

# **The Way of the Warrior: Indigenous Youth Navigating the Challenges of Schooling**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the educational experiences of 39 First Nations youth, ages 16-20 years, from two, First Nations, on-reserve, communities in northern Ontario, who share their reflections and experiences of reserve and public schooling. We drew on the Indigenous metaphor of the “new warrior” to analyze how these youth experienced and responded to educational challenges. Their conversations describe how racism framed their schooling experiences and how they made use of their Indigenous sources of strength, which included family and community structures, to address the inequalities in their schooling.

**Key words:** First Nations youth, racism, Indigenous knowledge, family and community, Ontario education, northern education

## **Résumé**

Cet article porte sur les expériences scolaires de 29 jeunes autochtones. Âgés de 16 à 19 ans et provenant de deux réserves du nord de l'Ontario, ces jeunes ont partagé leurs réflexions sur l'école à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de la réserve. Les auteures se sont appuyées sur la métaphore autochtone du « nouveau guerrier » pour analyser comment ils ont réagi aux défis auxquels l'école les confrontait. Dans leurs propos, ces jeunes décrivent comment le racisme a défini leurs expériences scolaires et comment ils ont puisé leur force dans des ressources autochtones, comme la famille et la communauté, pour faire face aux inégalités qui étaient leur lot à l'école.

**Mots clés :** jeunes autochtones, racisme, savoir autochtone, famille et communauté, éducation en Ontario, éducation dans le Nord

## **The Way of the Warrior: Indigenous Youth Navigating the Challenges of Schooling**

### **Introduction**

Although educational opportunities have been increasing for Indigenous youth in recent years, a significant disparity continues to occur in academic achievement and attainment between Indigenous youth and their non-Indigenous counterparts in countries like Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. For example, in Canada, the proportion of Aboriginal youth, ages 15 and over, who do not complete high school is 40 per cent, compared with 13 per cent for non-Aboriginal young adults (Statistics Canada, 2006). The trend is similar in the United States, where Trujillo and Alston (2005), describing the status of Native Indian and Alaskan Natives in education, report that the academic outcomes for Native Indian and Alaskan Native youth are significantly lower than European Americans. Attributing to their marginal success, Indigenous youth confront racism on a regular basis in their school encounters with peers and teachers (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; St. Denis & Hampton, 2002). Further, they struggle to find relevance in mainstream curriculum and pedagogies that largely ignore Indigenous histories, worldviews, and perspectives.

Too often, Indigenous youth and their families are blamed for their failure to achieve in schools. This belief is rooted in deficit theories used to explain the school failure of students from low-income minority families that continues to be reproduced with disadvantage students from diverse linguistic and cultural communities. Yet, Indigenous families and communities have maintained that continuity and transmission of Indigenous knowledge is the foundation for learning for their children. Indigenous knowledge systems, which encompass the local and specific knowledge of their people, emerging out of their languages, values, beliefs, and practices (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Battiste, 2005), affirm Indigenous identity and are the basis of Indigenous peoples' cultural integrity. Indigenous knowledge includes processes that are intergenerational, land based, tied to narrative and experiential, ensuring continuity of knowledge across the generations. Indigenous knowledge is concerned with issues of power, place, and relationships (Villegas, Neugebauer, & Venegas, 2008), and as such holds promise for youth to reach within themselves and their communities for sources of strength to navigate particular challenges they face in mainstream schooling. Improved educational outcomes for Indigenous youth are critical to improving the more general health, and the social and economic indicators of Indigenous peoples (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996).

This article draws on a culturally rooted and contemporary expression of the "new warrior" put forth by Kanein'kehaka (Mohawk) scholar, Taiaiake Alfred (2005) to describe how a group of Indigenous youth from Canada faced schooling challenges, similar to other historically marginalized groups, which affected their educational success and life choices. This Indigenous warrior theme casts light on conversations that the principal researcher held with a group of 39 First Nations youth, ages 16-20 years, from two First Nations, on-reserve communities in northern Ontario, as they shared their reflections on their

educational experiences, career aspirations, and growing up in their reserve communities.<sup>1</sup> This study places youth at the centre of the research to identify the inequalities Indigenous youth faced in their schooling and how they exercised strategies of agency and resistance to allow them to take a warrior's stance, reaching within their families and communities to take hold of the Indigenous knowledge contributions that allowed them to reframe their educational experiences. In analyzing their narratives, we drew on the metaphor of the "new warrior" (Alfred, 2005) to characterize the relationship these Anishinaabe youth had with the public education system. Their Indigenous specific responses can inform the policies and practices of schooling for Indigenous youth with the goal of increasing their educational outcomes.

