

**Indigenous Ways of Learning, Being and Teaching:  
Implications for New Teachers to First Nations Schools**

by

H. Colleen Marchant  
B. Ed, University of B.C. 2002

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

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in the Area of Curriculum and Instruction

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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Lorna Williams, PhD, Curriculum and Instruction  
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## Abstract

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As First Nations communities in British Columbia take control over the education of their children, it is important for teachers to understand some of the distinctions and nuances of the culture particular to First Nations schools and communities. This project attempts to provide some of that information.

Three sources of information provide important cultural knowledge for teachers new to First Nations schools. Interviews with five respected principals and five respected educators, of First Nations schools in British Columbia, provide the first source of knowledge. Personal and significant cultural experiences, obtained over seven years teaching in First Nations schools, provide the second source. Finally, a literature review, depicting aspects of Indigenous cultures, important for new teachers to understand, provides the third source.

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## Dedication

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# Chapter 1

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

### Introduction

“Aboriginal communities that have assumed control of their schools are still plagued by questions of how to implement education in the twenty-first century...How do we represent our cultures in school? What is appropriate, meaningful, and necessary?” (Battiste, 1999, p. XIV).

Most teachers new to a First Nations school subscribe to the view that the children be acculturated into the fundamental values of their own specific histories and cultures (Greenwood & deLeeuw, 2007). They also support the idea that First Nations people have a legitimate desire to be self-defining, to have their way of life respected, and to have their children taught in a manner that enhances the consciousness of being First Nations (Hampton, 1999). A recent survey of new teachers to First Nations schools revealed that most teachers did not know about First Nations and their culture before arriving in the community (Agbo, 2004). Agbo’s study recommends that the initial necessity be for teachers to become acquainted with the culture of First Nations. “It is clear, from the present study, that community people want to feel that Euro-Canadian teachers are reinforcing family values, that is, respect for parents, elders and the First Nations culture, rather than teaching children only Western values” (p.20).

Similarly, Pewewardy (2002) suggests future teachers must be reflective practitioners who possess the observational, empirical, and analytical skills necessary to monitor, evaluate, and revise their teaching techniques based on the learning styles of the students they teach. “They need to understand and respect the students’ cultural knowledge bases. This includes studying the history and culture of (First Nations) students that incorporate their values, stories, music and myths” (p.37).

Castellano et al (2000) state: “Aboriginal people need a new story. The old story of how our lives have been – is now known, and Canadians can perceive its demoralizing



effects...ultimately this new story is about empowering aboriginal world views, languages, knowledge, cultures, and most important, aboriginal peoples and communities” (p. viii). Educators, new to a First Nations school, still know very little about how students are raised, socialized in their homes and communities, and even less, about how they traditionally transmit their heritage. If they knew more about either of these areas, they could better understand students’ behaviour in school. This would allow them to shape education to create environments more conducive to learning for First Nations children (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). In a workshop for First Nations educators, Kavanagh (1998) elicited numerous responses to the question of effectiveness of First Nations schools (Appendix A). The general themes that arose included the necessity for more community involvement and more effective teacher training. For example, “We need to effect teacher education programs to make all teachers aware of the needs of First Nations students” (p.76). All agreed that education is at the heart of the struggle for First Nations people to regain control over their lives, communities and nations.

Kavanagh (2006) has produced an important and useful handbook for the First Nations Schools Association entitled, *Teaching in a First Nations School: An Information Handbook for Teachers New to First Nations Schools*. This publication provides a background of First Nations history and languages, the emergence of First Nations schools and school administration and governance. In addition, it provides information on the importance of community connections and the relationship between parents, families and First Nations schools. While this handbook is highly recommended as a reference for new teachers, it does not provide information on the importance and necessity of being a ‘different’ teacher – one who places the local First Nations culture at the heart of curriculum and pedagogy.

It is my perception that there is a need for additional information from experienced First Nations researchers and educators to describe effective strategies and interactions to enhance the educational outcomes for First Nations children. What are the Indigenous ways of learning and teaching that create an optimal environment? I tend to agree with many researchers that, only by living and actively participating in the community, can one gradually assimilate the nuances necessary to be a truly effective teacher. I know,

from personal experiences, that each year I lived in a First Nations community, the more effective I became. In this project, I describe personal unique teaching experiences, previously unreported in the literature, which provide new teachers with useful information. Similarly, I have interviewed ten respected educators with wide-ranging experiences in First schools. I have done this to obtain their thoughts on what new teachers need to know to be effective. Finally, I believe that by providing this information from a First Nations educator's perspective, it will provide an important additional resource to complement Kavanagh's 2006 handbook.

The question remains for a new teacher to a First Nations school and community: How do I acquire the knowledge and skills in order to provide an education for First Nations children, which principally derives by the thoughts, orientations and cultural philosophies of the First Nations community itself. (Cajete, 2003)

### **The Advocacy/Participatory Issue**

Indigenous people think and interpret the world and its realities in different ways from non-indigenous people because of their experiences, histories, spirituality, culture and values. It is important to learn about these realities and worldviews in order to provide optimal learning opportunities for First Nations children attending their own band schools. Battiste & Henderson (2000) state: "Survival for Indigenous people is more than a question of physical existence...it is an issue of protecting, preserving, and enhancing Indigenous worldviews, knowledge systems, languages and environments. It is a matter of sustaining spiritual links with ecosystems and communities" (p.290).

As a First Nations person teaching in a First Nations school, I am deeply involved and committed to providing a culturally appropriate education for my students. After spending five years and graduating from the Native Indian Teacher Education Program (NITEP) at UBC, I eagerly looked forward to teaching in a First Nations school. However, after my first year of teaching, I felt disillusioned with the effectiveness of my ability to provide the quality of instruction I desired. I am not alone in this regard. Manuelito (2005) cites a survey, conducted by the Native Educators Research Project at

Arizona State University, in which only 26 percent of 238 native participants, in 27 native teacher education programs, felt prepared to teach their tribal cultural programs. She claims the percentage is even smaller for teachers in regular college teaching programs.

I came to the realization that in spite of being a status First Nations person, my knowledge of First Nations groups, other than my own (Sechelt), is incomplete. In fact, I have learned that even within particular First Nations different communities have different protocols and ceremonies. The longer one lives in a particular community, the more effective one becomes, providing one has the correct mindset. I also felt that I was missing information from my teacher education program. I felt a need to acquire both academic knowledge and skills to complement my 'lived experiences' in First Nations communities.

Because of my feelings and perceptions towards my teaching effectiveness, I enrolled in the Master of Education program, in curriculum development, at the University of Victoria. While none of the courses I have taken is from a specifically indigenous viewpoint, I have been allowed to do research projects in each course on particular aspects of First Nations culture. This has permitted me to read many research articles on Indigenous cultural issues and has helped me to develop a more complete understanding of an Indigenous worldview.

The most important, and helpful aspect of the Master of Education program has come via the mentorship of my supervisor, Dr. Lorna Williams. Through her various research articles, (Tanaka, Williams, Benoit, Duggan, Moir & Scarrow, 2007; Williams, 2000; Williams & Tanaka, 2007) and, in particular, her success in bringing an Indigenous worldview to students at the University of Victoria, I have become inspired to "develop concepts that more faithfully reflect Indigenous traditional educational transmission processes" (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p.95). Thus, I turn to my First Nations community to continue my education. After five years of teaching in an isolated First Nations community and acquiring many friendships, memories and a rudimentary knowledge of the culture, I have spent the past two years in a less remote First Nations community. This has helped me to understand the similarities and differences between First Nations cultures, including how the language and culture is part of the school

curriculum. Again, it has also taught me that the longer one teaches and participates in a First Nations community, the more knowledgeable one becomes, providing one is an enthusiastic learner. Further researching the literature on First Nations education, seeking knowledge from First Nations elders and professional educators, as well as listening to my students, their parents and their grandparents, will help to strengthen my Indigenous knowledge. In this present project, it is my intention to share my experiences, along with those of respected First Nations educators, in an attempt to provide insights for new teachers to First Nations schools.

### **The Project Question**

What are the Indigenous ways of learning, being and teaching that are necessary to create an optimal learning environment for First Nations children attending their own schools? Which of these ‘ways’ are most important for a new teacher to understand and embrace when beginning a teaching position in a First Nations school? This project attempts to answer these questions by utilizing three sources. First, I study of the recent research literature to explicate those findings having direct relevance for teachers of First Nations children. Second, I describe teaching scenarios from my experiences in First Nations schools and relate them to the research literature. Third, I interview five teachers from First Nations classrooms and five principals from First Nations schools, to obtain additional insights for new teachers.

## Chapter 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### The Importance of Culture

This chapter examines the recent research on the importance of Indigenous culture as a component of First Nations education and examines the role of educators in cultural pedagogy. The findings support a growing body of work on First Nations cultural tradition that empirically supports something First Nations people have known all along: enculturation is a resiliency factor in the development of their children (Whitbeck et al, 2001). Ball (2004) states, “We must be able to feel confident that our worldview is clearly understood by our own children and that they will know that their culture has value in modern times as it did in the past. We must be able to teach our children appropriate skills and understanding, and control how our children are taught” (p.454). Several other researchers share this belief in the importance of placing culture at the heart of every First Nations education program (Feng et al, 2007; Manuelito, 2005; Pewewardy, 2002). “Language and culture are at the heart of everything a school does, and their inclusion in the education process must be seen as a requirement, not an option” (Kavanagh, 1998, p.27).

Researchers suggest that a major challenge to First Nations students’ academic success is cultural discontinuity. In general, they agree that students achieve better educational outcomes if reared in a culture that has expectations and patterns of behaviour consistent with those of school (Powers et al, 2003). Feng et al, (2007) report, “According to the cultural discontinuity perspective, cultural inclusion is a necessary component for Indian students’ academic success. Thus, the need for increasing Indian language and culture in schools is evident” (p.53). Similarly, Demmert and Towner (2003) found a firm belief, within many First Nations communities and with professional First Nations educators, claiming cultural content is essential if one is to succeed academically and to build meaningful lives as adults. Agbo (2004) argues, “Unless educators begin to support the interests and values of Indigenous groups and validate

Indigenous knowledge forms and experiences, the education of Indigenous groups will continue to be mediocre in quality” (p.4).

Retention of heritage and a strong cultural identity are described as being the most important factors in predicting the academic achievement of First Nations students (Brade et al, 2003). “Because the educational system plays an extremely influential role in the lives of children beginning at an early age, it is crucial that impressionable youth be exposed to information and leaders who reflect back to them their own worth” (p.239). Yet Indigenous views of the world and approaches to education are brought into jeopardy with the spread of Western social structures and institutional forms of cultural transmission. The Alaska Native Education Cultural Standards demonstrate the importance of culture by shifting the emphasis in education from teaching about culture to teaching through the local culture as a foundation for learning (Barnhardt, 2008). “The tide has turned and the future of Indigenous education is clearly shifting toward an emphasis on providing education in the culture, rather than education about the culture” (Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998, p.139).

First Nations peoples are interested in developing educational systems that reflect First Nations cultures, philosophies and values. At the same time, they are concerned about the ability of their children to succeed in the mainstream Western culture (Kavanagh, 1998). Ladson-Billings (1995) states, “Culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (p.476). Barnhardt & Kawagley (2005) agree that First Nations people may need to understand Western society, but “not at the expense of what they already know and the way they have come to know it” (p.2). Non-native people also need to recognize the co-existence of multiple worldviews and knowledge systems and find ways to understand and relate to the world in its multiple dimensions and varied perspectives. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People reported that Aboriginal youth almost universally argued for an increased First Nations cultural content in the curriculum, but also a heightened sensitivity to the difficulty in bridging two cultures in the learning process (Alfred, 1995).

Additional important considerations in the implementation of culture in First Nations schools includes the following observations. Hermes (2005) claims, “The

knowledge, skills and values to be learned by children reside with the people, within the land, and within the interaction of the people and the land” (p.421). Smylie et al (2006), likens a culturally based approach to a fingerprint, specific and relevant to the individual community or program. LeRoux (2001) argues that exposing children and having them acquire their own cultural identity should occur before introducing them to other cultures. “Differences between home and school culture often negatively interferes with effective teaching and learning in the classrooms” (p.45). Moje & Hinchman (2004) believe that culturally responsive pedagogy should begin with the formation of relationships between teachers and students. These authors also claim that educators should use students’ experiences to “challenge and reshape the academic content knowledge and literacy practice of the curriculum” (p.326).

The recent passage of the First Nations Jurisdiction over Education in B.C. Act (2006) gives participating First Nations control over education in their community. This will provide an opportunity to design and deliver education programs and services “which are culturally relevant for their communities...thus enhancing the quality of education for students” (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2006, p.1). However, Mendelson (2006), believes what we need is a “careful, rigorous, steady development of an improved school system with a clear fixed resolve to reach our goals over the next decade” (p.6). He argues that sweeping panaceas that aim to resolve all problems immediately will not work.

### **Characteristics of First Nations Culture**

While the foregoing research makes a strong case for the importance of culture being central to First Nations education, it is also important to identify the cultural characteristics common to the diverse and numerous First Nations communities. Saunders et al (2007) state, “No one epistemology is shared by all. However, a number of concepts bridge most, if not all Indigenous people. Respect for each other and nature, the understanding of community, and the need for authenticity or an authentic voice are common values” (p.1019). These authors cite the ‘3Rs’ of First Nations culture: respect

(for the individual and for differences), relevance (of the content to the learner and life), and reciprocative learning (the partnership of learning with and from each other).

Several researchers cite the importance of respect in First Nations culture. (Kavanagh, 2006; Pewewardy, 2002; Stokes, 1997). One demonstrates respect by listening to others, valuing cultural traditions and seeking direction on how to implement culture. “Respect for people and their feelings is much more important in Native American society than in the general population...elders are particularly to be respected” (Stokes, 1997, p.579).

Inter-connectedness is another important First Nations characteristic. Durst (2004) found that, in First Nations culture there is a connection of all things, with a web of interconnectedness between the individual and the community and the community and nature. Schroder (2006) claims, “In the Native mind, all forms of life are inseparably connected to each other...cycles and circles are the prominent metaphors for life and reality, rather than linear and hierarchical models” (p.309). Bowman (2002) found a connection to family, nature and culture provides a natural support system and illustrates the importance of belonging. In a similar vein, Whitbeck et al (2001) describe First Nations characteristics as having “the values of sharing, non-competitiveness, politeness, not putting oneself forward in a group, allowing others to go first, being reluctant to speak out, present rather than future orientation, and norms of non-interference” (p.50).

Pewewardy (2002) found First Nations students prefer harmony, unity and a basic oneness. There is security in being a member of a group, rather than being singled out. Students do not want to give the impression as being either above or below the status of others. Competition does not provide motivation; co-operation is a preferred learning strategy. Collective decision-making, extended kinship structures, ascribed authority vested in others, flexible notions of time, and traditions of informality in everyday affairs, are the First Nations characteristics described by Kawagley & Barnhardt (1998).

Williams & Tanaka (2007) have provided several characteristics of traditional Indigenous ways of teaching and learning. These include: mentorship and apprenticeship learning, learning by doing, learning by deeply observing, learning through listening, telling stories and singing songs, learning in a community, and learning by sharing and providing service to the community. Stokes (1997) claims that in their early years at



home, First Nations children learn by “observing their parents, not by having conversations with them...by the time they enter school they have done most of their learning through direct experience and participation in real world activities. Thus, there is a mismatch between early learning experiences at home and expected behaviour for school learning” (p.577).

