### **Teaching Through Language and Culture**

As this is a culturally-responsive program, it is important that teacher educators find ways to teach through language and culture. Therefore, a major limitation of the teacher educators in this study is that only two were Aboriginal in background (Maureen and Sylvia) and neither was a Nishnawbe-Aski language speaker. Unfortunately, the sole only language speaker among the teacher educators was the only one unavailable for an interview. This shortage of teacher educators from the community is not surprising as there are few community members fully qualified under the Ontario College of Teachers legislation, which is one of the reasons why this program was deemed vital by the 24 Chiefs in Sioux Lookout District. As a result, only the language course (taught by the Nishnawbe-Aski teacher) was in the language; even this was somewhat problematic as there are three languages spoken in the district: Cree, Ojibway and Oji-Cree.

While other instructors were not proficient in the language or culture, they made significant efforts to be culturally-responsive in their teaching. Julian drew on Aboriginal conceptions of justice and incorporated restorative justice into his lessons. Peter, who used digital stories in his computer course to have students look at what was “culturally and personally significant to them, their students and communities,” was excited by their “fabulous culturally-explicit digital products.” Brad was familiar with the land in their communities and how to draw on the local geology in practical ways. Susan spoke of her work with special education teachers and Elders in other communities.

Jason understood the importance of “tapping into the use of Elders in the community” and heard teacher candidate concerns about “losing the Elders fast;” he reported that “some are quite scared about losing the expertise and knowledge” of the Elders and worried that they lacked the knowledge to fill this gap. This led Jason and his students to design Physical and Health Education lessons focused on “activities such as a week-long ice-fishing excursion where an Elder would come in and teach the students about why it is important to the community and then the teacher highlighting the physical activity benefits and the connections among body, mind and community.” Other units of study included snaring small game, drumming, dancing and setting up a community carnival.

Sylvia and Dale both encouraged teacher candidates to draw on their language and culture in class. Dale recalled that “they would speak language in the classroom,” translate for each other, and attempt to explain terms in the language that did not translate across cultures. She and Sylvia also used the teepee set up outside the lodge as a ‘sharing lodge’ in which teacher candidates could present their assignments and reflect on issues within the community of learners.

Maureen employed a variety of Indigenous approaches in the six courses she taught. Much of this was new to her, as she discovered her Métis heritage later in life. Among the cultural activities she introduced were the Medicine Wheel and the Seven Grandfather Teachings. The Medicine Wheel activity highlighted some of the cultural tensions within First Nations. Maureen recalled, “here were a couple of people who called home and to their mothers and cried because they wanted to know if it was evil to touch or play with anything cultural. Was it diabolic?” Maureen, who was very sensitive to the religious diversity of perspectives within the 24 First Nations in the area, sought to



increase cultural knowledge while respecting all perspectives. She said, “One of the most successful things was comparing core values and trying to make a separation between what was on the outside and what was inside.” This meant that one could be, for example, Catholic yet also be engaged in smudging. When she taught about the Seven Grandfather Teachings, she often would say, “This is Native, this is tradition” then make links to similar Biblical virtues. In teaching history, she developed own resources based on what she could find from different sources, with an emphasis on Aboriginal perspectives. She drew heavily from a book on the seven fire prophecies as a way of exploring Anishinabe from their origins on the east coast through contact, post-contact, treaty-making time, and up to the present: “The simple book about those Seven Fire prophecies and Anishinabe history the majority of the class had never seen. So it was bringing them some cultural teachings from their own people.”

Teacher candidates appreciated the efforts participants made to bring culture into the classroom. Nonetheless, without sacrificing the other qualities of their instructors, teacher candidates wished for more cultural content and to be taught by more Aboriginal educators.

### **Curriculum and Pedagogical Expertise**

The curriculum knowledge and pedagogical expertise of teacher educators was acknowledged by teacher candidates, who expressed high regard during a Talking Circle that was part of the wider research study. One teacher candidate said, “I really enjoyed the teachers. They broadened our horizons and give us lots of information.” Another said, “They are really knowledgeable and dedicated to the courses they are teaching.” “I know

how kids' minds work now" thanks to the help of one instructor, recalled the next speaker.

