ABSTRACT

In Canada, the issue of low graduation rates among Aboriginal students is a growing concern. Educational researchers assert that racism and discrimination in schools and in the wider society are factors that impede the success of Aboriginal and other minority students. Since teachers' decisions potentially have consequences for a student's educational and life chances, it is imperative to determine the basis of teachers' decision-making in order to determine whether it is discriminatory. This study combines the insights of the micro, data-driven theories of self-fulfilling prophecy and attribution in order to consider the ways in which discrimination occurs or is reinforced by the decisions teachers make about students.

Twenty-one teachers recommended twenty-four fictional students for remedial, average or advanced programs based upon the program eligibility criteria. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the thought processes teachers used in arriving at their decisions, they were asked to think aloud as they made decisions. Teachers were also asked to respond to questions about the basis of their decisions. Interviews probed teachers' ideas regarding issues of race, class, gender.

Of the twenty-one teachers interviewed, only one teacher placed student record cards accurately according to three different levels of achievement. The study indicates that, while teachers think about how a student is assessed, the way they think about their students often appears confused and arbitrary. Findings also revealed that some teachers' recommendations were influenced by arbitrary factors such as the students' group membership.

Further, although teachers may not intend to make discriminatory decisions based on students' ascribed characteristics, they are capable of biased decisions that denies opportunities to some learners. In order for teachers to recognize the influence of their biases upon student placement, the author proposes a consciousness-raising technique for improving teacher decision-making.
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1 INTRODUCTION

In “Teaching to Transgress” bell hooks points out that “from grade school on, we are all encouraged to cross the threshold of the classroom believing we are entering a democratic space—a free zone where the desire to study and learn makes us all equal” (hooks, 2003, p.177). My educational experiences were no exception. After leaving my undergraduate education, I lived and worked in many different countries. In these contexts, my ambivalence towards my subject-position often made me unable to recognize the various injustices that surrounded me in my travels. However, over time the conversations that I had with the people I met helped me to recognize that the privileges bestowed to me through white skin, English speaking tongue and middle class background shaped not only my experiences overseas but also my experience within the classroom. Following this recognition, I began to distinguish the ways in which race, class, gender, ability and sexuality intersect as I re-examined my own classroom experiences. I recognized that in my Canadian school experiences racial identities and social class status intersected in different and powerful ways to create experiences for my friends that created subtle and at times not so subtle differences in our experiences. I came to see that schools were not the neutral spaces that I had believed. The power dynamic and the politics of the classroom were as intricate and complex as those in any other institution.

I returned to Canada with a renewed interest in education. Only this time I wanted to, as hooks states, “make pedagogical codes transparent” (hooks, 2003, p.39). Having recognized the powerful influence that many of my teachers had upon me, and having worked for several years as an English teacher myself, I wanted to understand
how a teacher might also influence a student's academic future. This thesis is an exploration of both the factors that influence teachers' decision making regarding their students and finally suggests ways in which these teachers might become more aware of their expectations and thus more cognizant of their learners' needs.

1.1 Background and statement of the problem

For many teachers the demands of the classroom do not allow for critical reflection to examine how their decisions might shape the lives of their students. And yet teachers' decisions regarding student placement are crucial because a person's future employment or occupational status is very often tied to their educational achievement. Teachers' misguided decisions may not only affect the lives of students, but also may cost Canada an immeasurable amount in terms of wasted human potential. This is of particular concern when one considers the current dropout rates of Aboriginal students.

Educational studies continue to expose an educational system in which Aboriginal\(^1\) children are the most visible victims. These studies show a shortfall in everything from educational expenditures to graduation rates (Council of Ministers of Education, 1999; Ministers' National Working Group on Education, 2002). Today, Aboriginal students continue to be less likely than their non-Aboriginal peers to enrol in

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\(^1\) The term Aboriginal is used in this thesis as an umbrella label to encompass many different groups including status/non-status Aboriginals, Aboriginal peoples on and off reserve, those with Aboriginal ancestry and Inuit peoples. I also acknowledge the variations in ways someone may choose to identify him or herself including Aboriginal peoples, Amer-Indians, First Nations, First Peoples, Indians, Indigenous Peoples, Native Peoples, and North American Indians. I acknowledge the complexities both with these groups and within the terms people may identify with, however for the purpose of this study the term "Aboriginal" was chosen as it is the term most commonly used in the British Columbia school system. In all cases I have capitalized the word "Aboriginal" in the way that other nationalities are also capitalized. For further discussion on the complexities of terminology, please refer to Friesen & Frieson (2002).
academically challenging courses (Cowley & Easton, 2004), more likely to leave school prior to graduation and less likely to return (Council of Ministers of Education, 1999). The 2006 Census reported that 31% of the off-reserve First Nations population aged 25-64 did not have a high school diploma, compared with 15% of their counterparts in the total Canadian population (Bougie, 2009). This does not bode well for Aboriginal youths’ future employment prospects; half the jobs in Canada now require at least a secondary school education (Ministers’ National Working Group on Education, 2002). Adding to this dismal news are claims from the Canada’s 2004 Auditor General’s Report indicating that it would take an approximate 28 years for the current educational divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to close (Auditor General’s Report, 2004).