Spirituality is another characteristic of First Nations culture. Whitbeck et al (2001) state, “Spirituality is an essential dimension of (First Nations) culture. Knowledge and practice of spiritual ways and values reflect both cultural practice and cultural identity” (p.50). Agbo (2004) claims, “It is necessary for all people in the community to respect old ways of doing things, especially First Nations spirituality” (p.23). Reagan (2005) found the spiritual nature of traditional Indigenous thought and practice permeates virtually all aspects of educational practices. “This can be seen most clearly, perhaps, in the way that each child is viewed and treated, and the respect that is accorded each individual” (p.128). Kavanagh (1998) describes spirituality as the relationship and connection between people, the environment, and the world around us. “There is a need to include spirituality in the curriculum as a means of providing balance to the lives of students” (p.67).

The oral tradition is a characteristic forming the backbone of First Nations culture. Reagan (2005) reinforces this idea, “Oral traditions must be respected and viewed by the teacher as a distinctive intellectual tradition, not simply as myths and legends. If the traditions, beliefs, values and ideas that have been taught to the children by their parents and grandparents are not important in the school curriculum, the message is obvious” (p.129). Because many of the values of First Nations students are taught through storytelling, students can benefit from this type of instruction. “...the oral literature of the community and storytelling within a teacher’s class can be the basis of beginning instruction in reading and writing” (Pewewardy, 2002, p.38). It is important for teachers to recognize, appreciate and value cultural differences in storytelling because these differences affect classroom life in many important areas, including children’s comprehension and memory, curriculum, and social interactions (McCabe, 1997).

Finally, relationship to the land is another extremely important characteristic of First Nations culture. Basso (1996), describes this with eloquent prose in his wonderful book, *Wisdom Sits in Places*. He states:

Land, known as mother earth, is not a metaphor...earth is a being, a source of life that gives birth to all living creatures and sustains the life of her children...land is a place of birth, growth and development, and death. Land and formal education share important characteristics. Both provide a focus for livelihood and survival, sustain life, validate the individual and assure the future (p.81).

Basso continues, "Because places are visually unique, they serve as excellent vehicles for recalling useful knowledge. And because knowledge needed for wisdom is nothing if not useful, the adage 'Wisdom sits in places' is seen to make perfect sense" (p.134). Chambers (1999) echoes this concept by claiming memory and history, both individually and collectively, are located in particular places, giving rise, not only to concrete experiences, but also to local, regional and national identities. Thus, place-based education is an essential characteristic of First Nations education.

### **Learning Styles of First Nations Students**

Learning style refers to "the composite of characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological factors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how a learner perceives, interacts with, and responds to his/her learning environment" (Pewewardy, 2002, p.24). This First Nations researcher cautions that First Nations students should not be stereotyped, or placed in the same category, because the inherent abilities of students within any First Nations group are as varied as in any other group of students. Saunders et al (2007) are even more emphatic, claiming the literature on Native learning style "is a means of both placing blame for conditions on the student, while masking the inequities of the system" (p.1019). They feel it is not appropriate to claim that one learning style can encompass the diversity of First Nations societies.

Alfred (1995), citing the findings of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, found twenty-seven studies claiming different learning styles of First Nations children. This commission has targeted traditional culture and traditional child-rearing practices as influential factors affecting learning style. Alfred concludes that an over-emphasis on learning style differences may lead to a new form of inaccurate labelling and stereotyping. Preferences in learning style are identified frequently, but not with sufficient consistency to suggest a unique First Nations learning style.

Williams (2000), claims learning style research closes more doors than it opens. “The research has focused on the differences between, rather than the differences within groups. It has the power to influence how society perceives Aboriginal learners and how Aboriginal learners perceive themselves” (p.162). Researchers have failed to be guided by the diverse and dynamic understanding held and practiced within Aboriginal communities. She feels the answers will come from First Nations researchers and educators through “deeply considered questions about ourselves” (p.165).

In spite of the foregoing cautions, there does appear to be some factors that are ubiquitous among First Nations learners. For example, Pewewardy (2002), claims First Nations students have definite learning style tendencies, such as “strength in the visual modality, and preference for global, creative, and reflective styles of learning” (p.37). He found students learned best when they are presented first with the big idea, then seeing the details that relate to it, rather than the longer process of building generalities from the details. “They readily see the overall picture before they concern themselves with the details” (p.38). Other characteristics of learning, cited by this First Nations educator and researcher, include an emphasis on the social/affective dimension, holistic perspectives, expressive creativity, harmony, and non-verbal communication,

Jacobs (Four Arrows, 2003), claims Native children have different assumptions about learning than those of ‘Western’ children. “They expect more opportunities for personal reflection, critical thinking, observation, experience, and autonomy” (p.28). Goulet (2001) describes the importance of traditional teaching practices, “where learning occurred through observation and doing, and responsibility for engagement lies with the learner in order to respect individual autonomy within group interdependence” (p.70).

Thus, she feels classroom management styles function better when indirect and when educators respect student autonomy.

Finally, with respect to learning styles, Bergeson, Griffin & Hurtado (2000), in an extensive review of American Indian research literature, claim that American Indian students typically: value and develop acute visual discrimination and skills in the use of imagery, value and excel in co-operative environments, perceive globally, and are reflective learners. They also claim American Indian students, “tend to learn how to perform an activity by repeatedly observing the activity being done by a competent other, then practicing in private until confident it can be done well” (p.16).

### **The Role of the Teacher of First Nations Students**

New teachers to First Nations schools need to be aware that they are going to be working in very complex settings that will include some unique difficulties (Kavanagh, 2006). Understanding this fact will ideally help these teachers in adapting of a First Nations school setting more easily and “result in more positive relationships and benefits” (p.35). Teachers must view themselves as learners. That is, to teach effectively, they must learn about the culture, background and experiences of their students (Cummins, Chow & Schechter, 2006). “Once teachers know about the different forms of prior knowledge their students might bring to the classroom, they can build bridges between the mainstream academic knowledge and discourse, and the knowledge and discourse the students bring to the classroom” (Moje & Hinchman, 2004, p.323).

Teachers of First Nations children must critically examine how their own views about knowledge, human nature, values, and society are mediated “through commonsense assumptions they use to structure classroom experience” (Agbo, 2004, p.29). Similarly, Jacobs (Four Arrows, 2003), claims when teaching ‘character’ to First Nations students; teachers must explore their own assumptions. Because “if a more Western role dominates, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to integrate authentic spiritual awareness with virtues, and teachers will fall into the authority/compliance trap” (p.27).

Jessica Ball (2004) believes an instructor from outside the culture of his/her students can never really know what the students' experiences have been like. "You can visit; you can work there every day, and still not have awareness of many things. It is really important to be aware of not knowing and open to learning from your students" (p.470). However, it is also important for teachers to connect with the community and families, in order to affirm, value and include the cultural practices, language, and knowledge of the people into the classroom, in order to overcome past inappropriate teaching practices (Goulet, 2001). "Effective teachers recognize that culture is dynamic and changing, so they incorporate both traditional and contemporary culture in the curriculum" (p.70).

The challenge is for teachers to provide First Nations children with learning experiences within a culturally relevant and appropriate environment (Bergeson, Griffin & Hurtado, 2000). These authors caution against using 'middle class' basal readers and textbooks. "They need to start reading with meaningful realistic literature about which they can think and hold discussions" (p.45). It is important to modify instruction so that it is more compatible with the cultural norms of First Nations students' homes and communities. For example, when children err, their 'elders' explain "painstakingly and relatively privately (to) illustrate or point out the current procedure or proper behaviour" (p.30). Often, classroom teachers do not understand this and their 'scolding' becomes an assault on the child's status before his peers.

Goulet (2001) observed several qualities possessed by effective First Nations teachers. Warmth, caring, sensitivity, humour, and trust characterized teacher-student relationships and they combine these with high expectations. She found effective teachers used an indirect, non-confrontational approach to classroom management. "They used humour and often laughed at themselves and with their students" (p.76). Bergeson, Griffin & Hurtado (2000), found teaching to be more effective when classroom participant structure involved "less teacher domination of verbal interaction during instruction, while allowing for more voluntary verbal participation by the students" (p.30).

Ladson-Billings (1995) claims teachers who used language interaction patterns that approximated the students' home cultural patterns were more successful in improving student academic performance. "Making small changes in everyday participation

structures may be one of the means by which more culturally responsive pedagogy can be developed” (p.468). Other characteristics of success provided by Ladson-Billings include teachers demonstrating their belief in the community and attempting to support and instill community pride in their students. In order to solidify the social relationships in their classes, effective teachers encourage their students to “learn collaboratively, teach each other, and be responsible for the academic success of others” (p.481). Students are not permitted to choose failure in effective teachers’ classrooms. “Absent from their discourse about students was the ‘language of lacking’” (p.479).

Feng, Feng & Moore (2007), also emphasize the importance of the community’s perception that First Nations teachers are respectful and caring. Educators possessing these characteristics were valued and seen as role models, even if they were not First Nations. “The social relationship between teachers and Indigenous students is incredibly important. Appreciation and respect are the antecedent attitudes for teaching (First Nations) children” (p.55). Communities view non-native teachers as role models if they demonstrate respect for First Nations beliefs, attempt to understand ‘First Nations ways’, have pride in their students, and are open-minded towards cultural inclusion. Similarly, when teachers involve parents and community members in the education system, “students are likely to perceive that teachers ‘care’, leading to possible academic gains” (p.55). The importance of teachers ‘caring’ is clearly demonstrated by Powers et al. (2003) who found that over one-half of First Nations school ‘dropouts’ reported that their teachers failed to care about them.

Finally, Goulet (2001) provides a very useful suggestion for teachers of First Nations students. When observing outstanding teachers, she found one teacher “was always at the door of her classroom to greet her students when they came in the morning. That way, she could tell from their facial expression what kind of night they had and could adjust her teaching and expectations for participation accordingly” (p.77).

### **The Role of First Nations Teacher Education Programs**

Agbo (2004), in a survey of First Nations leaders, reports they overwhelmingly felt that the university should play a vital role in improving the quality of teachers for First

Nations children. LeRoux (2001) agrees, stating, “Teachers need to acquire the skill of deeply understanding cultural norms other than their own. This sensitivity needs to be instilled during teacher training” (p.45). Tanaka et al (2007) identified a strong need for educational reform within the context of Aboriginal pedagogy in Canada. Battiste & Henderson (2000) reinforce this position.

Future teachers of First Nations children must have experience with them during teacher training programs. They also need to become cognizant of classroom practices that are compatible with First Nations students’ linguistic styles, cognitive functioning, motivation, and the school norms to which they are accustomed (Pewewardy, 2002). However, LeRoux (2001) cautions that teacher generalizations about particular cultural groups “as a result of being exposed, during training, to multicultural information can be a potential danger in itself. It may even strengthen, rather than diminish, stereotypical beliefs” (p.46). During training, teachers need to be equipped to manage such stereotyping in ways conducive to effective teaching and learning.

Dr. Lorna Williams, at the University of Victoria, has developed a unique opportunity for students to “engage in teaching and learning from an Indigenous perspective, which is fundamentally different from previous educational experiences” (Tanaka et al, 2007, p.99). Within her teaching education, there “is an attempt to implement programs that encourage a deeper level of social interaction and transformation” (Williams & Tanaka, 2007, p.8). Williams speaks of a ‘longing of the Western world’ to better understand the fundamental commonalities that are shared by Indigenous people. In her program, she has presented four such common themes: finding one’s own way, the act of becoming still in a place of dissonance, uncertainty and anticipation, and, energy developed through a shared sense of purpose. By inviting participation in an environment where these themes are ‘lived’, her students achieve a holistic understanding of First Nations ‘ways of being’. Without doubt, a course of this type is very effective in communicating First Nations cultural values. Exposure to a similar curriculum would be ideal for all prospective First Nations teachers.

## Problems Facing First Nations Teachers

One of the common concerns, in the literature relating to First Nations schools, is the fact that separate culture and language groups vary significantly from one another in values, spiritual beliefs, kinship patterns, economics, and level of acculturation (Kavanagh, 2006; Reagan, 2005; Whitbeck et al, 2001). “Even among children from the same community, the degree to which students display sociolinguistic and other cultural differences may vary according to their exposure to, and attitude toward, mainstream culture” (Bergeston, Griffin & Hurtado, 2000, p.31).

In many First Nations communities generations of people do not know their own culture of origin or their heritage language, and their identities as members of an Indigenous community have been attenuated.

Although the long era of residential schooling...is now over, its negative impact on self-concept, parenting, social cohesion, and the intergenerational transmission of language and culture remain (Ball, 2004, p.455).

In spite of these findings, Reagan (2005) states, “Nevertheless, it is possible to discuss a common core unity in the midst of diversity. There are, in fact, common cores of beliefs, and of remarkable similar practices, that are common to most (First Nations people)” (p.118).

A second concern is the recognition of cultural systems as being dynamic and ever changing in response to new conditions. This has enormous implications for the sustainability of First Nations communities (Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998). Agbo (2004) found the social pattern of traditional First Nations society today appears to be undergoing serious change. “The ideals that are taken for granted by elders, such as kinship, respect for elders, and helping, for example, are not observed by younger members of the society” (p.12).

A third concern is the relationship many First Nations parents have with their children’s school. Kavanagh (1998) claims, “The history of First Nations people, and the resulting internalized racism that in many cases still exists, continues to interfere with decision making, parental support for schools, the rate of volunteerism in schools, and the energy people have to focus on school and education” (p.32). An American study, ‘The



Indians at Risk Task Force', found that First Nations parents are still not part of the school system despite efforts to increase their involvement. "This is a troubling finding, given the importance of increasing parental involvement on educational improvement, as demonstrated in numerous studies" (Bergeson, Griffin & Hurtado, 2000, p.40). Powers et al (2003) determined that Native parents found collaboration with school personnel difficult, "particularly if aspects of their own culture are obviously absent from the school" (p.20). Kavanagh (2006) reminds us that many First Nations parents have not had a positive experience in the education system and "therefore may be reluctant to be active in a school setting. Also, some parents are not confident that they have the skills and knowledge necessary for involvement in home and school learning" (p.29).

A fourth concern is the teaching of traditional culture in the school setting. Agbo (2004) found some parents opposed the teaching of language and culture in the school, while acknowledging the importance of their children in acquiring these skills. It was argued "parents were in a better position to teach the children than the non-First Nations teaching staff, who were not familiar with the culture" (p.18). Barnhardt & Kawagley (2005) state, "Many elders fear that traditional skills and approaches to knowledge will be trivialized or perverted by formal educators, that their informal teaching role in the community will be destroyed..."(p.149). These authors also found that many parents fear that children taught native ways in school will not acquire mainstream ways, "and so will not be able to cope in either world" (p.149). Alfred (1995), in his survey of First Nations students, found they were critical of the language and cultural programs provided by First Nations schools. Students complained, "they learn very little and are always repeating the same things...cultural programs have not received the resources, attention, and support they need in order to be effective" (p.123).

A final concern is the differences between the mainstream Western culture and the culture of First Nations peoples. Kawagley & Barnhardt (1998) provide an apt description of this problem.

For a Native student, imbued with an Indigenous, experientially grounded, holistic perspective, typical approaches to teaching can present an impediment to learning, to the extent that they focus on compartmentalized knowledge with little regard to how academic disciplines relate to one another

or to the surrounding universe (p.118).

Bergeson, Griffin & Hurtado (2000), reflect on the discontinuity between the culture and language of First Nations students' homes and communities and that of the school. "It is believed that these discontinuities often result in systematic and recurrent miscommunication in the classroom, as well as a failure to acknowledge and build upon the knowledge these students bring with them to school" (p.13). When teachers' teaching styles do not match students' learning preferences, conflicts often occur. Mendelson (2006) reminds us that for many First Nations families

this is only the second, third, or fourth generation to be offered more than a most rudimentary education in classrooms. Many elders living today had no classroom education at all...The cultural change to formal classroom teaching is immense and requires huge adaptation in the nature of family life and daily living (p.2).