### Conceptual Framework

For many, the Indigenous warrior involves unsettling images perpetuated by media stereotypes and educational rhetoric that has constructed the warrior as violent, militaristic, and male gendered. These images have been associated with the American Indian Movement in the United States and protests and territorial occupations in Canada. To suggest the Indigenous peoples of New Zealand are genetically predisposed to high risk behavior, the Maori have recently been ascribed the "warrior gene" (Stokes, 2006, 6). Yet, for Indigenous peoples, the notion of the warrior is deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual understandings expressed through languages and identities. Disrupting the colonial myths associated with the Indigenous warrior, Kanein'kehaka (Mohawk) scholar, Taiaiake Alfred (2005) put forth a culturally rooted and contemporary expression of the "new warrior, one deeply committed to the resurgence and regeneration of Indigenous peoples' cultural integrity through reconnecting with their sources of strength, which includes their traditional territories, spirituality, cultures, and languages and each other. In his thought-provoking book, *Wasase: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*, Alfred presents a political vision for Indigenous peoples to take action against the colonial structures imposed upon them. Western institutions of schooling have dominated as a colonial force devastating Indigenous communities in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States (Armitage, 1995). Education has been the primary vehicle of assimilation for Indigenous peoples, historically masking religious and government efforts to do away with Indigenous peoples in their own lands thereby reducing Indigenous threat to national unity and modernity (Miller, 1996; Milloy 1999; RCAP, 1996). Today, education continues its assimilationist agenda through multicultural rhetoric that promotes diversity while it positions Western knowledge as the centre of the curriculum, legitimizes dominant languages, and promotes mainstream values.

Indigenous youth's resistance to educational practices that marginalize, discriminate, assimilate their Indigeneity, as represented in their identities and knowledge systems, has taken multiple forms. Several studies have reported on how Indigenous youth value their connections to family and community in their schooling. Deyhle (1995), in her work with Navajo youth in the United States, observed their resistance to racist interactions and educational policies and practices in a predominantly white Anglo school the youth

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<sup>1</sup> Their conversations form part of a larger study that examined what factors played a role in whether Aboriginal youth stayed, left, or returned to their communities, given the patterns of mobility observed among Aboriginal people in Canada

attended. She suggests that the youth in her study, who embraced their Navajo culture and maintained strong connections with their reservation community, found success within Anglo schooling. At the core of the Navajo youth's decisions to remain in school was their cultural integrity, which Deyhle defines as the youth's refusal to accept assimilation or rejection of the institutions of school and work, with their cultural traditions and community networks serving as their foundation of strength.

Bergstrom, Cleary, and Peacock (2003) noted sources of support and identification within the Indigenous community in their interviews with Indigenous youth from across Canada and the United States as they shared what could be learned from their success, failure, and resilience in education. Youth described positive mentors, family expectations, and opportunities to connect with cultural practices and values that contributed positively to their lives. According to the youth, these forms of Indigenous knowledge helped them find a "good path," which is the honoring of core values of the Anishinaabe belief system known as "bimaadiziwi," leading to a healthy way of life. In another study, Native American youth identified cultural and tribal youth programs and the perceived sense of support that came from caring members in the community as significant factors in dealing with the adversity in their lives, which included alienation and discrimination faced in schools (Lafromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006; Stiffman et al., 2007).

### **Literature Review**

Schooling for Indigenous youth is too often marked by experiences of racism, individual and systemic, resulting in their lack of educational success (Beresford & Partington, 2003; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Deyhle, 1995, 2008; RCAP, 1996; Schick & St. Denis, 2007; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Sonn, Bishop, & Humphries, 2000). St. Denis and Hampton (2002) provide an analysis of the literature from Canada and the United States that examines racism and its effect on Aboriginal and Native American Indian students in secondary and post-secondary education, suggesting that the impact of racism on Indigenous students has not been given significant attention in the scholarly literature. Racism directed at Indigenous students takes various forms ranging from verbal and psychological abuse to low expectations and policies and procedures that limit education and employment opportunities. The consequences can be observed in low self-esteem, negative attitudes, and interactions with peers and teachers and early school exit. Indigenous youth who suggest racism as an explanation for their challenges risk being portrayed as unreasonable, outrageous, or unfriendly by educators and peers who fail to acknowledge the place of racism in schools (Schick & St. Denis, 2007).