These teacher educators rose above "simplified conceptions of teaching" (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1989, p. 37) to deep understandings of the complexity of learning within classrooms. These teacher educators were able to adapt their teaching to meet the needs of teacher candidates from very different cultural contexts. Some were able to draw on teaching experiences that were well suited to this particular population of teacher candidates. Brad, who had taught in a Native Teacher Education Program, understood the cultural appropriateness of a "hands-on approach to learning" that and possessed a rich practical knowledge of geology from living on the land. Peter, who described this group as "the same population" as the Nishnawbe-Aski students he taught but "five years later" as adult learners, quickly recognized them as "generally highly motivated people with many skills" and taught in a manner that was consistent with their cultural backgrounds. Jason was a very experienced teacher and teacher educator with a Ph.D. While his curriculum knowledge and pedagogical expertise were considerable, it was not the specific materials and knowledge that were the most important to success. It was that this knowledge and expertise gave him the flexibility to adapt to their needs. "I really had to adjust what I was doing every day based on the things that happened the day before." For example, "We focused on land-based activities, things that were culturally rich and meaningful to them. These did not necessarily involve the traditional sports model of competition...They enjoyed the lack of emphasis on competition as opposed to developing life-long culturally-enriched Physical Education practices that they could do." Maureen and Sylvia were able to build on their experiences teaching Aboriginal students

at the post-secondary level as well as on their own experiences as members of Aboriginal communities.

Participants thought deeply about their engagement with teacher candidates. Maureen, concerned about issues of power, stressed the importance of humility as embodied in one the Seven Grandfather Teachings of the Anishinabe people. Maureen recognized that the knowledge of teacher educators is in service to the needs of the particular students with whom they work. “So the expectations we have as instructors are irrelevant if we don’t base them on observation and experience with the group to know where they really are.” Each day was a new adventure as she constantly challenge herself in order to serve her students: “Travelling light to me meant getting away from reliance on what I had planned...Challenged to be more flexible.” This significant insight reflects an internalized understanding of expertise in action.

Instructors drew on their considerable curriculum and pedagogical expertise to adapt their courses to Indigenous needs. This adaptive expertise also involved hard work, with most of the instructors noting that they worked long hours (often well into the night) continuously adapting curriculum for teacher candidates.

### **Epistemic Conversations with Aboriginal Staff**

The work of teacher educators in this program was not done in isolation. Throughout, they were supported by Aboriginal staff working in the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education. Julian, for example, recalled:

I was very appreciative of all the cultural support I received in delivering the course... People from the Tecumseh Centre put in a lot of work in helping to

adapt the course so that it would be more culturally responsive, which included designing and providing art work for the course outline and for the supporting slides. These slides that were used on Elluminate Live to support my presentation to them, and also support in thinking about Aboriginal needs, and how to Indigenize the course as well. So, a lot of very positive support that I certainly valued.

The term *epistemic conversations* was coined by an Aboriginal member of the Tecumseh Centre staff to refer to their ongoing systematic efforts to increase the epistemic and cultural awareness of non-Aboriginal researchers and instructors. Recognizing the epistemic and cultural limitations of non-Aboriginal instructors, researchers, and staff engage potential instructors and researchers in epistemic conversations prior to working together. In many instances, these conversations are protracted and occurred over years of shared experience within various Aboriginal research projects completed in partnership with the Centre. In other instances associated research or stories relevant to the BEd program were shared with potential instructors in an effort to reveal the subtly nuanced needs of the communities that are connected to establishing culturally responsive pedagogy of relations in schools. Instructors enveloped and supported by a team of Aboriginal Centre staff who drew on their resources to help shift practice and provide a consistent message to teacher candidates. Establishing message consistency included substantial consideration of the visual appeal of course syllabus and associated materials. Instructors worked with the Centre's graphic artist to create a consistent Aboriginal graphic look that included easily recognized cultural icons that tied one course to the next visually. For example, Julian's course was linked to

imagery of the wolf pack and the ways in which wolves work in their community. This imagery informed how he framed the course and the ways in which the class explored the ethic of care that guides the actions of teachers under professional standards and the law.