A quote by Ladson-Billings (1995) provides a useful conclusion to this literature review. "Aboriginal communities cannot rely on old models of Eurocentric education to transform themselves. We must search beyond. We must expect to find incoherence and contradiction on our way towards transformation and revitalization of Aboriginal languages and cultures" (p. xiv).

While there is a large body of research literature on First Nations culture and education, the foregoing information reflects my personal selection of what is presently most important. I have based this decision because of my seven years of teaching in First Nations schools and completing the Master of Education course requirements at the University of Victoria. I hope that this research literature will help to eliminate some of the incoherence and contradictions new teachers may experience. Combining these observations with my personal experiences and interviews with ten respected educators will form the basis for a supplemental handbook for new teachers to First Nations schools.

## Chapter Three

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

#### **An Indigenous Paradigm**

This study attempts, as close as possible, to embrace an Indigenous paradigm. It is important to point out that many First Nations researchers have subscribed to a particular Indigenous research method. Wilson (2001, 2003, and 2007) provides an in-depth discussion of this topic. He claims Indigenous methodology means talking about relational accountability. “As a researcher, you are answering to all your relations when you are doing research” (Wilson, 2001, p.177). Wilson has developed eleven research principles in collaboration with several other Indigenous researchers (Wilson, 2007). These are located in Appendix B. He suggests this chronology challenges Indigenous scholars to “articulate their own research paradigms, their own approaches to research and their own data collection methods in order to honour an Indigenous paradigm” (Wilson, 2003, p.170).

Hodgson-Smith (2000) also claims that unless there is a paradigm shift, concerned Indigenous researchers will continue to be frustrated and confused, with the possibilities of new insights remaining clouded and hidden. Battiste & Henderson (2000) also agree, “For knowledge to flourish, scholars need to see Indigenous knowledge as a new *sui generis* (self-generating) path, as a new opportunity to develop greater awareness and to discover deeper truths (p.39). This project attempts to be in harmony with an Indigenous paradigm, by employing a storytelling approach and, then ‘weaving’ these stories into themes, as a *metissage*, as described by Chambers & Hasebe-Ludt (2008).

#### **A Qualitative Design**

In addition to following an Indigenous paradigm, this study takes the form of a first order qualitative design. I have attempted to follow the nine principles forming the structure of an ideal qualitative design. All educator interviews occurred in natural

settings, with subjects choosing the locations. It has used several sources of data, concentrating on the realities perceived by the participants. It provides a holistic account, while being sensitive to ethical considerations. The design is emergent, as it was able to change to meet changing circumstances, and the design is in the form of an interpretive inquiry, where themes are developed from analysis of the data (Cresswell, 2007, p.37-47).

The research consists of oral histories, both autobiographical and biographical. Biographical oral histories because they consists of gathering personal reflections of First Nations cultural considerations, causes and effects, from five respected school principals and five respected school teachers from First Nations schools. In addition, the study includes five autobiographical 'stories' gathered from personal experiences during seven years of teaching in First Nations schools.

Prior to conducting the research study, I obtained consent from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board, as described by protocol #09-083, approved 12 March 2009, (Appendix F). In addition, a research agreement made with the First Nations Schools Association on 19 August 2008 provides permission for me to conduct the research in the schools under their jurisdiction. Finally, this study attempts to follow the eleven Indigenous research principles prescribed by Wilson (2007) (Appendix B) as well the Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR) guidelines for health research involving Aboriginal people. This later publication states (p.11), "In the past, Aboriginal people and cultures have sometimes been harmed through research...It is now widely agreed that mechanisms to prevent further harm are needed..."

## **Procedure**

The research consists of two parts. In the first part, I reviewed personal journals and daybooks, compiled over the past seven years of teaching in two First Nations schools, to find relevant cultural content. Five 'stories', or scenarios of First Nations cultural experiences, deemed most useful to understanding for new teachers, are described. Following the Indigenous tradition of 'storytelling', these scenarios provide instruction

for new teachers. In addition, I have cite pertinent supporting research literature to emphasize the importance of each ‘story’, followed by a personal summary.

The second part of the study consists of personal interviews with five respected principals and five teachers with considerable experience teaching in First Nations schools. With one exception, all ten educators have taught in two or more First Nations schools. First, all interviewees were contacted by telephone, where the nature of the project was described and their participation solicited. After agreeing to participate, setting a time and location of their convenience, the educators read and signed the Participant Consent Form (Appendix C). On the other hand, in the case of telephone interviews, the participants had the Implied Consent Form (Appendix D) read to them, followed by an assurance of understanding.

I developed a separate set of questions for both teachers and principals, to guide the interviews (Appendix E). I conduct the interviews in privacy, at a location and time of each participant is choosing, where I assure anonymity. I use two tape recorders, making duplicate recordings of each interview. I transcribe the recordings , type them, and present them to the subjects to assure accuracy. Participants signed their transcript, vouching for its authenticity.

During the interviews, additional questions arose from the responses obtained. These questions and answers were included in the transcripts as well. In addition, when the interviews were being transcribed, other information seemed necessary to clarify the answers. In those cases, a second interview occurred, using the same procedures. After transcribing all interviews, they, along with the tapes, have been stored in a locked cabinet at my residence.

## **Analysis of Results**

The five personal cultural events explicated from the journals and daybooks are summarized and presented as ‘stories’, related to the recent Indigenous literature and are provided as lessons for educators new to First Nations schools.

An analysis is made of the transcribed interviews with teachers and principals to highlight key concepts of particular relevance to new teachers. The selected comments

are then weaved together into themes. The same themes, from all interviews, combine into the form of a 'metissage', as described by Chambers and Hase-ludt (2008). A metissage "weaves the language and traditions of local cultures and vernaculars (particularly incorporating autobiographical material and local oral traditions and stories) with the dominant languages and traditions of literacy." (P.142) It is a research technique learned from Dr. Wanda Hurren during my graduate program (EDCI 531) "A metissage carries the ability to transform...and seeks cross-cultural, egalitarian relations of knowing and being" (p.142). The idea is to juxtapose the thoughts of the educators to highlight differences "without essentializing or erasing them, while simultaneously locating points of affinity" (P.142). Thus, the collective metissage both attends to difference while generating something new. As a result, each metissage provides insights relating to culture in First Nations schools, based on the collective thoughts of ten educators from First Nations Schools. I also believe a metissage approximates an Indigenous paradigm by allowing us to hear all voices, similar to occurrences in a sacred circle.

Because of the need to retain anonymity, I cite remarks and quotations from individual interviewed teachers as T1, T2, T3, T4 or T5. Similarly, I cite remarks and quotations from individual principals as P1, P2, P3, P4 or P5.

### **Significance of the Project**

I expect the results of this study will be a valuable resource for new teachers to a First Nations community by providing them with additional knowledge of Indigenous ways of learning, being and teaching. In addition, this project expects to provide answers to the following questions: How do we represent our culture in our schools? What is appropriate, meaningful and necessary? What are the problems and experiences of new teachers to First Nations schools?

Castellano, Davis & LaHache (2000) state, " Aboriginal people have an unquenchable hope in the promise of education; they believe it will instruct them in the ways to live long and well on Mother Earth and that it will instil in them the wisdom and the capacity to carry their responsibilities in the circle of life." (p. xi) . I believe it is an

obligation for all new teachers to First Nations schools to be adequately prepared, open to learning, and willing to acquire the cultural knowledge necessary to meet this promise.

The results of this project will also be available to the First Nations Schools Association to provide them with a compendium of recent research literature, as well as unique insights and experiences from ten respected educators. I hope that dissemination to new teachers may follow.

At the least, this research project was able to enrich my personal cultural knowledge and enhance my ability to educate young First Nations children. I will emulate the Cree grandmother, cited by Hodson-Smith (2000) who states, “We teach what we know as an act of love” (p. 157).

## **Chapter Four**

### **RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

The results of this project consist of two parts. The first part consists of autobiographical experiences that occurred during seven years of teaching in two First Nations schools. I chose them because of their particular relevance and usefulness for new teachers to First Nations schools. I describe each experience in a traditional 'story' form. Finally, I supplement the stories by providing relevant passages from recent First Nations literature, to provide credibility.

The second part of this project consists of themes developed through interviews with five respected teachers and principals from First Nations schools. Each theme is a 'weaving' of ideas into the form of a metissage, combining the thoughts of all educators for each. They juxtapose similarities and differences to provide a useful resource for new teachers.

#### **Part One: Autobiographical 'Stories'**

##### **Oral Culture: Story One**

During my first year of teaching, I was excited about introducing books and reading to my kindergarten class. I asked the children to pick a book from the class library and then find a place to sit on the carpet to look at their book until my TA or I came around to read their book to them. As I was walking around the room, I noticed that one little girl was holding her book upside down. When I spoke to her, she said, "Why on earth would I ever want to look at a book?" I was astonished and dumbstruck, because on my practicum the children could hardly wait to get their hands on books. This little girl's question remains vivid and startling to this day.

I subsequently discovered, after integrating into the community, that almost no homes contained books, and in particular, no children's books. In addition, I learned that



very few parents had read books to their children before they attended school. Therefore, a majority of the children began school without any experience with the printed word, or any understanding of the importance of being able to read.

I eventually learned that many components of a centuries old oral tradition still remained in the community and were a big part of family dynamics. The importance of elders, with their oral transmission of knowledge and wisdom, was very evident in all community gatherings. Within families, oral transmission of history, legends and guidance occurs, with the sharing of food playing a big role. Children are taught to ‘take in’ words with their meals.

In order to develop an appreciation of books and reading to my students, it was important to employ a variety of strategies. Those found most useful include reading stories to the children, particularly stories that had appeal because of their content relevance (including especially First Nations stories and myths). A ‘buddy reading’ program, with a class of older students reading to my children so they saw role models of successful readers, was also beneficial. A ‘literacy night’ for parents and their children, where teachers cooked a meal for the families, talked briefly about the goals of literacy and made children’s books available to parents at little or no cost, worked well. A ‘book bag’ program was employed, where students took books home to share with their parents and were rewarded for their effort; and finally, ‘reading groups’ were organized, where students were placed in small groups, based on their literacy skills, to enhance their development. I gave each child four books each year as presents, to help build a home library.

As well as developing an interest and, hopefully, a love of books, it was important to honour the oral traditions of the community. Thus, I placed emphasis on classroom discussions of students’ experiences, community events, books we have read, role playing and developing oral communication skills.

### **Supporting research literature**

Barnhardt & Kawagley (2005) remind us that traditional knowledge “is the information that people in a given community, based on experience and adaptation to a

local culture and environment, have developed over time and continue to develop. This knowledge is used to sustain the community and its culture” (p.3). Similarly, Agbo (2004) advises, “...Unless educators begin to support the interests and values of Indigenous groups and validate Indigenous knowledge forms and experiences, the education of Indigenous groups will continue to be mediocre in quality” (p.2).

Pewewardy (2002) states, “ Because many of the values of First Nations students are taught through storytelling, students can benefit from this type of instruction. Teachers can use stories and legends to teach morals. Moreover, the oral literature of the community and storytelling within a teacher’s class can be the basis of beginning instruction in reading and writing” (p.38). From Reagan (2005), “Oral traditions must be respected and viewed by the teacher as a distinctive intellectual tradition, not simply as myths and legends. If the traditional beliefs, values and ideas that have been taught to the children by their parents and grandparents are not important in the school curriculum, the message is obvious” (p.129). Finally, from Cummins et al (2006), “Teacher-student interactions must affirm students’ cultural, linguistic, and personal identities, in order to create classroom conditions for maximum identity investment in the learning process” (p.305).

### **Summary**

Many aspects of traditional oral culture remain in First Nations communities. These have important implications for teachers. First, it is important to respect, support and assist in developing oral communication skills of First Nations students. Oral storytelling, in the First Nations tradition, can be a useful technique for developing reading and writing skills.

Second, at the same time, teachers must recognize that printed materials, particularly children’s literature, is absent from many First Nations homes. Developing an appreciation for books and reading, including soliciting support from home, is an important endeavour. I provide several suggestions.

## **First Nations Ceremonies: Story Two**

During the second year at my present school, the administration advised us there would be a 'burning ceremony' for school staff later in the week. Our school has had these burning ceremonies every year, conducted by our chief, a spiritual person. The purpose of the ceremony is to pay tribute to the ancestors and seek their support in making the educational programs, delivered by our school staff, successful experiences.

One of my colleagues, a non-First Nations teacher, came to me and spoke about her apprehension concerning this ceremony. She had previously taught in a First Nations school in Alberta. In that community, the school also conducted burning ceremonies, but attendance was restricted to band members. My colleague, therefore, was uncertain and quite reluctant to participate; not understanding what she was expected to do. As the days progressed, she became increasingly nervous and fearful. I am not sure if her fear was due to uncertainty or to Native spirituality, or both.

On the day of the ceremony, the staff assembled at the site where the chief began the ceremony. At that point, my colleague began to sink to the ground, fainting. The chief observed her and motioned to band staff to come to her assistance immediately. The staff attended to my colleague and she recovered quickly.

After the ceremony, we proceeded into the school to share a meal. As soon as they finished eating, several teachers got up and left the school without listening to the speeches provided by several First Nations staff and the chief.

This event left me with two distinct thoughts. The first was the importance of First Nations concepts as described by Dr. Lorna Williams, when referring to her own First Nations culture. These concepts, which were important for my colleague to understand, are: (1) The act of becoming still amid 'our need to know', and (2) The value of being in a place of dissonance, uncertainty and anticipation (Tanaka, Williams et al, 2007).

My second thought concerned the displeasure I felt for the lack of respect shown by the teachers, for the First Nations staff and our chief, in failing to listen to their wisdom and knowledge. By leaving immediately after the meal, without listening to these words, they failed as professional educators in a First Nations school.

### **Supporting research literature**

Dr. Lorna Williams suggests that there is, “the ‘longing of the western world’ to better understand the fundamental commonalities that are shared by Indigenous people.” She suggests”...that the best way to learn them is to live them” (Williams & Tanaka, 2007, p.8). Kavanagh (2006) claims, “New teachers should be fully aware that they are going to be working in very complex settings that will include some unique difficulties. Understanding that fact will ideally help new teachers adapt to a First Nations school setting more easily, and result in more positive relationships and benefits...”(p.35).

Reagan (2005) reminds us that “Rituals and ceremonies of various sorts played, and continue to play, a very important role in most Native American cultures” (p.123). Whitebeck et al (2001) cautions that “Separate cultures and language groups vary significantly from one another in values, spiritual beliefs, kinship patterns, economics, and level of acculturation. In some instances, within-group differences may be greater than differences between a particular Indian culture and the majority population” (p.48). Finally, Agbo (2004) leaves us with a most important point. “It is necessary for all people in the community to respect old ways of doing things, especially First Nations spirituality” (p.23).

### **Summary**

Rituals and ceremonies play an intrinsic role in First Nations school curriculum. It is important for teachers to familiarize themselves, in advance, to understand what takes place in the particular community where they teach. Teachers can achieve this through discussions with administrators, language/cultural teachers, mentors, elders and resource people from the community. In seeking information, it is crucial to understand what is appropriate in terms of role and behaviour, what to do and what not to do.

Teachers must always keep in mind the importance of respect for all aspects of First Nations culture, particularly the words of the people.

### **Non-verbal Communication: Story Three**

During my first year of teaching, I asked questions to many of my students, but received no response. Therefore, I asked again...still no response. I turned to my teaching assistant (TA), a male band member of the community who had worked in the school from its beginning, almost twenty years. I asked him, “Why don’t the children answer me?” He replied, “They did answer you, you need to look at them!”