Within educational settings, institutional racism takes form through ethnocentric curriculum and mainstream pedagogies that serve to reinforce the knowledge and experiences of white, middle class learners. Indigenous youth struggle to find relevance in classrooms that make little or no efforts to represent their histories, values, perspectives, and worldviews. Berger, Epp, and Møller (2006) in their study of schooling in the far north of Canada found that school use of irrelevant curriculum and approaches to teaching that did not value the Inuit language resulted in students' lack of attendance, discipline problems, and underachievement. Science educators teaching Canadian Aboriginal students in a rural high school revealed that they viewed Western science and approaches to learning

as no more foreign to their Aboriginal students than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, dismissing an Aboriginal worldview as relevant to Aboriginal student success (Aikenhead & Huntley, 1999). In their analysis of four schools that served Indigenous learners in the United States and Australia, Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist (2003) observed in the two, state-run schools that the curriculum provided to the Indigenous students “is not only Anglocentric and white dominated; it is also outdated, didactic, and not geared to produce a positive and self-confident scholastic identity” (pp. 14-15.). Castagno and Brayboy (2008) caution educators about the further narrowing of curriculum as a result of high-stakes testing and the decline in pedagogical approaches sensitive to Native American students in the United States, given the emphasis on standardization and testing as both the political and educational means for measuring success.

Much of the literature on Indigenous education pays attention to the systemic inequalities in education, describing the conditions that contribute to Indigenous students’ lack of educational success. The explicit perspectives of youth in research has been under utilized (Fernández, 2002), in general, and for First Nations youth in particular. Rymes (2001), in her study of youth making choices about alternative schooling options, cautions educators not to leave students’ narratives unexamined. Lee (2007) adds that it is necessary for educators to understand the per-spectives and attitudes of youth about schooling to effectively address their needs. When researchers engage youth in research that is concerned with the reality of their lives, researchers are able to provide a more complete picture of the process of schooling, where multiple perspectives can inform educational policies and practices.

### **Listening to the Voices of Youth**

By talking to the Anishinaabe youth in their own communities, the present study gives voice to their views and lived experiences about what it means to be Indigenous in today’s schools.

#### **Sites**

The Anishinaabe, as they refer to themselves, are known to others as the Ojibwe, Odawa, or Pottawatami, whose traditional territories loosely surround the northern Great Lakes region bordering Canada and the United States. Once traveling as families, clans, and communities within their territory, colonial policies confined them to reservations, which represent land bases geographically defined by the Canadian government as First Nations communities. Today, however, Aboriginal people in Canada are as likely to live in urban and rural communities as they are on reserves. The Anishinaabe youth in this study reside in two First Nations communities in northern Ontario. The majority of youth taking part in the study are from a reserve located in a rural area with a registered population of approximately 2,200 people. Located in the community is an early childhood education program, kindergarten to grade-8 school, provincial high school, and alternative schooling options, such as an adult education program and an alternative high school. A youth centre, hockey rink, baseball field, community centre, bowling alley, and several businesses are located in the lower and upper villages of this community. There are several kinds of youth programming, which include youth recreation nights, cultural programming, employment and training initiatives, and occasional health workshops. Although the Anishinaabe

language is not spoken fluently in the community, various language revitalization efforts take place through community programming, and there remain many speakers in the community.

The second First Nation community is an isolated small island reserve accessible only by boat during open water and by vehicle in the winter when the lake has frozen and is safe for travel. It has a registered community membership of approximately 500 people. This island community has a baseball field, a small convenience store, and daycare. Homes are dotted around this island community. There are limited programs available to youth, with only a few that focus on health and employment. The Anishinaabe language is not spoken in the community, with few fluent speakers, although new language programs are being developed for the school and community. Although the school in this community serves children from kindergarten to grade 8, students must attend high school off-reserve at secondary schools located in an urban centre two hours away. They board in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal households. The city where they attend high school has a range of educational options that include public and private schools and a First Nations community-controlled secondary school located on a nearby local First Nations community at the edge of the city.