Considering that education is a central tool for both economic development and in establishing one’s personal sense of self worth, the need for immediate action is urgent. Not only is increased educational attainment for Aboriginal people integral for labour integration and future employment (Bazylak, 2002; Duncan & Sokal, 2003; Hampton & Roy, 2002; R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2004), it would also provide more Aboriginal peoples the means for acquiring leadership roles in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations, as well as academic and political institutions (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 1998).

In the past, literature citing factors inhibiting Aboriginal student success has tended towards a “blame the victim” approach that attributes low educational attainment

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as the fault of the individual learner (Abele, Graham, & Maslove, 1999; Barman, Herbert, & McCaskill, 1986; Ryan, 1997). Aboriginal peoples have grown increasingly tired of a society that places blame on their families, communities and the learners themselves before initiating a more critical investigation of the educational system (Silver, Mallett, Greene & Simard, 2002). The fear is that until politicians, administrators and teachers critically examine the various policies and practices already in place, Canadian schools will continue to reinforce and legitimate procedures that limit the success of their Aboriginal learners.

Increasingly more educational researchers are pointing towards racism and discrimination in schools and in the wider society as factors that impede the success of Aboriginal students (Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004; St. Denis, 2004; St. Denis & Hampton, 2002; Ungerleider, 2003). Other scholars suggest that the promotion of Eurocentric values and epistemologies as the only valid way of knowing in Canadian schools has severely limited the experience of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Archibald, Pidgeon, Janvier, Commodore, & McCormick, 2002; Battiste, 2002; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). The latter promote the incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing into the dominant school system as one way to alleviate the current educational divide. Some researchers contend that it is teachers' lowered expectations for Aboriginal and minority students that have contributed to the large Aboriginal/minority dropout rate in schools (Brandon, 2002; Farkas, 2003; Garcia, 2001; Hall, 1993; Strong, 1998; Riley & Ungerleider, 2008). These researchers claim that it may be the stereotypes and biases held by teachers that lead them to underestimate their students' ability to achieve academically and could, over time, impede students' prospects. These researchers contend that until
teachers' stereotypes and biases are identified and challenged, the current educational divide will continue.

It was the recognition of the potential long lasting impact of teachers' beliefs combined with the possible influence of stereotyping on the basis of teacher decision making that inspired my previous study; The face of achievement: Influences of teacher decision-making on Aboriginal students (Riley, 2005; Riley & Ungerleider, 2008). This study found that students whom teachers were led to believe were of Aboriginal ancestry or English as a second-language were consistently under-rated in comparison to their non-Aboriginal, non-ESL counterparts despite the fact that they had identical records of prior achievement. The findings of that study revealed a need to revisit what has been largely taken for granted: the question of systemic and individual bias. This study extends my investigations to experienced teachers and explores the following research questions; how do teachers' regard Aboriginal students? What factors influence teachers' assignment of pupils to different opportunities? And finally, what reasons do teachers give for their recommendations about the opportunities afforded to students. This study invites twenty-one teachers to participate in a task that probes teachers' ideas regarding issues of race, class, gender and discrimination in the classroom in order to offer a rare assessment of the basis of classroom decision-making. This topic is timely as more attention needs to be paid to how the experiences and perceptions of teachers might influence the success of Canada's increasingly diverse student body.
2 TEACHERS’ EXPECTATIONS: AN OVERVIEW

We know that schools continue to fail Aboriginal learners, but we have yet to identify exactly why. Although claims of racism and discrimination within the educational system may indeed be accurate, there is still very little concrete data that demonstrates how this might unfold within the classroom context and what impact it has on students’ performance. By learning to what extent teachers’ expectations and perceptual biases have on the achievement of students, educators may be more prepared to modify or adjust their behaviour in the classroom.

This section describes in detail how the micro, data-driven theories of self-fulfilling prophecy and attribution might be utilized in combination with the macro level theories of whiteness and critical race theory in order to demonstrate the ways in which discrimination may be passed on or reinforced through teachers’ decision making.

2.1 Teachers’ expectations

The term teachers’ expectations describe the inferences teachers make regarding their students’ potential to achieve in the classroom. These inferences are based upon the knowledge or perceived knowledge the teacher has regarding the student and may be influenced by a number of factors. While some of these factors may be internal to the student, such as a student’s ability to achieve academically, teachers may also be influenced by external factors. IQ test scores, a student’s family background and the comments made by former teachers regarding a student’s performance in class are all factors that may help shape the teacher’s perception of the student before the student has even set foot in the classroom.
Face to face, teachers may also be influenced by a student's ascribed characteristics such as race, gender or physical appearance. This information may shape the teacher's expectations of a student before the student has been given the opportunity to perform (Brophy & Good, 1974; Janes, 1996; Jussim & Eccles, 1992; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Over an extended period of time teacher's expectations may be modified further by the way the student behaves (or is perceived to behave) in the classroom. A student's work habits, motivation, behavioural compliance and leadership skills may all be factors that inform the teacher's judgement of the student. Whether the teacher chooses to label these traits as “positive” or “negative” may have as much to do with the teacher's personal values as it may do with the actual behaviour of the student (Brophy & Good, 1974). For example, a teacher who places a high value on leadership skills and who equates positive leadership with a student's ability to interact successfully with peers may be more likely to reward a student who exhibits good social skills. However a teacher who attributes positive leadership skills with a student's ability to debate in the classroom may be less likely to reward the student displaying good social skills if that student does not exhibit strong debating techniques. Teacher expectancy effect describes the perceptions and expectations a teacher has of a student that lead to actions which shape or affect that student's performance in the classroom. There are three factors as to why a student's performance may confirm a teacher's expectations of their student: accuracy, perceptual bias and self-fulfilling prophecy (Jussim & Eccles, 1992; Jussim, 1989; Kolb & Jussim, 1994).
2.1.1 Accuracy effect