The next time I asked a question I paid attention to the child’s face. Sure enough, his gestures convinced me that he was answering the question. It was not long before I came to realize that most students possessed a whole repertoire of facial gestures – using forehead, eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth, head and arms.

Eventually, I became aware that this form of non-verbal communication was prevalent in the community. It occurred at family gatherings, public meetings, potlaches and other public events. It was a non-obtrusive way to communicate with others, without drawing attention to oneself or without interrupting/interfering with ongoing activities. The lesson learned was to pay attention to non-verbal communication, especially in First Nations communities. In addition, I was able to learn a new way of ‘speaking’!

### **Supporting research literature**

Stokes (1997) points out, “In the early years at home, (First Nations) children learn by observing their parents, not having conversations with them...By the time they enter school they have done most of their learning through direct experience and participation in real world activities. Thus, there is a mismatch between early learning experiences at home and expected behaviour for school learning” (p.577). Bergeson et al (2000) agree, “There is often a discontinuity between the culture and language of First Nations students’ homes and communities and that of the school. It is believed that these discontinuities often result in systematic and recurrent miscommunication in the

classroom, as well as failure to acknowledge and build upon knowledge these students bring with them to school” (p.13).

Goulet (2001) claims, “Traditional teaching practices include learning by observation and doing and responsibility for engagement lies with the learner, in order to respect individual autonomy within group interdependence. Thus, classroom management styles are often indirect and student autonomy is respected” (P.70). Finally, Saunders et al (2007) remind us of the 3Rs of First Nations culture. “The 3Rs include the area of respect (for the individual and for differences), relevance (of content to the learner and life), and reciprocative learning (the partnership of learning with and from each other)” (p.1026).

### **Summary**

Non-verbal language plays a significant communication role in many First Nations communities. It is important for teachers to learn, respect and nurture this ability, which is used in home communication as well as in public events and ceremonies. Acquiring and reflecting this skill back to students can promote teacher-student relationships. It can be an excellent opportunity for reciprocative learning.

### **Death in the Community: Story Four**

This incident relates to the first death occurring in the community where I began my teaching career. We, (the teaching staff), were advised by the administrator that ‘the body’ would soon be returning to the village, therefore we were instructed to dismiss our students, advising them to go directly home.

When I gave this information to my primary students, one of them asked, “Why do we have to go right home?” I explained to him that there had been a death and the body was coming home for the funeral. He again asked, “why?” I told him that it was what the village wants. There was another funeral a few months later and the same child again asked, “Why do I have to go straight home? Why can’t I play in the park?” It rained a lot where we lived, but this was a beautiful day so this little boy could not understand why

he could not play out. I told him the principal had told me to send my class straight home because that is what they do here when a death occurs.

I had inquired after the first death and a few community members said, “That is what we do.” When I was not able to give this child a good enough answer to his ‘Why’ question, another child, from a traditional family, spoke up. He said, “We have to go right home, close the curtains and remain still, so the spirits cannot find us.” A class discussion ensued, where some children talked about what happens in their homes, (e.g. “We put blankets on the doors and windows”, “We are not allowed to play outside.” etc.), whereas a number of students were completely ignorant of this cultural behaviour.

When I asked a First Nations colleague, from the community, about what my student had told the class, he confirmed that the child’s information was correct. They believe that ‘spirits’ are present in the community while a body of a deceased person remains unburied. All young people and pregnant women are vulnerable and in extreme danger during this time and must remain ‘hidden’ indoors and out of sight until the funeral is over.

Members of the teaching staff, not raised in the community, had never had this information conveyed to them. It was up to us to learn this on our own. I later discovered that members of a secret society patrolled the community after dark, during these times, to ensure everyone remained indoors and no harm would come to anyone.

Several of my colleagues, in the following years, remained in the school working, after they sent the children home because of a death. Still others chose to leave the community, considering it a school holiday. Some community members expressed their displeasure about these behaviours and the lack of sensitivity towards the culture. Yet, it was up to each teacher to learn, on his or her own, how to conduct themselves within the First Nations community.

### **Supporting research literature**

Respect is probably the key ingredient for teachers working in First Nations communities. LeRoux (2001) states, “Teachers need to acquire the skill of deeply understanding the cultural norms other than their own” (p.45). Stokes, (1997) adds,

“Respect for people and their feelings is much more important in Native American society than in the general population” (p.579). Kavanagh (2006) agrees, “Respect is perhaps the most important and consistent value for First Nations schools and communities...respect can be demonstrated by listening to others, valuing cultural traditions, and seeking direction...”(p.9).

Spirituality is also a very important aspect of First Nations cultures. Agbo (2004) emphasizes, “It is necessary for all people in the community to respect old ways of doing things, especially First Nations spirituality” (p.23). Whitbeck et al (2001) agrees, “Spirituality is an essential dimension of (First Nations) culture. Knowledge and practices of spiritual ways and values reflect both cultural practice and culture identity” (p.50).

The young boy in this story, who taught me the cultural protocol, reminds me that teachers need to see themselves as learners. Cummins, Chow & Schechter (2006) agree, “Teachers must view themselves as learners. That is, to teach effectively, they must learn from their students about students’ cultures, backgrounds, and experiences” (p.306). In conclusion, Hermes (2005) quotes Lanny Real Bird, “I cannot teach you the culture. Culture is something you have to live” (p.44).

### **Summary**

Once again, respect is the key ingredient in this scenario. Acquiring knowledge of community protocols is essential, as they may vary even within communities from the same First Nation. Teachers also need to be aware of the wide range of individual differences among their students when it comes to cultural knowledge and participation. To be successful, teachers need to be enthusiastic observers and learners of First Nations culture.

If there is a need to clarify/understand what occurs, it is important to seek out a knowledgeable person to determine the reasons things occur in a particular way. In addition, one needs to determine the correct behaviours of a witness/participant to cultural events. Deaths and funerals in the community require a particular sensitivity and understanding.



### **Code Switching: Story Five**

During my first year of teaching, I found that several of my students used their First Nations language interspersed with English when expressing themselves orally. For example, 'choo' is often used to mean 'I understand' and/or 'goodbye'. Similarly, 'choo-qwa' (come here), 'ab' (I do not have any), 'chumus (desserts/sweets), and 'utsick' (very good) were often used during conversations in class. Children used perhaps twenty or so First Nations words in place of Standard English. No child in my class knew what the word 'scissors' meant, they only understood 'slupchucks'.

In my third year of teaching, I read the story 'Fantastic Mr. Fox' to my class. In the book, a rat is drunk from apple cider. The humour of the story was lost because the students did not understand what 'drunk' was, they only knew their own word, 'nuck-chew'. When I substituted this word into the story, the class roared with laughter, all knowing what a drunken person looks like. It was the same for nursing babies; my lessons would come alive when I interspersed the local language, commonly used in everyday conversations. This became a key component to connecting with my class.

I learned that it is important for teachers to understand language in relation to cultural and individual identity, both of which may differ considerably between and within First Nations communities.

### **Supporting research literature**

Bauer (2000) claims young children can differentiate between two languages and are not confused by it, so when code switching, they are systematic and consistent, as well as being aware of their code-switching activities. "The better teachers understand the relationship between children's bilingualism and their emergent reading of texts, the greater will be the opportunities to provide appropriate support in their reading development" (p.105). The Committee on College Composition and Communication (1974) dealt with the question, 'Should schools try to uphold language variety, or to

modify it, or to eradicate it?' There conclusion was unanimous in supporting the first of these options. They state (p.3) "Teachers need to compliment their book knowledge of language by living as minority speakers. They should be wholly immersed in a dialect group other than their own...Humanity tells us that we should allow every (person) the dignity of their own way of talking." Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez (2002) found more than ever before, it is important to recognize the existence of diversity of language within any group, as well as dynamic shifting patterns as individual students participate in multiple 'communities' such as home and school.

Wheeler & Swords (2004) claim by trying to eradicate the vernacular from home, the teacher is both cutting a link between home and school and devaluing the children's family and/or community. Such dialect prejudice reduces teacher expectations of children's abilities and, as one reduces the expectations, the children's performance suffers. "It is important to understand that a child who speaks non-standard English is not making language errors, rather she/he is speaking correctly in the language of the home discourse community" (p.471).

Finally, Reyes (2004) makes the important point that, "code switching should be understood as a tool for cognitive development and a skill children use to achieve communicative goals. Educators should not consider code switching as a sign of cognitive confusion, but instead, as an indicator of a child's bilingual competency" (p.94).

### **Summary**

In many First Nations communities, children intersperse words from their First Nations language within English sentences. This occurrence is called code switching, a widely researched phenomena. It is important for teachers not to correct these words, but rather to understand and respect them as speaking the language of their home discourse. In fact, this code switching activity can be a useful tool in helping First Nations children to become bilingual.

Once again, code switching is another opportunity for teachers to learn from their students, which helps to develop teacher-student bonds, as well as demonstrating a desire to become an active community participant.

## **Part Two: Interviews with Educators**

In this section, ten interviews with respected educators from First Nations schools, (five principals and five teachers), are merged as themes, providing new teachers with cultural insights when working in First Nations schools. The themes are presented as “weavings” or metissages (from the Latin word meaning mixed), which “attends to differences and generates something new” (Chambers & Hasebe-Luddt, 2008, p.142). “As research praxis, a metissage seeks cross-cultural, egalitarian relations of knowing and being” (p.142).

It is felt this method parallels an Indigenous paradigm. It is similar to a traditional First Nations sacred circle, where participants express their feelings and opinions on a particular topic. Each speaker’s words are of equal importance, while the combined words of all speakers provide the essential nature of the particular circle topic.

For this project, I quote each participant’s words exactly, to ensure their emotions and thoughts provide an accurate portrayal, without editing or alteration. That way, the reader can ‘place themselves within the circle’ to experience the conversations. The thoughts and opinions of the respected educators are ‘woven’ together to produce a metissage for each theme. At the end of each theme, I present a personal perspective of what is important to me. However, I encourage readers to reach their own conclusions for each theme, based on the thoughts of the educators.

### **Teacher Orientation: Theme One**

Orientation towards the culture, community and school can be a crucial first step for teachers new to First Nations schools. Yet four of the five teachers in this study received

no orientation whatsoever in the several schools in which they taught. For example, T-1 was interviewed by a principal in Vancouver, for a teaching position in an isolated village in Northern British Columbia. She states, “He gave a very...not a very good orientation. Just basically it was isolated, up a logging road, how many people lived in the village, not more than that.” She goes on to say, “It was the first time I had gone anywhere by myself... I think that was one of my biggest problems ... being a new teacher and willing to jump into anything without thinking it through at the time. It was a crash course, not only with teaching, but with the local First Nations group up there.” T-2 states, “There was no orientation, I went up there for my interview to learn about the community and find out where it was, but I was not introduced about anything to do with the culture...”

The one teacher who did receive an orientation found it inadequate. She reported that a resource person:

Just sat us all at a table and just kept giving us different papers about aboriginal education and said ‘You need to teach this’. When he was finished we had a stack of ten papers in front of us. He said ‘You need to put First Nations content in your classroom’. He didn’t say how. He didn’t talk about what other teachers are doing... I remember not really knowing ... knowing about how to put ... not given a good tool to put First Nations culture into the classroom. (T-5)

This comment, made by T-5, is more powerful when one learns that she is a band member of the community from the school in question

In spite of these obvious deficiencies, new teachers might encounter First Nations schools where the administration has developed successful orientation strategies. For example, P-5 brings new teachers into the school for a few days a month prior to the end of the school year.

To familiarize themselves... to learn about the school, to learn what we do here, to learn what we are about, a little bit about the ceremonies, what is expected here. Sit with the kids and just get an overall feel for the school ... plus have them spend time with the teacher who is doing the current position right now. They have enough time to ask as many questions as they can with the teacher, as well as with us. (P-5)

A second administrator, P-2, conducts an orientation, “To let them know the structure, organization and daily routine of the school. At the same time, I also let them know about the routines and rituals of the community. So a good example would be when there is a death in the community during the school week. This is what I tell my teaching staff: to respect the family, kids are not to be playing out on the streets. That’s one of the things that I inform during orientation.” P-2 also starts the orientation process with an opening prayer by an elder, speaking traditional language, “So that way new staff ... is exposed immediately to a First Nations ritual when we start our gatherings like that.”

Other interviewed administrators have people from the community come to the orientation to talk about traditional activities such as hunting, fishing and relationships with the land (P-3) and provide a tour of traditional territory while explaining the history and archaeological sites. (P-1)

### **Personal perspective**

A proper orientation for new teachers to First Nations schools is a priority. It goes a long way towards situating educators within their new community and position. Obviously, in the past, orientation has not been a priority in several schools. A suitable orientation has many facets and may vary from school to school, depending on isolation, cultural programs and school populations. A good orientation could include bringing teachers into the school at the end of the previous school year to introduce them to staff, students, programs, ceremonies and cultural activities. This would allow teachers to have the summer to do research and be adequately prepared.

At the beginning of the school year, a good orientation involves meeting elders and community members, while listening carefully to their advice. In addition, having the administration provide an overview of the ceremonies and cultural activities of the school and community would help. Ideally, provision of a cultural calendar of events for the school year would be an excellent resource.

A tour of the community, including cultural sites, important landmarks and various community buildings, is another good orientation strategy. Providing the names of

individuals, in the community, who are willing to provide cultural information and/or activities would be beneficial. Finally, having an opportunity to meet the community and share a meal at the beginning of the school year would be a welcoming introduction.

### **Helpful Beginning Information: Theme Two**

The interviews with educators provide several ideas for new teachers to help them adapt to a new teaching position in a First Nations school. P-3 suggests a mentoring system, where new teachers work side-by-side with an experienced teacher. “A First Nations teacher who has taught there for many years would meet with them and go over things ... just to start getting them to know what the people do, how we do it, and why we do it.”

P-4 cautions against teachers “that come in to save us poor little Indians ... they think they are going to come in and change the way we live, change the kids, and all of that ... instead of working with us.” She also feels it is important for new teachers to do a little background reading, as well as obtaining information from other sources “on the type of culture where they are going to teach.” T-1 agrees, “Just going to a different area, there are so many different protocols and I think it would be very helpful to have a general view of what you need to be sensitive to, because in First Nations culture it is very important. I know it’s hard because it is not a culture that is written down, it’s well ingrained into just the spoken language.”

Later in the interview, T-1 provides an additional thought:

Just one thing comes to mind is you don’t expect students to look you in the eye, because in their culture it is considered rude. So for a teacher that is used to having students, when you are disciplining them saying, ‘You need to look me in the eye’ ... you have a lot of problems, especially with the parents thinking, ‘How insensitive could you be? We don’t do that.’

And it never comes out until later, when someone will say, ‘We don’t look you in the eye.’ Therefore, just those sorts of things would be helpful.

Similarly, T-2 adds, “(just knowing) different things, such as eye contact, knowing what seemed to be polite and what wasn’t in a native community. Also, about traditions that

had been lost and the importance of them. How the elders want to keep in traditions and how we are trying to go back to them.”

P-5 suggests that it is helpful for new teachers if, in the teacher’s contract “we’ve outlined everything in term of working in a First Nations school ... what’s expected.” For example, in her school, one of the contract clauses for teachers requires, “Using, promoting and speaking (the First Nations language) in your classroom every day.”

P-4 provides some succinct advice for new teachers:

I feel it’s important for new teachers coming into a First Nations community to be open-minded and not believe the stereotypes they might have heard. Make an effort to be visible in the community but don’t be too aggressive. Allow people time to become used to seeing you ... understand that there is a very different rhythm to life in an isolated First Nations community. Try to spend time observing and asking appropriate questions to learn about the social norms and then consider these norms while planning in your classroom as well as participating in community events.