### **Participants**

We invited Anishinaabe youth from each community to participate in the study through youth forums, which introduced the project to youth in their communities. Posters were placed in each community, and youth, ages 16 to 20 years, were mailed invitations to participate. We conducted interviews with 39 First Nations youth, ranging in age from 16 to 20 years. Seventeen females and 22 males took part in this study. Most of the youth ( $n = 33$ ) resided in the larger First Nations community. Of the 39 youth at the time of the interviews, nine were attending post-secondary schooling, three had graduated and would be heading off to a post-secondary program, 25 were completing high school through traditional means or alternative programming, and two participants were not in school. Discussions with youth were audio-recorded and most participants agreed to be both audio- and video-recorded. All youth received a transcript of their interview, and a CD if they were video-recorded for their review, allowing them to reflect and verify their narratives. Each youth was given a set of initials for purposes of reporting and maintaining anonymity.

### **Data Collection**

We drew on Anishinaabe protocol to guide us in conducting this research, whereby the interests, knowledge, and participation of the two First Nations communities direct the research process. This action is consistent with principles of an Indigenous methodology that serve to ensure that research with, by, and for Indigenous communities is respectful, ethical, and useful to the people and communities the research serves (Smith, 1999). Permission to conduct this research required formal consent from the elected governance structure comprised of Chief and Council members in each reservation community. The principal investigator met with several administrative personnel from each community to discuss the parameters and protocols associated with the research. These meetings included members and youth who served youth programs and education in their communities. This protocol contributed to the research agenda, shaping discussions that took place with the youth. Youth were asked open-ended questions that focused on their experiences with

schooling, post-secondary education choices and career aspirations, family and community relationships, youth programming and services, and reflections on the challenges and opportunities faced while growing up on a reservation community.

### **Data Analysis**

We first analyzed the youths' stories based on the thematic categories of the interview protocol, ensuring questions relevant to the communities' interests were carefully considered. A second level of analysis involved the principal investigator and research assistant reading and coding the transcripts for patterned responses that emerged within categories and for themes that became apparent across all their stories. The analytical use of the metaphor of the new warrior yielded the categories related to themes of agency and resistance, Indigenous knowledge systems, and cultural integrity. We resolved inconsistencies among categorizations of patterned responses through discussion to reach consensus between the researcher and research assistant.

Indigenous approaches to research advocate for a cyclical process to the research (Piquemal, 2001). With this in mind, we shared the findings of our research with the First Nations communities taking part, presenting the findings and recommendations at a community forum. The presentations engaged youth, parents, Chief and council members, and community stakeholders to discuss the research and relevance of findings and recommendations. After this process we prepared a final report.

### **Findings**

We are grateful for the opportunity to listen and learn from the stories that the Anishinaabe youth in these two First Nations communities shared with us. Like many other Indigenous youth, the Anishinaabe youth who took part in the present study exercised strategies of agency and resistance drawing on their families and communities for sources of strength to confront the ethnocentrism and anti-Indigenous hostilities that existed in their interactions with peers and teachers and within the curriculum and pedagogies of schooling. This kind of agency and resistance demonstrates the ethos of the new warrior put forward by Taiaiake Alfred (2005). The application of this warrior metaphor to our study allows us to make sense of Indigenous youth's experiences and responses to schooling through an Indigenous framework, that positions Indigenous knowledge as a theoretical framework and a tool of analysis. This section represents their warrior stories that are presented as three distinct themes. The first, and most salient, theme describes their encounters with racism in their interactions with peers and teachers. The second and third themes describe how youth in this study drew on their families and community resources to deal with the challenges of schooling.

#### **“Because I was Brown”: Anishinaabe Youth and their Encounters with Racism**

Overwhelmingly, the youth reported their experiences with racism and discrimination while attending public high schools. Racism, both personal and systemic, emerged as a theme across their narratives as they reflected on their experiences with public schooling. The types of experiences they discussed were negative attitudes and stereotypes directed toward them by non-Aboriginal peers and teachers and an unwelcoming school

environment. These experiences were demonstrated by disparaging comments and discriminatory practices:

*There was racial stuff happening too. Like, you don't see it, but it's there. Even with the teacher. . . . It was a lot of different things. Being bugged about being Native, having long hair, called dirty all the time by the students. (DK)*

On occasion, the discrimination found its expression in violence:

*When I was in grade 12 there was big racism going on between high school students. We were all from [First Nation community]. Their little crew was people from [neighbouring town]. They'd been talking about fighting all week. . . . Then one time they were down there and they were all in the park. . . . There was no teachers or nothing there. . . . There were about five Native guys and about another five non-Native guys and they went at it and they even had crowbars. (DD)*

Even when discrimination was not explicit, youth felt they did not fit in among their non-Aboriginal peers. Another student reported leaving high school because he found the racial identification too hard to bear. “*Not just the work, but everyone around me,*” he indicated. He felt he was not liked by his peers. When we asked him why he thought they didn't like him, he replied, “*Because I was brown.*” (NP)

Teachers were complicit in our youth's reported experiences with racism, with well over half the youth feeling that teachers ignored the incidences or that attempts to deal with incidences were inadequate: “*When I first got there [high school], there was a kind of racial thing against Natives from the students and the teachers did nothing about it*” (OC). In other examples, the teachers were felt to be the source of racist attitudes toward Aboriginal students:

*I found the teachers were kind of biased. I just didn't like that. Because some of them just wanted to see me, like, fail kind of thing. And I didn't know why, but I just had that feeling every time I was around a few of them. (WE)*

Teachers' prejudices also had a direct impact on the youths' experiences:

*We were going to [a tournament] for hockey that year and there was also non-Native girls in our class on the same sports team. We were all going together. But for some reason me and [friend], the other girl, got pulled aside and [teacher] said, 'you can't go on this trip because you won't be able to pass.' Because we had to miss a week a school. She told us if you go on this trip you're not going to pass this class. And there was other hockey girls going on this team that weren't Native. . . . It was racism. From a teacher too. (DD)*

The transition to public high school brought new curriculum expectations for these youth, who all attended First Nations community-controlled elementary schools within their First Nations communities. Their elementary education was an important and positive



experience for almost all the youth in this study. They described many of the cultural and recreational activities that their reservation school provided, commenting specifically on the language and culture classes and close friendships with students from within their own communities. However, for many of these youth, as they recalled their experiences of moving in to public high schools, they struggled to find meaning in the dominant cultural norms associated with curriculum and teaching demands. This tension is shared by several youth:

*Like they figured I could go into high school at the advanced level and have no problem. So I said, "okay, sure, if they'll let me I'll go." And I got there, I was lost. I had no idea what the teachers were talking about. (TC)*

*[Attending high school] made me feel like I wasn't smart enough, you know, and I don't know, I guess I didn't try. I guess sometimes . . . well . . . I didn't . . . I kind of got into the drug thing, then my grades kind of slipped and I didn't really go to school or I would skip class all the time. (DC)*

*When I went to high school like, we were like pretty much like so far behind. It was a lot of things that other kids knew we just didn't know, like at all. And I really didn't like that part. (WE)*

When youth shared expressions of their culture, some teachers failed to respond positively. As one young Anishinaabe man tells,

*I had this one art teacher . . . I made what is called a dream catcher. I brought it in. She just looked at it really hard and looked again and gave me a dirty look. I can tell when somebody doesn't like me. I just got that feeling that she didn't like me, so I went to see my counsellor about it . . . and I dropped out of that course. (JP)*

For these youth, expressions of their Anishinaabe identity were in conflict with the culture of the secondary schools, which included their interactions with non-Aboriginal peers and teachers and with the expectations of the curriculum. Their identities were closely tied to their First Nations communities, where they found sources of strength that supported them in their learning.

### **“I Was Raised Pretty Good”: Anishinaabe Family and Community as Sources of Strength**

Family, both immediate and extended, played an important role in the youths' education and cultural identity. Parents and siblings, aunts and uncles, and grandparents conveyed messages to the youth that education was important. These youth knew that their families gave them invaluable support. They knew they could rely on their family to help them with their schooling. Their narratives discuss the role of family in their education:

*I was raised pretty good. "Finish your homework before you go out to play, do this, do that, chores." That's why I did really well in college. I did extremely well and that's part of the reason, I think my parents were . . . taught me well, taught me to do this, do that, before I had fun. (GD)*

More than several of the youth pointed to the emphasis that grandparents placed on education, with obvious positive effects:

*My grandparents, they're always there. Always there to help me. And they'll talk to me if I need to talk to them about anything, like if I'm in trouble or something I'll talk to them and they'll help me resolve it or if . . . I need something, they'll be there to help me. (TC)*

*We're really, really close with my grandpa. . . . And he always stressed how important education is, like you know, you can't really do anything without education, like it's a really big important thing. And that's what I really think about too when I'm at school because I know he would be really proud. (AM)*

The importance of schooling as communicated through the generations, from parent to youth, grandparent to grandchild, characterizes how values are shared within an Indigenous community. Feeling supported by caring members of their family and community, the Anishinaabe youth have courage to persist in their unwelcoming school environments or make alternative educational choices.