The role of Aboriginal staff in supporting instructors is evident in Brad's experience. Brad was approached to teach a science methods course when the program began. He suggested that teacher candidates would benefit from an earth science course alongside the science methods was incorporated into the design of the program. He recalled multiple discussions with staff over two years, including sharing research that was conducted by Tecumseh Centre researchers on science in Nishnawbe-Aski culture. He recalled, "I spent a year before that preparing this particular course unique to these students." During this time, he met with the program coordinator, visited Sioux Lookout to speak with people in the community, and consulted with members of the geology department to ensure that the earth science course met university standards. He then designed the course from the "point of view of making them very hands on" to suit the "learning styles of Native people."

One Centre staff member noted: "The point was not to blame or shame those potential instructors for the contemporary outcomes of colonization. The goal was to increase their knowledge, the need for culturally aligned teaching and to envelope them in the resources of the Centre that made that process as easy as possible." Instructors selected to teach in the program entered into a respectful and subtle epistemic conversation designed to build a knowledge base from which those instructors might draw on in their classrooms. In particular, these efforts to integrate Nishnawbe-Aski content into their courses led to assignments that involved application of knowledge and skills to the local context. Missing, however, was significant cultural content in most

courses by those educators. Only Dale, Sylvia and Maureen embedded IK deeply in their her courses, which is not surprising given their backgrounds and studies in Aboriginal education. It also helped that each of them taught multiple courses, which allowed them to more deeply understand teacher candidate needs and adapt their teaching to the cultural context. The evidence from their interviews drew attention to the particular value of teacher educators who are culturally knowledgeable, when combined with relational knowing and cultural sensitivity.

### **Discussion**

The primary purpose of Aboriginal teacher education is to undo the harm done by colonization, prepare Aboriginal peoples to live in the liminal space between their culture and Euro-Canadian culture, forge Aboriginal self-determination, and renew the culture and language of Aboriginal peoples through education (Brayboy, 2005). As this Aboriginal BEd program was staffed primarily by non-Aboriginal and non-Nishnawbe-Aski teacher educators, one has to use an Indigenous lens to determine the degree to which they support Indigenous knowledge, culture and language in the context of the lived realities of Aboriginal people (Brayboy, 2005). Or, is it another example of assimilation?

Before looking at analyzing the findings, it is important to note that the program was developed as a result of a needs assessment conducted by the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education in collaboration with the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council. Members of the 24 First Nations in the Sioux Lookout District identified the vision of the program and stressed the importance of fluency in both Nishnawbe and English languages and a strong cultural identity, as well as the importance of preparation for participation in society outside their territory. For 2,517

students in 2004, there were only 164 First Nations teachers (40 who were fully qualified under the Ontario College of Teachers and 40 with Native Teacher Education Program diplomas that allowed them to teach in First Nation schools only), 42 uncertified Aboriginal teachers and 48 non-Aboriginal teachers. As non-Aboriginal teachers typically stay only a couple of years and possess little cultural knowledge, the recruitment of teachers from these communities is crucial to both linguistic and cultural survival and academic success. The role of Brock University was to provide the teacher education expertise to support the development of capacity in these communities, as well as prepare teacher educators to imbed Nishnawbe knowledge in the curriculum. As the availability of local Sioux Lookout educators was, and continues to be limited it was necessary to staff the program with teacher educators who are not Nishnawbe-Aski and who were mainly from southern Ontario.

It was evident from the interviews, as well as feedback from teacher candidates and other stakeholders that the teacher educators in this program were of high quality. Each was very well qualified in their subjects and in pedagogy, with ample teaching experience and strong scholarly credentials. Several also had extensive teacher education experience, which meant that they were skilled in the art of preparing teachers. Although only two were Aboriginal, several others had experience in Aboriginal education and/or research. It was also evident that many of them made genuine efforts to promote self-identity and cultural identity and, to the degree they were able, they sought to teach through language and culture. Most important of all, these individuals tended to be relational in their approach to teaching, which meant that they attended carefully to the responses of teacher candidates and modified the curriculum and their delivery to meet their needs and those of their communities. For example, Maureen's expertise as a teacher educator, which

began with the requisite knowledge of Aboriginal culture and pedagogical skills, extended to deeper understanding of her students and the ability to adapt as circumstances dictate. The importance of relational knowing is a significant finding, as it suggests that instructors who combine expertise with receptivity to Aboriginal peoples and their culture make the most effective teacher educators for Aboriginal teacher candidates.