T-5 suggests arranging for elders to sit down with new teachers to initiate and improve communications between the school and the community. She also offers the following advice:

I think it is important to know how to ask questions, I find that a lot of the time we ask questions, but not in the appropriate way. It is important to watch and listen before you ask a question about any aspect of the culture. ... If you’re a new teacher in a First Nations school, don’t isolate yourself, because if you try to do things on your own you’re going to struggle ... we need to network with colleagues as much as possible ... find out what everybody is doing. If somebody has been there for a few years make a point to talk to that person. Find out about the school, what the parents are like, because it goes beyond the classroom when you’re in a First Nations school.

A third teacher comments:

My biggest advice would be ‘If you don’t know, ask!’ Keep asking until you find somebody that will tell you. The first person you ask might not answer you, but it likely it isn’t because they don’t like you. It might because they

either don't know, or they are the person you are looking for, but in their culture they are not supposed to brag about their accomplishments. So just keep trying to find somebody to answer your questions, because you will find a lot of really good resources if you just keep digging. (T-3)

A fourth teacher also felt it would have been helpful to know more about the culture and its customs before beginning her teaching career in a First Nations community. (T-2) She felt that attending the cultural classes was a very helpful endeavour. "In learning about the language I was able to learn about the culture." Finally, another teacher (T-4), suggested that additional printed information be made available to new teachers, explaining the community's political structure (elected/hereditary chiefs and their roles), community services (band office, holistic center, youth center, fisheries, etc.) and traditional ceremonies and practices (hunting, fishing, potlaches, funerals, etc.) . She also adds, "When you're first presented with information, it's just ... to a certain extent it is just words. You understand a certain amount, but you truly have to live here for awhile before some of it really starts to seep into you with understanding."

### **Personal perspective**

A successful teaching experience in First Nations schools involves adequate preparation and a thirst for acquiring cultural knowledge. First, it is very important to learn as much as possible about the community, school and culture before beginning a teaching position. Second, it is necessary to be sensitive to the cultural nuances and protocols of the school and community. Such things as eye contact, the appropriate way to ask questions, the importance of insightful observation and a holistic view of students are some examples.

Third, it is important to develop communication networks with colleagues, parents, elders and community members. One can often accomplish this through active community participation, which is also a first step in developing trust. If possible, acquiring a mentor from knowledgeable and respected staff would be an ideal first step. New teachers must view themselves as learners, never as 'experts' or 'saviours'.



Accompanying students to language and cultural classes is a good way to acquire knowledge.

Finally, new teachers need to clearly understand and follow all protocols and obligations of written teacher contracts. Remember that each community has unique considerations.

### **Resources: Theme Three**

After the orientation and important beginning information, the quest for resources to obtain important cultural knowledge becomes imperative. Practically all participants in this project pointed to the language and culture teacher(s) in the school as the most important sources for acquiring this knowledge. In addition, they pointed to the abundance of visual and written information available in most of the cultural resource rooms. Visits by elders, as mentioned earlier, also provide a very important role in providing cultural information to new teachers. (P-1) Sometimes information can come from unexpected sources, so T-2 mentions importance of ‘watching and listening’. “...and even ... there was a janitor, who was an elder, who would give me information about the language and culture during my first year.” T-1 explains that the importance of elders “is one of those unwritten protocols. If there is an elder in the school and you want to do something, it’s respect to go to them first. Even if you think you know what you are doing, you should make sure to talk to them first.” However, P-3 laments, “We don’t make enough time with our elders. I know we could learn a lot from them. We really need to get them into the school so they can agree with some of the things we are looking at for sharing with our non-First Nations staff about our community.”

P-2 provides an often-overlooked resource “We have some non-native teachers who have been here for 12-14 years and who have gained some knowledge and who can give some insights to new teachers from a non-native perspective. They have gained a certain understanding and respect for various cultural activities that they have participated in or witnessed.”

Of course, there are numerous cultural resources in each community but it is important to be aware of the cultural differences as described by T-3:

In First Nations culture people are expected to share their knowledge,

but they're expected not to brag about the knowledge that they have ...

I might be talking to a storyteller, a weaver, or a carver, but they wouldn't tell me that. It had to be someone else who said 'so and so is a good storyteller, weaver or whatever' ... They will never tell you they possess such knowledge, it will have to come from some other source.

When speaking about resources for new teachers, T-4 provided the following summary:

I spent time with the language and culture teachers, I attended the students language and cultural classes. I attended community events and volunteered to help whenever appropriate. I also did some reading about local history and local landmarks. I talked with other teachers who had been here for a few years.

### **Personal perspective**

First Nations communities have an abundance of resources for new teachers to acquire cultural knowledge. Operating from a position of respect, a genuine interest in learning, and working to develop trust, one can acquire considerable understanding. The longer one remains in the community, embracing these values, the more knowledgeable one becomes. The First Nations community members (teachers, elders, support staff, volunteers), participating in the school, form the 'first line' for new teachers to acquire knowledge. Printed materials from the cultural center, resource center and band office should be utilized for cultural information.

It is important to understand that a great majority of First Nations individuals are quite humble, in that they never boast about their abilities and accomplishments. Thus, it may be necessary to learn about community resource people from others.

Acquisition of knowledge is not restricted to First Nations community members. Often, a few non-First Nations individuals have developed long-standing relationships with a community. They can provide useful information, from a different perspective, on ways to succeed in a First Nations community.

### **Relationship with the Community: Theme Four**

As well as seeking out resources in the community, it is very important, in First Nations communities, for teachers to become involved in community activities, according to the interviewed principals. P-3 states, “We encourage them to go to events that have a large majority of our community members in it ... We encourage them to go to these so they can get to know the community that way.” P-4 agrees, “I think it is important for them to participate in a lot of cultural events that are going on, to become part of the community. I think they would make an impact on the kids they were teaching if they were to participate with us. I think it’s important that they show genuine interest, not to make an obligatory appearance and then leave.” She also feels it is important “to make a connection with a local person to find out the ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ of community involvement.”

All of the teachers interviewed for this project emphasized the importance of community involvement. T-3 asserts:

I think it is important to know about the day-to-day life in the community ... For each community there are similarities, but for each community there are real differences. What might be considered common practice or considered polite in one is actually not polite in another. Therefore, it’s important that you’re given a little information about cultural protocols, or deaths, or being invited to community events.

Later, T-3 adds, “Community members don’t understand why a teacher is complaining because where the teacher lives is much, much nicer than where the community members are living. Community members might be living 10-12 to a house, so what are teachers complaining about in sharing with one other person.” (This comment mentioned when talking about housing.)

T-1 found “the community members that I befriended were really helpful. You can’t live in a place like that and try to isolate yourself. I think that anyone who has tried to do that was just not successful with the students or their parents or the community.” She also talked about the importance of developing a special relationship with her students:

“A lot of these kids do not have many positive role models at home, at least where I was. None of the parents had ever graduated. They have a lot of problems at home and they can’t leave it at the door. You end up not only a parent or a sister, or something like that. You also end up being a counsellor, a friend. I think knowing how to establish a relationship with the kids; getting to know the kids really, really helps... always being positive and letting the kids know you like them.

T-4 declares, “I believe it is the responsibility of the teacher coming into the community to make herself visible and approachable and begin to learn about local culture, social values, and norms. One should attend community events and be visible in the community.”

Perhaps T-5 describes the relationship with the community the most eloquently:

You can’t honestly survive in a community as a teacher and just be a teacher. I think, especially in a First Nations community, you have to go to the community events, to those dinners, to bingo, if you can. People need to see you outside of the classroom because there are a lot of trust issues you know. You’re new to a community, people don’t know you, and you’re teaching their children. They need to feel that they can trust you. If you go to bingo, or go to that potluck, or to that ceremony, then they see that you are willing to learn about them. It’s not just about you teaching, it’s about you learning from the community too. That’s what I would say.

### **Personal perspective**

Unlike the public school system, First Nations schools have an intrinsic link to the community through numerous cultural activities. Because interconnectedness is a basic First Nations characteristic, it is necessary for teachers to become involved in community activities and cultural ceremonies if they hope to be successful. Community members often have issues of trust with the school and teachers because of their residential school experiences. By being a visible, active participant and by befriending community members, many parental concerns disappear.

At the same time, one achieves community involvement through sensitivity to cultural patterns of communication and a respect for the values of community members. Life-long friendships often develop, from my experience, once one immerses themselves in the First Nations community. There is a genuineness and richness that one experiences in First Nations communities that is often lacking in Western society.

It is essential that teachers do not isolate themselves, being only concerned with their role as a teacher. This will lead to unsatisfactory results for all concerned. “You can’t honestly survive in a community as a teacher, and just be a teacher...” (T-5).

### **Bringing the School to the Community: Theme Five**

*Wisdom Sits in Places*, the articulate text by Keith Basso (1996), describes the importance of First Nations education taking place in the community’s traditional territory. The interviews for this project corroborate this concept, but in addition, place it in the context of trust and residential school effects on parents. Many parents are reluctant to attend/visit the school because of their own negative educational experiences. “So you find it really hard with parents. It’s not that they don’t want to have anything to do with the school. It’s just that in the whole community there is a negative thing with education. Because before, it was always residential schools, so to get them into the school was really hard because it was just negative.” (P-1)

T-4 relates, “The parents ... we try to have good literacy nights and this year they haven’t been very well attended. We always make sure to provide food, either desserts or meals. Somehow, our communication ... we just haven’t done the right thing to get the parents in there.”

Many of the educators in this study have developed successful strategies, outside of the actual school setting, to enhance parental involvement in their children’s education, build trust with community members and strengthen school – community cooperation. T-5 believes:

There was some kind of cultural family attachment if we worked with the community. For example, we did a ‘camp out’ one year and all kinds of people

came because they didn't want their kids to be out camping without them. So, it turned into a community event rather than just a school event. We had parents, grandparents and babies. All these different people had come out and got involved in this event because it was about being on the land ...

Similarly, T-4 reports,

“We have our beach day at the beginning of the year and parents come out to that. Parents look after the kids when they come, so it really works well for teachers to go around and talk to people and play with the kids. Later in the year, we have another beach picnic further out, where everyone travels by boat or hikes the trail. The whole community comes together, there are ‘umpteen’ fires cooking salmon and each family brings two meals. You go along the beach, meeting and talking with each extended family.”

While bringing resource people from the community into the school (elders, storytellers, artists, musicians, etc.) is very important, there is also great benefit in teachers and students participating in community activities, according to the interviewed educators. P-2 talks about the importance of teacher flexibility in this regard:

Flexibility with the timetable, flexibility with our teaching schedule, because at times some really important community teachable moments come in that happen in the community on a certain day. Sometimes I get a call from either our Band Office or Holistic Center to say they are having a workshop happening to do with some kind of social improvement. They'll ask for a certain class to come down to attend. That kind of flexibility is important.

Another example, from T-4, is the raising of salmon fry in the classroom, then releasing them into a local stream. P-2 describes the community involvement in this case, “They're (students and teachers) in contact with our Fisheries Department, they're in contact with parents, they're in contact with other people who own boats, as well as people they travel with, to make sure that safety is involved. While they are going there some of our people with them are knowledgeable about certain areas in our traditional territory. They share this knowledge with the class.”

P-4 also advocates participating in the community. “One of the things I like to do is incorporate all kinds of traditional activities in the community, whether it is food

gathering, food preparation, preparing fish, stuff like that. Going for cedar should be incorporated into the curriculum somehow ... It's part of their lessons, it is part of their livelihood."

Students can develop both a positive view of their teachers and of their own cultural activities by observing their teachers participating in community events. T-1 contributes the following:

If you don't show an interest in who they are ... I mean the kids don't even try to at least being proud of being (name of nation). So, once they knew we were trying to do it and that I was interested, they became more interested.

We would go out trapping. We would go set traps on the trap line and go check them. We would go out looking for medicines during certain times, or we would smoke moose hides ... just whatever was relevant during the season.

Not all community involvement needs to be traditional cultural content. In fact, it is important to understand that the community and its culture are continually evolving. Having students participate in 'present day' community activities is also worthwhile. T-4 involved a number of band employees with her class when taking her students on a tour of the water treatment plant in the community. She says, "Now, that's a modern facility of course, but it's to help the children understand where and how the water reaches their homes and what to be aware of in the infrastructure of their community."

Another consideration teachers need to be aware of, involving flexibility, is making allowances when families take their children out of school to assist in food gathering activities. P-2 claims that teachers need "to understand ... let's say with our dog salmon season or clamming season. To understand that on a certain day a lot of the students are going to be away because they are going to be out on the boat catching dog salmon, or they are going to be away digging clams."

T-4 adds, "I do not want my school class to interfere with children learning how to go clamming, children learning how to put out branches for herring eggs. Last week, one dad took two kids to put out the branches for herring eggs and that was good for them. I wish the whole class could have gone. This same teacher adds, "Cultural activities are very much a part of life here. It's not unusual for children to be up very late at some of these activities. It's very important for teachers to realize this and accept that some days

children are going to come to school tired ... So, you just adjust the day accordingly and don't expect so much."

A final example, by P-4, demonstrates the importance of flexibility in promoting parental relationships in the community:

The boys go hunting with their dads and it occurs at night. One of the things I have shared with the dads is 'Let me know when you are going hunting so the next day we can start school an hour later'. We are not going to penalize them for going out to further their lives and for what is part of their food gathering ... I'm trying to be as flexible as I can in this regard and the dads love it. They love it because it's me working with them.

### **Personal perspective**

A characteristic of First Nations culture often misunderstood by Western society is the people's relationship with the land. Land is an integral part of all aspects of First Nations society. Thus, it is essential for teachers to utilize and enrich this cultural value whenever possible, by taking education out of the school and into the community and into the First Nations traditional territory. By doing this, teachers can promote more parental and community involvement in the education of their children. Many parents in First Nations communities have a negative attitude towards the formal school setting. However, by bringing education out into the community, many of these negative feelings disappear. In addition, many extended family members become involved.

An important teacher quality, coinciding with involvement in 'place-based' education, is flexibility. Teachers need to adjust their planning and 'thought processes' to meet the ever-changing community environment (physical, social and cultural). Teachers can benefit by suspending their inherent Western cultural attitudes and behaviours, while embracing the First Nations characteristic of doing what is important here and now, rather than doing what is 'written down', scheduled or planned. Often this is difficult for teachers who prides themselves in planning and organizing, but it can also be quite enlightening.



A holistic philosophy is an essential part of First Nations education. Activities that promote an integration of school and community work to develop this idea. They also promote teacher-parent interactions, increase student pride in their community, and demonstrate the practical and functional aspects of the curriculum.

### **The Importance of Ceremonies: Theme Six**

Ceremonies are perhaps the most important visible representation of First Nations culture. Most First Nations communities expect their schools to conduct a number of these ceremonies during the school year. It is essential for teachers to learn the protocols, expectations, and behaviours necessary to participate in these events.

Bringing First Nations culture into the school involves participation in important community ceremonies. T-5 found:

When we include culture in the school we're giving the kids there a balance between the academic side and about identity, because for First Nations kids there needs to be the connection. That's one of the benefits of being in a First Nations school, I believe. Kids get that balance, they get to be part of the ceremonies, they get to learn about who they are, and, at the same time they are learning to read and write. They're treated as equals ... this is not more important than this ... I think that is the rest of my thoughts.

Later on, during the interview, T-5 had some additional thoughts:

I see how valuable the ceremonies are and how important it is to know what's going on in your school. The cultural committee in our school makes a lot of the decisions about the ceremonies, so it's important to go to these meetings if you can. I've learned that it is important to be willing to help in those ceremonies. I learned how valuable it is to talk about the history from a First Nations perspective, because the kids see that as important to their identity. We had the kids that were learning to dance come in and we had a celebration of dancing. I just found that ... recognizing the value of that allowed you to really see the confidence develop in the kids.

...how it effects, how it impacted them.