### **“They Opened Up the Door Again for Me”: Alternative Schooling Options**

Although most of the youth in this study persisted in public high schools, there were those who, rather than choose to accommodate themselves within mainstream school, resisted by seeking out alternative schooling options from within either their own reservation community or a First Nations community geographically accessible. At least nine youths from the rural First Nations community turned to alternative high school programming operated by and within their own community. This alternative school was only a few minutes drive from the provincial secondary high school. It was intended to meet the needs of First Nations students who could not or chose not to attend the local provincial high school. Its low student-teacher ratio, ongoing intake of students, and career-oriented approach were appealing to students who felt pushed out of the local secondary school. As one student said, “When I got to high school, I quit sports. Every sport I liked, I didn't like any more. Then when drugs got in the way . . .” (GC). Realizing the social and academic problems he was experiencing in public high school, this student headed up the road to the high school in his community:

*It was alright. I didn't realize it was only 15 people in the whole class. I thought there was going to be at least 30. I was shocked when I went in there. [Small classes] really helped me. I worked constantly. Even on lunch breaks, just trying to*

*get my grade 12. (GC)*

Another student reported moving in and out of the public high school, citing social problems at the school as the reason for school leaving. The alternative high school allowed him to attend at various intervals, giving him some sense of confidence and accomplishment. The flexibility associated with stopping and starting at this alternative high school program has appeal to students. For example, one young woman noted,

*I started at [alternative program] because I felt too old to go back to high school. So I started at [name] and then a few months later I got pregnant and then went to school as much as I could. Then a month before I had the baby, I quit school. Well, not quit, but retired myself for the rest of the year. They opened up the door again for me that fall. (NL)*

Three students from the isolated reserve community, attending various provincial high schools in the city, turned to a First Nations community-controlled high school located on a reserve community at the outskirts of that city. One youth, having left two high schools in the city, said, “It’s a lot smaller than those [other] schools and I pretty much knew everyone who went to that school” (NP). He also appreciated the response from his teachers. “Teachers just think you’re a regular ol’ student that can earn B’s [as grades] and [just] need more help and stuff. . . . Like when you’re failing. They’ll tell you and then they’ll help you put up your mark” (NP). Experiencing social problems with peers and teachers in one of the high schools in the city, another youth made the switch to what he called the Native high school:

*Everyone in that high school feels like they’re friends. Like, everyone is your friend in that high school. Teachers don’t teach you. They don’t act like you’re some stupid kid and they don’t care about you. They actually cared about the students and they tried to help them as much as they can in that school. . . . They had a bunch of Native classes. They had Aboriginal studies, Aboriginal issues, Native language classes. A bunch of Native stuff, Native culture and stuff. They had ceremonies. . . . It gave me more confidence. . . . At the other high school, 30 people in your class and the teacher doesn’t like you so you’re pretty well screwed for the rest of the year. And at [alternative school] they help you. You had more help. Some people said you didn’t learn as much. But I learned just as much in that high school, if not more than the regular high school. (DK)*

Schooling on-reserve offers educational opportunities that eluded these youth within public high schools. Their cultural identities can be fostered, their lived realities recognized through relevant curriculum and flexible programs that accommodate their needs.

### **Discussion**

The first of these warrior stories shared by Anishinaabe youth in this study acknowledge that racism is a prevalent experience associated with their secondary schooling. They

engaged in what Deyhle (1995) calls “racial warfare” (p. 406), where Indigenous youth are at conflict economically, politically, and culturally in schools as dominant institutions. In their own words, these youth described how their non-Aboriginal peers and teachers appeared to be uncomfortable with them. They were made to feel that school was not their place, as noted by one student who observed the “*dirty look*” cast on a dream catcher that he had made, a symbol of unity and an artifact that provides identification with Aboriginal culture. They faced name-calling and stereotypes, with teachers not only failing to respond to incidences of racism directed at these Anishinaabe youth by their peers, but at times complicit in racism directed towards them. Because the public high school was located on reserve land, these Anishinaabe youth suffered assaults on their cultural dignity within their own communities, which perhaps heighten their responses as seen in the example of violence among youth. The racism they experienced in high school had an impact on their educational choices, determining whether they stayed or left high school, where they attended high school, and ultimately, whether post-secondary education was an option for them.