This research suggests that properly supported culturally-responsive Euro-Canadian teacher educators with teacher education expertise and relational dispositions can be highly effective in working with Aboriginal teacher candidates. The participants in this study were clearly not agents of assimilation; each drew on their rich knowledge and experiences to make genuine efforts to provide learning opportunities that were culturally appropriate and meaningful to teacher candidates in the contexts in which they lived and worked. This was a successful first effort, yet it is also clear that local capacity, particular from Nishnawbe-Aski communities, is critical to the ongoing development of a program that embeds language and culture in teaching and learning so that the unique character of their communities is preserved and enhanced.

### **Suggestions for Moving Forward**

The preparation of all teachers is a nuanced task given the complexity and diversity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world in which we live (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). This is especially true for teacher educators working within Indigenous contexts who need to be both highly skilled individuals, bi-epistemic, and modelers of *adaptive expertise* if they are to prepare teachers to responsive to the needs of their students and the



communities in which they live. Exemplary programs that begin from the perspective of the student in the classroom, “where schools are the critical lifeline for student success” (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 5) need to be studied and promoted if the socially constructed cycle that gives rise to the loss of culture/language, the economic circumstances, the educational needs and the normative approaches of most teachers is to be disrupted.

In order to more effectively address the needs of Nishnawbe-Aski teachers and communities in future cohorts, we offer a number of suggestions regarding teacher educators:

1. Whenever possible teacher educators should be Aboriginal, have experience teaching Aboriginal students and/or be expert teacher educators. Over time, teacher educators working in the program will develop increased understanding of all three areas. An effort should be made to increase the number of Nishnawbe and Aboriginal teacher educators in the program.
2. Relational knowing is an important dimension of both Indigenous knowledge and effective teacher education. Teacher educators should be selected who possess relational approaches to teaching and they should be instructed in Aboriginal strategies for building relationships from within Aboriginal intellectual and spiritual traditions, such as Medicine Wheels and Talking Circles. Relationships blossom through time together, so it is important to have teacher educators teach multiple courses where possible. While distance learning is necessary in order to reduce absences from home and community, ideally on-line instructors should have already established a relationship with teacher candidates through other courses.

3. Teacher educators need preparation in advance for the special nature of this program. They were provided with assistance in adapting their teaching to Aboriginal contexts, and this should continue or be increased. New teacher educators should be provided with guidance in effective strategies for preparing teachers, which may differ from how they have taught children.
4. More work needs to be done to embed culture and language into the program. As this capacity does not exist at present, it is important that the program leadership work to identify capacity in communities and, in future, consider employing graduates of the program as instructors.
5. As it will take time to develop capacity in the form of qualified teacher educators, consideration should be given to involving Elders in the program, possibly as co-instructors or as advisors, and to teach courses on the land so that teacher candidates learn to teach *through* language and culture.

### **Conclusion**

Teacher educators “living alongside” teacher candidates is a critical component to culturally-responsive Aboriginal teacher education and achieving the greater vision of a “culturally responsive pedagogy of relations” in Aboriginal schools. The participants in this study were largely successful due to their ability to combine educational expertise with an ability to relate to teacher candidates and their cultures while being engaged in ongoing epistemic conversations with culturally aligned sources. This program will continue to develop by enhancing these relationships and, increasingly, involving, engaging teacher educators who combine expertise and relational knowing with actually “living alongside” teacher candidates in their communities.

*Acknowledgements*

This research is supported by a Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant from the Canadian federal government.

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Figure 1. Model for Culturally Responsive Aboriginal Teacher Education.