Finally, T-5 talked about her frustrations on specific occasions:

When somebody in the community passed away, the school would close for the duration, until the day of the funeral. But I didn't understand because not everyone followed the traditions. So, some kids were out running around when they weren't supposed to and it was a bit frustrating from a teacher's point of view. Because sometimes there would be a few deaths in the community and the school, at one point, was closed for an entire month. Then there was the expectations for me to teach, when the kids had been out for that long. So, some of the cultural protocols were not that clear in some of the communities where I taught.

The uniqueness of First Nations schools is the balance they provide between providing a comprehensive 'Western' curriculum and embracing the cultural attributes of the community using a holistic model. T-1 emphasizes this First Nations approach:

Sometimes the things you are taught in university have to be thrown out and you have to be comfortable with that, because it's not an normal public school. You can't be thinking, 'I need to get these kids to grade level' because if you are thinking like that you're not going to be working with the kids. First Nations culture is all about being balanced and if you are not balanced physically, socially, academically and spiritually the kids don't learn.

P-2 provides an example of a type of spiritual ceremony a new teacher might encounter.

Last year I had three or four staff members who were hurt. So the first day back after the Christmas holiday, what I did was gather all our staff at the end of the day. I talked to our community ceremonial spiritual person asking him to come in, say a prayer, and brush all our staff with traditional sacred eagle feathers ... with our ceremonial people coming in to brush all our staff that way we could ensure that we are all going to be safe.

Another example by P-2: "All our events, the community Remembrance day, our graduation and even our school awards day, I always like to have a student open up the session or activity with a prayer in our language. Of course at our Christmas concert it

always starts, number one, with a prayer; number two with the Welcome song and dance.”

P-5 talks about advice given to new teachers in her school, when participating in First Nations ceremonies:

The vice-principal and myself, over the past couple of years, have really taken on the task of having them (new teachers) come in and we explain as much as we can, so they are not frightened. ‘This is what you’re going to see, this is what it’s going to look like, here’s what you’re expected to do and not expected to do ... I strongly feel if you are asked to put somebody in that position, you need to give them some basic understanding of what’s going on. So that’s what we do.

P-5 also talks about the co-operation between the school and band departments in promoting the community’s culture:

I think the really neat thing about working here...is that it’s not just the school. You go back to the strategic plan and you have all the departments. You have health, which is a big one, and you have early childhood. So the vision, all together, is how do we promote these cultural occurrences. We sit down as a team... You know, they’re trying to bring back all the traditions from the past that have been lost. And we ask, “How can the school help with that?” ... I think in terms of cultural occurrences the most important thing to say about here is that there is constant progression. There’s always something being added. When something is mastered, Okay good, we have done really well, now what. We can’t stop here, now what?

### **Personal perspective**

Ceremonies remain an important, vibrant and powerful part of First Nations culture in most communities. Teachers must become familiar, in advance, of the nature and protocols of all ceremonies they might experience. If possible, it would be ideal to obtain a cultural calendar of events for the school year, from the administration, at the beginning

of the year, to allow for adequate preparation. It is crucial for teachers to understand the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of participating in ceremonies.

In several schools, teachers may be intimately involved in ceremonies, for example cleansings, burnings and prayers. These can have a powerful effect on an individual, providing he/she is open to new experiences. Ceremonies also form an essential rite of passage for many First Nations children. These include naming ceremonies, learning songs and dances and participating in potlaches. Teachers are often asked to witness and/or participate in these ceremonies. Knowing the protocols and sharing information with students is an excellent way to form bonds and develop trust within the community.

Finally, deaths in the community and subsequent funerals are extremely important and sensitive events for First Nations communities. This is a time for teachers to demonstrate utmost respect during these emotional times, adhering to all the cultural protocols.

### **Teacher Turnover: Theme Seven**

One of the reasons for this study is to offer new teachers a compendium of knowledge, which will allow them to make wise choices when seeking employment in a First Nations school. As the following interviews demonstrate, teaching in a First Nations community for only one year can often result in dissatisfaction for both the teacher and the community. Thus, the importance of teachers remaining in a community for longer than one year becomes crucial.

T-1 found "Obviously the kids would get attached and then the teacher would leave and that was a really big struggle. It was why it took so long to get the children to think that you actually liked them ... because teachers just left." T-4 agrees: "Many isolated First Nations communities go through a high turnover of teachers so there are trust issues early on. But once they are sure you will be staying for the year or more they will begin to accept and trust you."

P-2 talks about 'ignorance' possessed by new teachers when they begin their position, "just because they don't know ... but as they stay longer in our school and in

our community they get a greater understanding.” T-3 found “That after my first year it was a lot easier and people would come to me a little bit more because they had seen how hard I worked the first year and that I was trying to do good things for their kids. So they were a little more willing to volunteer information or to volunteer to help. I found that just that extra year helped a lot. The people were my biggest resource....”

### **Personal perspective**

Previously, many isolated First Nations communities had a difficult time in recruiting teachers to their schools. Recently, due to an increase in First Nations graduates from university education programs, the declining enrolment in public schools, and the emergence of professional First Nations organizations such as the First Nations Schools Association, there are many more educators turning to First Nations schools for employment.

This opportunity should allow First Nations schools to be more selective in the quality of new teachers they employ. Teachers who demonstrate the characteristics that will provide the best education for their students will be easier to recruit. A major consideration will be finding teachers who indicate a commitment to remain in the community for an extended period. High teacher turnover has a negative effect on all people involved in First Nations education.

### **Qualities of Teachers/ Expectations of Teachers: Theme Eight**

This theme explores the opinions of the interviewed principals to ascertain what they feel are the most important considerations when recruiting new teachers to their First Nations schools. When discussing teacher qualities, P-4 says:

I think I would look for genuine interest, not ‘I need this job’ kind of attitude. ... How I felt they would fit into the community ... The best quality is a genuine interest and just a love for teaching. I think too, when you see a teacher up there at 7:30 in the morning until 7:00 at night,

preparing and decorating their room and helping out with extra-curricular activities ... I think that, for me, that's a sign of a committed and dedicated teacher.

P-2 feels:

The most important quality is interest. The prospective new teacher is really interested in getting to know the people of (the community), the culture of (the community). If they can understand our needs and have the willingness to understand the needs of our children: why they struggle to read, why they struggle to come to school every day, why they are hungry, why they are sad, why they are crying, why they are cold and why they are happy ... all those kind of things. The willingness and the interest to understand the holistic nature of the child ... You can't teach a child how to read and write and to be settled in the classroom unless you know what's going on in the child's life. I think it's important to make a teacher understand that they are there for more than just a teacher of reading and writing ... it brings out the concepts of empathy, compassion and sensitivity of the teacher.

P-5 looks for:

Determination and dedication, openness to new things, learning ... absolutely. We're assuming that they have the qualities to be an effective teacher. Other than that, we're looking for the person who is a team player. 'What can I do to help? What can I do to benefit the school?' If we ask somebody to do extra duties, is this person going to be somebody who jumps right up and says 'absolutely' ... Be creative and offer ideas, suggestions and alternatives. We're going to take that person. So that's the qualities that we look for. Those ones will go out, they'll find the answer. They will do the research and they will bring it back and they will be effective. That's what we look for.

P-3 looks for 'personality' and "Always if they were involved with other First Nations children." Similarly, P-1 says, "We want a person to have the personality and the disposition to fit in this environment."

As for teacher expectations, P-2 asks new teachers two questions: “How can you incorporate the community and its culture into your classroom? What research have you done about (the community)?”

P-5 states:

Really, the specific expectations are that they are open and willing to learn. ‘Are you somebody who is willing to do the research, willing to learn, excited about learning a new culture?’ That’s our expectation. That you’re willing to learn, you’re willing to listen, you’re willing to do the research, you’re willing to offer support in whatever way. Take a class if you are asked to, learn the language and be excited about that. That’s what we are looking for, the kind of individual who is willing to do that.

P-1 simply states, “We are a cultural school. If you are going to work here, you are going to be part of it ... and they know that.”

### **Personal perspective**

When recruiting new teachers it is helpful if they have participated in a teacher-training program that includes indigenous ways of learning, knowing and behaving as part of the curriculum. An applicant that has sought knowledge of the First Nation, the community and the culture prior to a teacher interview is a positive quality.

A willingness to view oneself as a learner, enthusiasm for involvement in a new culture, and an appreciation for an alternative lifestyle are characteristics First Nations schools might consider when recruiting new teachers. Determination, dedication and being a team player are other qualities mentioned by principals as being important.

For me, making friends with the parents and extended family of my students was the single most important and gratifying activity. Participating in family celebrations and helping with family mishaps and emergencies has led to lifelong bonding. Developing the trust of the community opens many doors.

## **Final Thoughts: Theme Nine**

This section closes with two disparate pieces of information from the interviews. Both have relevance for new teachers; however, they stand-alone in that only one of the interviewees brought up each topic. T-1 talks about the adverse effects of an ‘outside’ influence upon the traditional First Nations education and culture.

There were evangelical church groups up there. They said the kids’ collector cards were evil, so everyone was burning their kids’ cards. All DVDs and CDs were also considered evil, so we had huge gas barrels and they were just loaded ... I guess some groups have actually taken advantage of their (First Nations) loss of their sense of identity, because they know that. So they keep going in there ... So there is a lot of people relating more to the Christianity and not the culture ... I heard one parent, one time saying when her child was misbehaving, ‘That’s the Indian coming out of you!’ It was looked down upon. Dream catchers were actually considered evil. It was crazy how some spirituality was considered evil because of these other views that are coming in from these different church groups.

This discouraging information contrasts sharply with the second observation, by T-3:

I definitely learned a lot. I think it’s a great way for new teachers to start, because you are often given more responsibility than you would ever be given as a first or second year teacher in a public school. You have to become much more independent and much more self-sufficient, getting your own resources. So, it really teaches you a lot about planning and preparing ... I’ve loved getting to know the languages and allowing the kids to be my teacher.

### **Personal perspective**

First Nations educators face considerable obstacles in presenting cultural programs in their schools. It is imperative that school cultural and language programs have full



community support. The example cited above, where a fundamental Christian organization comes into the community and attempts to dismantle all the First Nations attributes can have serious adverse affects in attempting to present cultural programs. Other obstacles include aspects of the mainstream Western culture, including television, video games, music, movies, etc. All of these combine to erode First Nations culture.

It is important to educate First Nations children to understand and thrive in both First Nations and Western mainstream culture. Schools need not stress one at the expense of the other. However, the deleterious effects of the past make it imperative that schools rescue and revitalize aspects of First Nations culture, before they are lost completely. It is very important to value and promote these cultural activities with our students.

The second part of this theme provides a positive assessment of teaching in a First Nations school. I totally agree that First Nations schools provide an environment and opportunities that are unique. It is a most exciting, rewarding and challenging education experience one could have. I would never consider teaching anywhere else!

## Chapter Five

### DISCUSSION

This project arises from 'My need to know'. As mentioned in the introduction, I enrolled in the Master of Education program in Curriculum Development at the University of Victoria because I was unsatisfied with my experience in providing quality education for my First Nations students. This was in spite of five years of undergraduate work in the Native Indian Teacher Education Program, including two practicums at First Nations schools.

After completing the course work for this program, I discussed my project ideas with my supervisor, Dr. Lorna Williams, an eminent First Nations educator. We agreed that I would develop a 'Handbook' to help new teachers in their adjustment to teaching in First Nations schools. When I began researching the literature I discovered that the First Nations Schools Association had published a handbook by Barbara Kavanagh in 2006 entitled *Teaching in a First Nations School: An Information Handbook for Teachers New to First Nations Schools*. I returned to Dr. Williams to advise her that my topic had already been published.

Dr. Williams assured me that there was still a need to provide additional information, but from a First Nations perspective and from someone who had actually taught for a few years in an isolated First Nations community. Thus, it was agreed that I would search the research literature to pick out important considerations for new teachers, based on my own experiences. Secondly, I would review my daybooks and journals, over five years, to explicate unique teaching events that would be useful lessons for new teachers. Third, I would interview ten educators (five principals and five teachers from First Nations schools) to learn from them what they feel is important for new teachers to know.

At the completion of the three components to this study, I compared the results with the Kavanagh (2006) handbook to ascertain if there were points of agreement between her observations and those from the First Nations perspectives. The following items, from both studies, agree as being important for new teachers to understand:

- It is important to gain an understanding of a community's history and culture before arriving.
- Communities and schools vary considerably. Each has its own protocols for appropriate and respectful involvement in the culture.
- Respect is the most important value in First Nations communities.
- Education is perceived holistically, including children's intellectual, spiritual, physical and emotional development.
- Teaching of First Nations languages and culture is a foundation for children's development.
- It is important to show interest in the community outside of school by participating in community and cultural events.
- Try to promote community involvement in many ways including elders and community members in school activities.
- Parents, family and community involvement is critical but also a difficult challenge in many First Nations' schools, primarily due to the residential school legacy.
- High turnover rates cause disruptions for schools, students and parents.
- An orientation to the community and culture is an important initiation.

In addition to these points of agreement, this project's First Nations perspective discloses the following thirty considerations that new teachers to First Nations schools could consider:

- Emphasis should change from teaching about the culture to teaching through the culture as a foundation for learning.
- Culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a ways for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically.
- Culturally responsive pedagogy should begin with the formation of relationships between teachers and students.
- Educators should use students' experiences to reshape content and literacy practice in the curriculum.

- There is interconnectedness between individuals and the community and between the community and nature.
- Spirituality is an essential dimension of First Nations culture.
- Oral traditions form the backbone of First Nations culture and should be both respected and promoted.
- Relationship to the land is an integral component of all aspects of First Nations Culture.
- Over-emphasis of learning styles of First Nations students can lead to inaccurate labelling and stereotyping.
- Teachers must view themselves as learners to teach effectively.
- Teachers must critically examine their own views and assumptions when structuring classroom experiences.
- Teachers must recognize that culture is dynamic and changing, so must incorporate traditional and contemporary culture in the curriculum.
- Warmth, caring, sensitivity, humour, trust, and high expectations characterize effective First Nations teachers.
- Language interaction patterns that approximate students' home discourse are more successful in improving performance.
- It is important for teachers to demonstrate their belief in the community in an attempt to instil pride in their students.
- Even within the same community, there is a wide array of cultural differences and cultural knowledge among students' families.
- Parents need to be given assurance that including language and culture in the curriculum will not diminish their children's ability to succeed in the mainstream Western culture.
- Ceremonies play a crucial role in developing cultural pride and identity. They need to be supported and promoted by teachers.
- Non-verbal communication patterns are found in many First Nations communities. Teachers need to learn and understand them.

- Deaths in the community are extremely important events. Understanding and supporting all protocols, which are community specific, are essential.
- Code switching, (student including First Nations words in English sentences), is common with First Nations students. It should not be corrected, but rather used as a tool to promote bilingualism.
- Finding a mentor, from an experienced First Nations (or not First Nations) educator within the school, will be a very helpful initial step.
- Attend cultural and language classes with your students to acquire local knowledge.
- Most First Nations people do not brag about their accomplishments, thus the best way to find resource people is through referral from others.
- It is important to learn to ask questions appropriately and respectfully, after listening carefully.
- People need to see teachers involved in the community to alleviate trust issues with parents.
- Taking education out of the school and into the community and traditional territory promotes community and parental involvement.
- Flexibility is a key requirement for teachers. (this includes curriculum, timetables, scheduling and planned activities)
- Teacher must recognize that external influences from ‘Western culture’ (television, videos, computers, music, etc.) play a significant role in competing with First Nations cultural curriculum.
- Genuine interest, openness to new things, understanding the needs of the community and its children, determination and dedication, creativity and being a team player are qualities principals in this study look for in new teachers.