Scholars have suggested that issues of racism and Indigenous youth have not received sufficient attention in research (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Cleary & Peacock, 1998; St. Denis & Hampton, 2002). Yet, a number of striking incidences describe how racism shapes the education of Indigenous youth in several ways, including stereotypes and negative attitudes held by non-Aboriginal peers and teachers (Deyhle, 1995; Hare, 2001; Dunn, Forrest, Burnley, & McDonald, 2004), inadequate training and professional development of teachers (Hickling-Hudson, 2003), and curriculum that stereotypes or trivializes Indigenous peoples (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Educators must understand the dynamics of racism and how racism and oppression have an impact on schooling of Indigenous youth (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; St. Denis, 2007). The challenge, say Schick and St. Denis (2007), is to disrupt ideologies of racial superiority and inferiority. If racism is not addressed, schools cannot effectively implement culturally or linguistically relevant programs aimed at supporting Indigenous students (Cleary & Peacock, 1998).

The particular circumstances of the youth in this study, whereby they attended First Nations community-controlled elementary schools and then had to attend public high schools, warrants that educators take responsibility to understand the First Nations reserve communities where these students live and learn and the competing knowledge systems operating in their lives. Youth in this study reported feeling “*lost*” or not “*smart enough*.” Other students felt unprepared for the new curricular demands or “*so far behind*” as one student phrased it. The academic divide between their experiences in elementary school and high school speaks to how Indigenous youth bring different kinds of knowledge and experiences from their reserve school systems. Rather than blame Indigenous youth for not being familiar with the dominant norms and expectations associated with curriculum, or fault reserve schools for failing to equip their students for high school, educators “would likely serve Indigenous youth more effectively if we did a better job integrating multiple epistemologies within our pedagogy, curricula, and educational policies” (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 953).

Taking the contemporary warrior’s path, the Anishinaabe youth in the present study drew on their Indigenous knowledge systems to support them in their education and in their

lives. As the second of their warrior stories shares, family represents a primary cultural concept within their Indigenous knowledge system. In traditional times, families shared the responsibility for caring for young children with extended family and the community, socializing them in the roles and responsibilities that ensured survival of Indigenous peoples. Extended family networks that include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are highly valued for their contributions to family life because they both support schooling and offer ways to understand culture and identity within an Indigenous framework. Despite the impact of colonization on Indigenous families, whereby historical and contemporary policies and practices of schooling and child welfare undermine Indigenous family and community structures, family networks continue to be a source of strength and modeling that youth can draw upon. This understanding contradicts the deficit-based research that argues youth are not supported at home and that the way to improve achievement is to demand that youth assimilate into an individualistic, white, middle-class norm. It does, however, support research with minority youth that suggests social support, including family direction and supervision with respect to schooling, contributes positively to minority youth's lives (Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005; Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, & Dornbusch, 1993). The youth in this study embraced family as part of their warrior philosophy, describing how family was there for them when needed, reminding them of the importance of education. These messages came not only from their parents but also from grandparents and aunts or uncles.

Although these youth spoke about the emotional, social, and cultural support their families offered, their conversations did not reflect on whether parents or family were able to help them with the kinds of activities promoted by mainstream schools, such as helping with homework, communicating with school and teachers, or getting involved in their schools. This does not seem surprising, given the barriers that Indigenous families and communities have faced in the education of their children and youth. A growing body of literature addresses the legacy of schooling for Indigenous families and communities in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States (Beresford & Partington, 2003; Klug & Whitfield, 2003; Reyhner & Eder, 2004; Szasz, 1999) and educators must understand that how Indigenous parents and families participate in their children's schooling is situated within this historical context. It is also the case that public high schools where the youth in this present study attend are predominantly white, middle class institutions that come with a different set of values and expectations from those of the Aboriginal youth and their families. The young warrior's path is inspired by messages from Indigenous family and community members who speak to the value of schooling in their lives and the knowledge that their family members care about how they do in school. The youth are telling educators and policy makers that they would do well to engage Indigenous communities in ways that recognize the goals and aspirations that Indigenous families have for their children. This change may require special outreach efforts, given the marginalization Indigenous parents and youth face in public schools.