What does this all mean? This project attempts to help new teachers to First Nations schools by providing a First Nations perspective of what is important to know. Using this information, I will prepare a small handbook for new teachers, to be used in conjunction with the First Nations Schools Association Handbook.

Hopefully, by reading these two handbooks, prior to beginning a teaching appointment to a First Nations school, new teachers will have a 'head start' as well as useful tools to guide them as they begin their career.

I must caution that the winnowing of information in the production of a handbook for new teachers is based on my own personal experiences and attitudes. For that reason, it may be useful for readers to refer back to chapter two and four of this study to obtain information from the actual sources.

I believe that the information obtained, through researching this project, provides a useful body of knowledge for all First Nations educators. I am indebted to Dr. Lorna Williams for her help in making it coherent.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Parents and educators concerns**

A selection of quotations taken from a First Nations educators' workshop in 1998.  
From: Kavanagh (1998).

“In First Nations schools we must decide how we will describe ourselves, and why we exist. That is fundamental. Everything else is just mechanics of getting things done.”

“We want our kids to have the strength they need, that's grounded in their culture, and to have the skills they need to succeed wherever they want to be.”

“We've created expectations about what our schools should do for our communities. Maybe it's time to reassess these expectations in the context of the whole community.”

“We need community members to feel comfortable talking about the education of their kids, so that they will tell schools: you are not alone in the education of my children, or my grandchildren.”

“Encompass everyone, and make the vision community owned.”

“If you set goals, the community will sit back and wait for you to accomplish them. If the community helps you set goals, they'll help you to accomplish them.”

“We tried to establish a school vision from the inside out. Ten years later, we're still trying to make it work. Similarly, we tried to develop policies to allow us to do things better, but they don't necessarily reflect the vision of the community. Now it seems like we need to rebuild and reassess everything in light of community values.”

“To involve the community, we need to set aside enough time, and commit ourselves to the process, no matter how long it takes. We need to make people feel like their input to decisions is important.”

“Each child must see him or herself reflected in the curriculum.”

“Parents must be involved in talking about what holistic education is. It relates to the heart and soul of our communities.”

“Don't put culture into the education process; put the education process into the culture.”

“Let's start using the knowledge which is in the communities.”

“We need to effect teacher education programs to make all teachers aware of the needs of First Nations students.”

“In-service teacher training can work to unseat myths and stereotypes of First Nations students.”

“What should students know? Ask them. And ask their parents, families and communities. They can determine what is successful.”

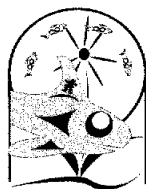
## **Appendix B**

### **Principles that must guide Indigenous research**

As proposed by First Nations researchers, from Wilson (2007)

- . Respect all forms of life as being related and interconnected.
- . Conduct all actions and interactions in a spirit of kindness, honesty and compassion.
- . The reason for doing research must be one that brings benefits to the Indigenous community.
- . The foundation of the research question must lie within the reality of the Indigenous experience.
- . Any theories developed or proposed must be grounded in an Indigenous epistemology and supported by the elders and the community that live out this particular epistemology.
- . The methods used will be process-oriented, and the researcher will be recognized and cognizant of his or her role as one part of the group process.
- . It will be recognized that transformation within every living entity participating in the research will be one of the outcomes of every project.
- . It will be recognized that the researcher must assume a certain responsibility for the transformations and outcomes of the research project which he or she brings to the community.
- . It is advisable that the researcher work as part of a team of Indigenous scholars and thinkers and with the guidance of elders and knowledge keepers.
- . It is recognized that the integrity of any Indigenous people or community could never be undermined by Indigenous research because such research is grounded in that integrity.
- . It is recognized that the languages and cultures of Indigenous peoples are living processes and that research and the discovery of knowledge is an ongoing function for the thinkers and scholars of every Indigenous group.
- .

## Appendix C Participant consent form



University  
of Victoria



Faculty  
of Education

**Aboriginal Education and Aboriginal Teacher Education**

### *Participant Consent Form*

#### **Indigenous Ways of Learning, Being and Teaching: Implications for Educators**

You are invited to participate in a study entitled *Indigenous Ways of Learning, Being and Teaching: Implications for Educators*, being conducted by Colleen Marchant, a Graduate Student in the department of Curriculum and Instruction Studies at the University of Victoria. You may contact me, if you have further questions, via telephone 604-796-2505 or email at [colmar01@uvic.ca](mailto:colmar01@uvic.ca).

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Curriculum and Instruction Studies. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Lorna B. Williams. You may contact my supervisor at 250-721-7767.

#### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose and objective of this research project is to discover useful cultural information for new teachers and/or First Nations teachers who are not from the community they are teaching in. I will then create a body of knowledge for teachers that will describe cultural characteristics common to most schools.

#### **Importance of this Research**

Research of this type is important because many of the teachers who are teaching in First Nations schools are not Aboriginal or directly from the community. Very few have any or very little cultural background knowledge about the First Nations community in which they are teaching.

#### **Participants Selection**

You are asked to participate in this study because you are a teacher or administrator of a First Nations School and because of your work with your community school and because I recognize the expertise and experience that you bring to your community.

#### **What is involved**

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will involve an in-person interview lasting up to one hour, at a date and time convenient for you. The questions will relate to what you feel that 'new teachers to your community should know about Indigenous/First Nations cultural teachings'.

#### **Inconvenience/Risks**

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you due to the time commitment required for the interview. However, I do not anticipate any major risks to you by participating in this research. I recognize that discussions about cultural teachings may bring up painful issues of cultural loss. I will focus my research on what new teachers to your community should know about Indigenous/First Nations cultural teaching in general. There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research, (certainly no greater than what you encounter in everyday life events).

**Benefits**

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include helping to build and clarify cultural understanding for new teachers to a First Nations community school. The primary benefits to yourself will be to use the results to provide accurate information to new teachers to your community through your participation in this resource for new teachers.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study information collected prior to your withdrawal may be used if written consent is received, or in the case of implied consent, verbal consent is received. Otherwise, all information will not be used and will be destroyed.

**Researcher's Relationship with Participants**

The researcher may have a relationship to potential participants as colleagues or acquaintances. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the following step has been taken to prevent coercion. Emphasis will be placed on the voluntary and confidentiality aspects of the study as well as assuring the participant(s) that no benefit is sought/provided and that participation should only occur if one is unreservedly open to the process and objectives of the study.

**Anonymity**

In terms of protecting your anonymity, your name, your community and school names will not be used. The researcher is looking for characteristics common to most First Nations schools that will be used to create a compendium for new teachers. If privacy concerns arise after you have given information, part or all information will be withdrawn upon your request.

**Confidentiality**

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by conducting interviews in private, handling the documentation alone, and all data will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home. However, confidentiality may be limited due to context and selection. The nature or size of the sample from which participants are drawn may make it possible to identify individual participants. Similarly, the procedures for recruiting participants may compromise the confidentiality of participants. The researcher will maintain respectful and responsible engagement with participants throughout the project. In this manner, what transpires between the interviewer and interviewees will remain confidential. Due to the public nature of the participants' work and small sample size of the research, confidentiality of much of the information provided in the individual interviews cannot be guaranteed.

**Dissemination of Results**

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways; through presenting the results in my oral exam, a copy of this research will be kept in the curriculum library at the University of Victoria. In addition, it will be shared with all the participants who wish to request a copy. Finally, the results will be made available to the First Nations Schools Association for their use as they see fit.

**Disposal of Data**

Data from this study will be disposed of after the completion of the researcher's oral exam and presentation of this project. The transcripts of interviews will be shredded. All files on the researcher's computer will be deleted, and the taped interview tapes will be pulled apart to destroy this recording.

**Contacts**

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include the researcher Colleen Marchant, Masters student Curriculum & Instruction, Faculty of Education, (604)796-2505, [colleen@uvic.ca](mailto:colleen@uvic.ca). You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Lorna Williams, at the University of Victoria, Faculty of Education, EDCI Aboriginal Education (250) 721-7767. Finally, the First Nations Schools Association Society may be contacted at Suite 113-100 Park Royal South, West Vancouver, B.C.



In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

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*Name of Participant*

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*Signature*

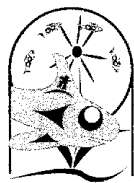
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*Date*

*A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*

## Appendix D

### Letter of Information for Implied Consent



University  
of Victoria



Faculty  
of Education

Aboriginal Education and Aboriginal Teacher Education

### *Letter of Information for Implied Consent*

#### Indigenous Ways of Learning, Being and Teaching: Implications for Educators

You are invited to participate in a study entitled Indigenous Ways of Learning, Being and Teaching: Implications for Educators that is being conducted by Colleen Marchant.

Colleen Marchant is a Graduate student in the department of Curriculum and Instruction Studies at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions by telephone at 604-796-2505 or e-mail [colleen01@fvu.ca](mailto:colleen01@fvu.ca).

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Curriculum and Instruction. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Lorna Williams. You may contact my supervisor at 250-721-7767.

#### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this research project is to discover useful cultural information for new teachers and/ or First Nations teachers who are not from the community in which they have accepted a teaching position. I will then create a body of knowledge for the teachers that will describe cultural characteristics in First Nations schools.

#### **Importance of this Research**

Research of this type is important because many of the teachers who are teaching in First Nations schools are not Aboriginal or directly from the community. Very few have any or very little cultural background knowledge about the First Nations community in which they are teaching.

#### **Participants Selection**

You are being asked to participate in this study because YOU ARE A TEACHER OR ADMINISTRATOR OF A FIRST NATIONS SCHOOL AND BECAUSE of your work with your community school and BECAUSE I recognize the expertise and experience that you bring to your community.

#### **What is involved**

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will involve an in-person interview lasting up to one hour, at a date and time convenient for you. The questions will relate to what you feel that 'new teachers to your community should know about Indigenous/First Nations cultural teachings'.

#### **Inconvenience/Risks**

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you due to the time commitment required for the interview. However, I do not anticipate any major risks to you by participating in this research. I recognize that discussions about cultural teachings may bring up painful issues of cultural loss. I will focus my research on what new teachers to your community should know about Indigenous/First Nations cultural teaching in general. There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research, (certainly no greater than what you encounter in everyday life events).

**Benefits**

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include helping to build and clarify cultural understanding for new teachers to a First Nations community school. The primary benefits to the yourself will be to use the results to provide accurate information to new teachers to your community through your participation in this resource for new teachers.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study INFORMATION COLLECTED PRIOR TO YOUR WITHDRAWAL MAY BE USED IF WRITTEN CONSENT IS RECEIVED, OR IN THE CASE OF IMPLIED CONSENT, VERBAL CONSENT IS RECEIVED. OTHERWISE, ALL INFORMATION WILL NOT BE USED AND WILL BE DESTROYED.

**Researcher's Relationship with Participants**

The researcher may have a relationship to potential participants as colleagues or acquaintances. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the following step has been taken to prevent coercion. Emphasis will be placed on the voluntary and confidentiality aspects of the study as well as assuring the participant(s) that no benefit is sought/provided and that participation should only occur if one is unreservedly open to the process and objectives of the study.

**Anonymity**

In terms of protecting your anonymity, your name, your community and school names will not be used. The researcher is looking for characteristics common to most First Nations schools that will be used to create a body of knowledge for new teachers. If privacy concerns arise after you have given information, part or all information will be withdrawn upon you request.

**Confidentiality**

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by conducting interviews in private, handling the documentation alone, and all data will be keep in a locked cabinet in the researchers home. HOWEVER, CONFIDENTIALITY MAY BE LIMITED DUE TO CONTEXT AND SELECTION. THE NATURE OR SIZE OF THE SAMPLE FROM WHICH PARTICIPANTS ARE DRAWN MAY MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO IDENTIFY INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANTS. SIMILARLY, THE PROCEDURES FOR RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS MAY OMPROMISE THE CONFIDEDNTIALITY OF PARTICIPANTS. THE RESEARCHER WILL MAINTAIN RESPECTFUL AND RESPONSIBLE ENGAGEMENT WITH PARTICIPANTS THROUGHOUT THE PROJECT. IN THIS MANNER, WHAT TRANSPIRES BETWEEN THE INTERVIEWER AND INTERVIEWEES WILL REMAIN CONFIDEDNTIAL. DUE TO THE PUBLIC NATURE OF THE PARTICIPANTS' WORK AND SMALL SAMPLE SIZE OF THE RESEARCH, CONFIDENTIALITY OF MUCH OF THE INFORMATION PROVIDED IN THE INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS CANNOT BE GUARANTEED.

**Dissemination of Results**

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways; through presenting the results in my oral exam, a copy of this research will be keep in the curriculum library at the University of Victoria. In addition, it will be shared will all the participants who wish to request a copy. Finally, the results will be made available to the First Nations Schools Association for their use as they see fit.

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**Contacts**

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include the researcher Colleen Marchant, Masters student Curriculum & Instruction Faculty of Education, (604)796-2505, [colleen01a@ucps.net](mailto:colleen01a@ucps.net). You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Lorna Williams, at the University of Victoria, Faculty of Education, EDCI Aboriginal Education (250) 721-7767. Finally, the First Nations Schools Association Society may be contacted at Suite 113-100 Park Royal South, West Vancouver, B.C.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca)).

By completing the interview, **YOUR FREE AND INFORMED CONSENT IS IMPLIED** and indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

*Please retain a copy of this letter for your reference.*

## **Appendix E**

### **Questions to guide semi-structured interviews**

For teachers:

- (1) What information about the local First Nations culture did you receive during orientation, prior to beginning your teaching position?
- (2) What information would have helped you, as a beginning teacher, in successfully integrating into the school, community, and its First Nations culture?
- (3) What important cultural attributes did you learn during your first year of teaching in a First Nations school?
- (4) What resources did you utilize to help you adjust to the First Nations culture during your teaching experiences in a First Nations school(s)?
- (5) What other things do you feel is important for new teachers to know when beginning a teaching position at a First Nations school?
- (6) Were you exposed to any First Nations culture/courses during your teacher training?
- (7) Are you familiar with either/both of the First Nations Schools Association publications: (a) Teaching in a First Nations school: an information handbook for new teachers, or (b) Reaching for success: considering the achievements and effectiveness of First Nations schools. If so, did you find them useful?
- (8) What other First Nations cultural experiences would you like to share?

For principals:

- (1) What information about First Nations culture is transmitted to new teachers during orientation?
- (2) What issues have you observed with new teachers, with respect to culture, during their first year of teaching in a First Nations school?
- (3) What aspects of the local culture are important for new teachers to know and understand?
- (4) Are there specific expectations you have for new teachers in relation to the First Nations culture in your community? If so, what are they?

- (5) What other important cultural occurrences in your school would you like to share?
- (6) What resources are available in your school/community for new teachers to acquire cultural knowledge?
- (7) In recruiting teachers for your First Nations school, what are the most important qualities that you look for?
- (8) Were you exposed to any First Nations culture/course work during your teacher training?
- (9) Are you familiar with either/both of the following First Nations Schools Association publications:
  - (a) Teaching in a First Nations school: an information handbook for new teachers.
  - (b) Reaching for success: considering the achievements and effectiveness of First Nations schools.If so, did you find them useful?

## Appendix F Ethics Board Certificate




University  
of Victoria

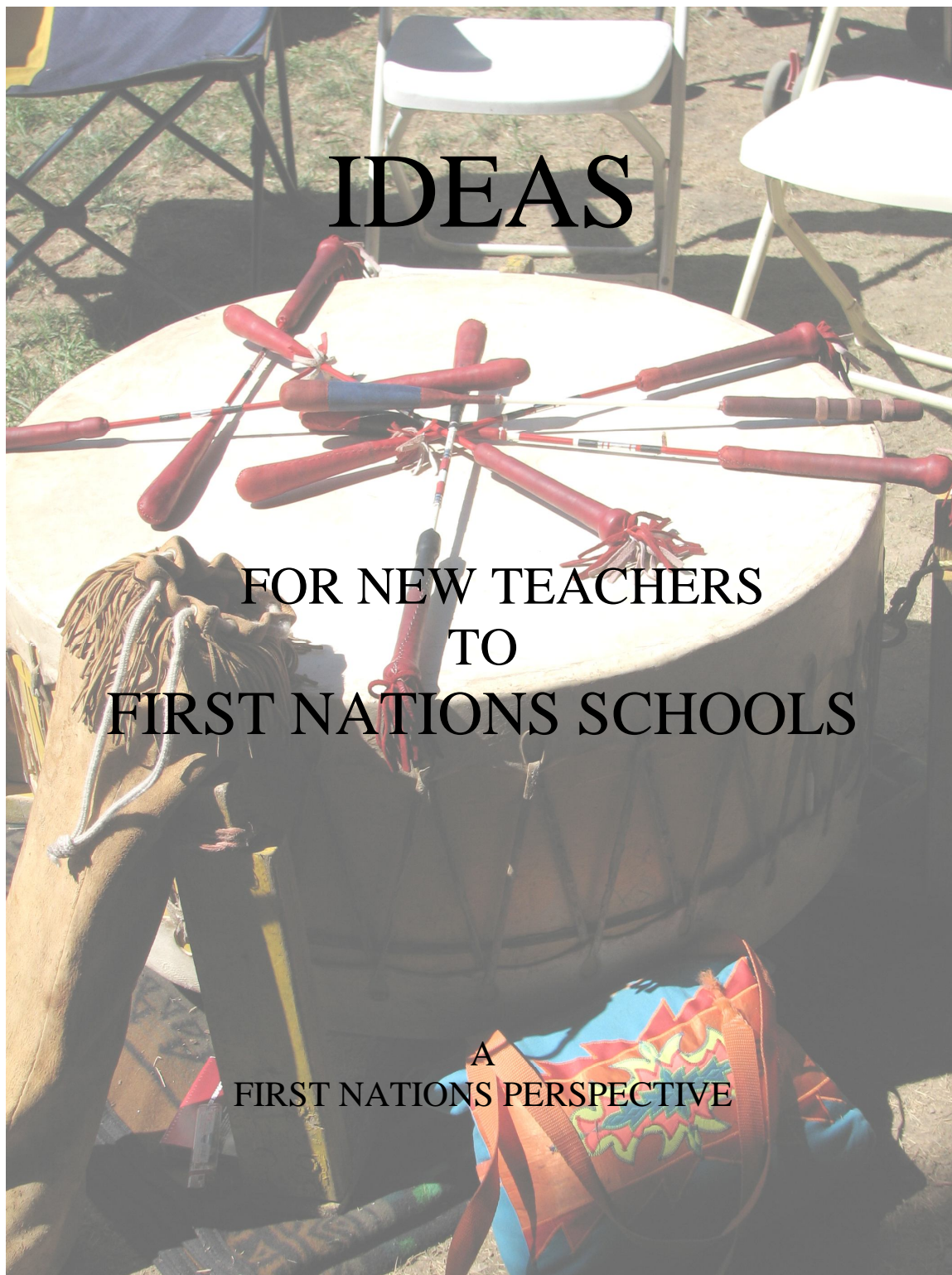
### Human Research Ethics Board

Office of Research Services  
University of Victoria  
Administrative Services Building - 2nd Floor  
Tel (250) 472-4545 Fax (250) 721-8960  
Email ethics@uvic.ca Web www.research.uvic.ca

### Human Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval

<u>Principal Investigator</u>	<u>Department/School</u>	<u>Supervisor</u>	
H. Colleen Marchant Master's Student	EDCI	Dr. Lorna B. Williams	
<u>Co-Investigator(s):</u>			
<u>Project Title:</u> Indigenous Ways of Learning, Being and Teaching: Implications for Educators			
<u>Protocol No.</u>	<u>Approval Date</u>	<u>Start Date</u>	<u>Expiry Date</u>
09-083	12-Mar-09	12-Mar-09	11-Mar-10
<b>Certification</b>			
This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Participants.			
This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol. Extensions and/or amendments may be approved with the submission of a "Request for Annual Renewal or Modification" form.			
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Dr. Richard Keeler Associate Vice-President, Research			

09-083 Marchant, H. Colleen

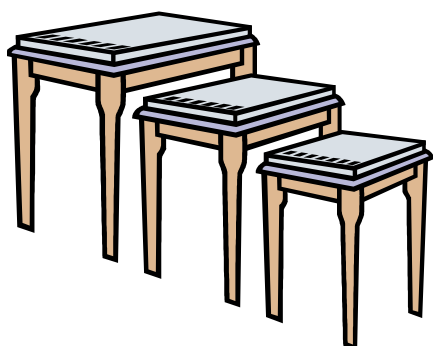


# IDEAS

FOR NEW TEACHERS  
TO  
FIRST NATIONS SCHOOLS

A  
FIRST NATIONS PERSPECTIVE





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## INTRODUCTION

This handbook derives from a Master of Education project at the University of Victoria, Department of Curriculum and Instruction entitled

### INDIGENOUS WAYS OF LEARNING, BEING AND TEACHING: Implications for New Teachers to First Nations Schools

Dr. Lorna Williams supervised the project, which was approved by The University of Victoria Ethics Board and The First Nations Schools Association

The information for new teachers comes from three sources:  
A review of the recent literature on First Nations culture and education, a description of five autobiographical events occurring during my first five years of teaching in an isolated First Nations school, and nine biographical themes, from interviews with five principals and five teachers from First Nations schools. My hope is that providing this information from three different sources new teachers will find useful ideas as they begin their teaching careers in First Nations Schools.

Colleen Marchant  
2009

THE



BIG

ONE

LEARN, UNDERSTAND AND  
RESPECT

THE CULTURAL PROTOCOLS  
OF THE COMMUNITY

Ceremonies, Communication & Community Involvement

## Don't ISOLATE Yourself



## Involve yourself in Community Activities



It will help develop parental trust, lead to friendships  
and increase your cultural knowledge



Bring the community into the  
School  
Elders, parents, storytellers, artists and  
helpers

&



Bring the school  
to the community  
Community activities,  
cultural events,  
field trips  
Food gathering,  
camping

## Embrace the 3R's Of First Nations Culture



Respect (for individuals & differences)

Relevance (of curriculum to the learner)

Reciprocal learning (the partnership  
of learning with and from each other)

## SOME MECHANICS

- Provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically
- Use students' experiences to reshape content and literary practice of the curriculum
- Do not over emphasize learning styles of First Nations students. It can lead to inaccurate labeling and stereotyping
- Language interaction patterns that approximate students' home discourse are more successful in improving performance
- The emphasis should change from teaching about the culture to teaching through the culture as a foundation for learning



*Future teachers need to become cognizant of classroom practices that are compatible with First Nations students' linguistic styles, cognitive functioning, motivation, and the school norms to which they are accustomed. (Pewewardy, 2002)*

## Spirituality



*Spirituality is an essential dimension of First Nations culture. Knowledge and practice of spiritual ways and values reflect both cultural practice and cultural identity. (Whitbeck et al, (2001)*

Teachers need to familiarize themselves with the spiritual nature of traditional First Nations thoughts and practices because they permeate virtually all aspects of educational practices

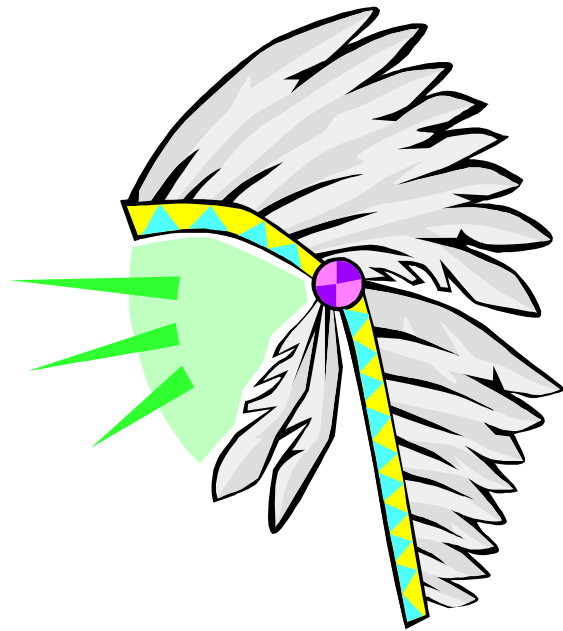
*It is necessary for all people in the community to respect old ways of doing things especially spirituality (Agbo, 2004)*

\*\*\*Remember, learn, understand and respect  
The protocols!!



## Oral Culture

Traditional oral culture still plays a very important role in most First Nations communities. This is positively demonstrated at community gatherings and during family times together at meals.



Within families, oral transmission of history, legends and guidance occurs, with the sharing of food playing a big role. Children are taught to 'take in' words with their meals.

It is important for teachers to promote and respect the oral competencies of their students

*Oral traditions must be respected and viewed by the teacher as a distinctive intellectual tradition, not simply as myths and legends  
(Reagan, 2005)*

# CEREMONIES



*The best way to understand the fundamental commonalities that are shared by Indigenous people is to live them.  
(Dr. Lorna Williams, 2007)*

## Teacher Mindsets



- Teachers must view themselves as learners to be effective
- Critically examine your own views and assumptions when structuring classroom experiences
- *Flexibility* is a key ingredient in adjusting curriculum, timetables, scheduling and activities to be in harmony with community events
- Teachers must recognize that culture is dynamic and changing, so they must incorporate both traditional and contemporary culture in the curriculum
- Warmth, caring, sensitivity, humor, trust and high expectations characterize effective First Nations teachers

*To teach effectively, teachers must learn about the culture, background and experiences of their students.  
(Cummins, Chow & Schecter, 2006)*

*It is really important to be aware of not knowing and open to learning from your students.  
(Jessica Ball, 2004)*

## The Land



Relationship to the land is spiritual in nature and is an integral characteristic of First Nations culture

Providing opportunities for students to gain educational experiences on traditional territory is highly recommended (Place-based education)

*Land and formal education share important characteristics. Both provide a focus for livelihood and survival, sustain life, validate the individual and assure the future. (Basso, 1999)*



*Memory and history, both individually and collectively, are located in particular places, giving rise, not only to concrete experiences, but also to local, regional and national identities. (Chambers, 1999)*

## Relating to Parents



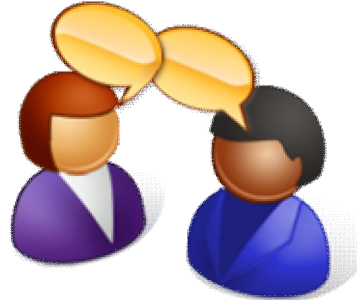
- Many parents have negative opinions of education, schools and teachers because of residential school trauma.
- Teachers should make every attempt, through respectful communication, to develop relationships with parents and extended family members.
- Taking students out into the community for educational experiences, often works to promote parental and family member involvement.
- It is important to reassure parents that providing First Nations language and culture in the school will NOT adversely affect students' academic achievement and the ability to succeed in mainstream culture.
- By actively participating in community events parents will observe your desire to embrace the culture. This, in turn, will help to ease trust issues parents have with their children's teachers.

*Many parents fear that children taught Native ways in school will not acquire mainstream ways and so will not be able to cope*

*in either world. (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005)*

## Communication 101

1. In their early years at home children learn by observing their parents, not having conversations with them.



By the time they enter school they have done most of their learning through direct experience and participation in real world activities.

Thus, there is a mismatch between early learning experiences at home and expected behavior for school learning.

2. Remember that most First Nations people are quite humble by nature. They are loathe to brag about their accomplishments and talents. Thus, to find resources for your classroom it may be necessary to obtain referrals, for a specific person, from others.



3. It is extremely important to learn how to ask questions appropriately and respectfully in First Nations communities, and only after 'being still' and listening carefully.

\*\*\* Are you ready for the next Communication course?  
(Turn the page!)

## Communications 201



Teachers new to First Nations communities may find two unique communication patterns exhibited by their students: A non-verbal language and a code switching activity.

1. In many First Nations communities a non-verbal language (using eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth, forehead, head & arms) is in common use. This is widely used in community gatherings where one wishes to communicate without disrupting the activity.
2. In speech patterns, many First Nations people use words from their own language interspersed within English sentences (code-switching)

In both these cases, teachers need to respect and promote these unique patterns and use them as tools for developing bilingualism. It is also a great way to bond with students through reciprocal learning.

*By trying to eradicate the vernacular from home, the teacher is both cutting a link between home and school and devaluing the children's family and/or community.  
(Wheeler & Swords, 2004)*

## Helpful Hints

- It is important for teachers to demonstrate their belief in the community and instill pride in their students



- Culturally responsive pedagogy should begin with the formation of relationships between teachers and students.
- Understand the special interconnectedness between individuals and the community and between the community and nature.
- Realize that even within the same community there is a wide range of cultural knowledge and practice among families and students.
- When teachers' learning styles do not match students' learning preferences, conflicts often occur.



*We teach what we know as an act of love.  
....a Cree Grandmother.  
(Hodson-Smith, 2000)*



## Making a commitment



Teacher turnover has been a serious problem affecting the quality of education at First Nations schools.

The longer teachers remain at a school, with a strong desire to learn and participate in the culture, the more effective they become.

It is important for teachers to acquire a thorough understanding of the school, community and culture prior to accepting a position.

It is also incumbent upon the school to provide a comprehensive orientation for new teachers.

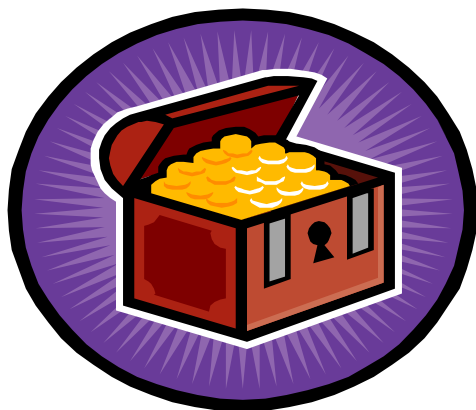


"Many First Nations communities go through high turnover of teachers so there are trust issues early on. but once they are sure you will be staying for the year or more they will begin to accept and trust you"

*(A longtime First Nations teacher)*

## The Reward

Teaching in a First Nations school offers an environment and opportunities that are unique. This is best described by the words of a teacher who taught in three First Nations schools.



*"I definitely learned a lot. I think it's a great way for new teachers to start, because you are often given more responsibility than you would ever be given as a first or second year teacher in a public school. You have to become much more independent and much more self-sufficient, getting your own resources. So, it really teaches you a lot about planning and preparing. I've loved getting to know the languages and allowing the kids to be my teacher*



## Final Thoughts



- Recapping:

Before accepting a teaching position, do a thorough investigation of the history, culture and life of the First Nations community.

Ask for a proper orientation process that explains your role, relationship to the community and the cultural activities in the school and community.

Seek a mentor from a respected, culturally knowledgeable member of the school staff, to guide you through the learning process.

Attend cultural and language classes with your students to enhance your knowledge.

Don't isolate yourself. Form networks with colleagues, parents and community members. Participate in community events. Make yourself visible.

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## End note

Teachers new to a First Nations school would be wise to read a publication by Barbara Kavanagh, for the First Nations Schools Association, entitled *Teaching in a First Nations School: An information handbook for teachers new to First Nations schools* 2006

This publication provides a background of First Nations history and languages, the emergence of First Nations schools, and school administration and governance. In addition, it describes the importance of community connections and the relationships between parents, families and First Nations schools.