Embedded within Indigenous knowledge systems are values that guide how Indigenous people live and make sense of their world. A central value is the notion of relationships or connections one has to living and non-living things (Simpson, 2000). The young Anishinaabe warriors in this study drew on their relationships with reserve-based community structures and family and peers to make decisions about educational choices

that best suited them. As the final theme of our warrior stories reveals, the decision of almost one third of the youth in this study to attend alternative schooling options located within their First Nations community or a geographically accessible reservation community is a demonstration of their agency, allowing them to resist public high schools that do not honor their cultural integrity. Unlike the public schools, alternative schooling resembled the First Nations communities in which they lived; there was an extension of friendship and kinship within the schools that created a sense of belonging, support, and respect. The youth in this study valued their relationships with peers as part of their experience at these alternative schools, where they “*pretty much knew everyone who went to that school,*” and where “*everyone feels like they are friends.*” The on-reserve schools that the youth spoke about offered a learning environment providing culturally relevant pedagogy and programs to meet their academic needs and flexible scheduling and small classes that students described as helpful to them. Research consistently calls for more culturally-responsive pedagogies and curriculum as a means of improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth (Battiste, 2005; Beresford & Partington, 2003; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Klug & Whitfield, 2003).

The alternative high schools located in their own or neighboring First Nations community stand as a formal realization of First Nations communities’ investment in the cultural integrity of their youth, supporting their educational success by valuing their interconnections between people and place within the practices of schooling. As part of the new warrior resurgence, First Nations communities are reaching within to their own community resources to establish alternative school options for their youth. These community resources represent important networks. Public schools would do well to forge relationships with First Nations communities, drawing on the resources and values within, to better serve the learning needs of Aboriginal youth and enhance the curriculum for all students. As the present study demonstrates, Aboriginal youth find opportunity in the First Nations communities and these relationships can be just as valuable in urban communities, where schools can take advantage of First Nations community resources on whose traditional territories they find themselves teaching, and with Aboriginal organizations that provide a range of services for those living in urban areas. In Canada, Aboriginal youth represent the largest and fastest growing segment of the Aboriginal population. With the increasing number of Aboriginal youth living in urban and rural communities, it is important that educators expand their knowledge of Aboriginal education, creating space for Indigenous worldviews, content, and perspectives to enrich the learning opportunities for all youth.

### **Conclusion**

In listening to the stories of Anishinaabe youth, we were made aware of the challenges that face Aboriginal youth in schooling. Racism experienced at the hands of peers and teachers shapes their educational experiences, and the mainstream curriculum and pedagogies of public schooling serve only to further marginalize these youth. More importantly, we have come to understand the Indigenous-specific responses of these youth as they made choices about how to move ahead in their schooling. These young warriors demonstrated commitment and courage by surviving the assaults that schooling imposed on

their cultural integrity. These new warriors also moved beyond survival to draw on the inherent and internal resources of strength available to them (Alfred, 2005), which included their relationships to family and connections to the First Nations community, as well as opportunities within it, such as the alternative high school.

Further research is needed to examine racism and specific Indigenous strategies that empower Indigenous youth to identify, confront, and resist the assaults on culture they face in schools. Approaches advocated to address racism against Aboriginal youth have included culturally responsive schooling [CRS] (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008), anti-racist pedagogies (Schick & St. Denis, 2007), and multicultural education (Nieto, 1996). Our study of the educational experiences of a group of First Nations youth and the use of their Indigenous knowledge systems to navigate the challenges of schooling contribute to our understanding of social justice approaches taking many forms. As researchers, we are reaching within the Indigenous academic community to help us think about new analytical tools and a theoretical basis that the new warrior metaphor provides. While utilizing family and community resources to deal with racism in schools may not seem so distinct, the metaphor of the new warrior offers an Indigenous perspective, sorely lacking in the scholarly literature, that helps us to think about approaches to social justice in new ways. This understanding is especially significant as the new young warrior are, themselves, taking from their “heritages and translating them into ideas and practices to form frameworks for their own lives which will eventually become the intellectual, social and political landscapes of [their] nations as they become the leaders of [their] peoples” (Alfred, 2005, p. 257).

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