The first factor, *accuracy effect* describes a teacher accurately assessing a student's ability to achieve in the classroom based on the student's performance. The student's performance is not affected by the teacher's perceptions or expectations of the student and the teacher does not allow their expectations or biases to influence their assessment of the students' performance in class. Teachers' expectations are described as accurate when they are based on valid predictors such as a student's prior achievement and motivation in class (Kolb & Jussim, 1994). When assessing the performance of a student, accuracy is desirable as it implies that the teacher is basing his or her decision on valid predictors such as grades or test results, rather than by arbitrary factors such as race, ethnicity or behaviour in the classroom. Studies by Kolb & Jussim (1994) found that "70 percent of the correlation between teacher expectations and student achievement represent accuracy, and the remaining 30 percent represent self-fulfilling prophecies, perceptual bias or both" (p.4). While this study and others (Jussim & Eccles, 1992; Jussim, 1989) support a high level of teacher expectation accuracy, they also provide evidence that self-fulfilling prophecies and teachers' perception bias can and do occur in the classroom.

2.1.2 Self-fulfilling prophecy

While accuracy refers to the idea that the teacher is able to successfully predict student achievement without influencing it, *self-fulfilling prophecy* and *perceptual bias* mean that it is a teacher's beliefs that influence the student's performance in the classroom. Self-fulfilling prophecy was first described by Robert K. Merton in 1948. He coined the phrase to describe the process in which a false belief regarding a person or situation
evokes a new behaviour which makes the original, often erroneous belief become a reality (Merton, 1948). Twenty years later, a researcher by the name of Rosenthal speculated whether the same phenomenon might also occur in classrooms if a teacher's erroneous expectations of a student lead the teacher to behave towards the student in ways that result in the fulfillment of the teachers' initial expectations (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson's study, "Pygmalion in the Classroom" (1968), focused on the effects of teacher expectations on student achievement. In this study, all participating students were administered a non-verbal test of intelligence, which was disguised as a test that would predict intellectual "blooming" (Rosenthal, 2002). At the end of the test, twenty percent of the students were selected randomly to participate in the experimental group. Teachers were then given the names of the students in this group and were informed that during the course of the school year, these particular students were expected to "bloom" or grow in their academic performance. In actuality, the only difference between the experimental students and the control group students lay in the mind of the teacher. At the end of the school year all students were retested with the same test of intelligence that had been given to them eight months prior. The findings of the study indicated that the students that teachers had been led to believe would "bloom" showed greater intellectual gains than did the children of the control group (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). The results of this study provided evidence for the notion that teacher expectations could produce positive or negative outcomes. Later studies (Brophy & Good, 1974; Clifton, Perry, Parsonson & Hryniuk, 1986; Jussim, 1989) continued to demonstrate that there is some degree of relationship between teacher expectations and student achievement, however, while
Rosenthal hypothesized that it was teachers' expectations that influenced a student's achievement, these later researchers suggested that it was how the expectations of teachers influenced their interaction with students which had the ultimate effect upon the student's achievement level (Janes, 1996).

2.1.3 **Perceptual bias**

The third notion, *perceptual bias* describes the process in which a teacher's perception of a student influences their evaluation of that student (Janes, 1996; Kolb & Jussim, 1994). Often the perceptions a teacher has of his or her student is informed by the teacher's normative values and expectations. A study by Williams (1976) indicated that teachers were more likely to perceive students who obeyed the social norms of the classroom as being brighter and harder-working. While this study indicated that teachers' perceptions only had a minimal effect on the student's cognitive learning as measured by standardized test results, the study demonstrated that teachers' perceptions of their students did have a significant influence over the teaching evaluations of the student. This is significant considering that it is often the teacher who will have final say over student placement in class, regardless of the student's test results. For example, a teacher who perceives untidy students as being lower achievers may asses an untidy student as being less able than her tidy peers regardless of her academic ability in class. This erroneous perception may be exacerbated further by "sustaining expectation effect" (Janes, 1996; Saracho, 1991) which dictates that as a teacher comes to expect a certain standard of work from a student, the teacher begins to respond to their expectations of the student rather than to the student's actual performance. While the "untidy" student may make more of an effort to hand in neat
assignments, the teacher is no longer able to identify these changes within the student’s work because she has become blinded by her erroneous expectations of that student’s ability to achieve (Riley, 2005). When it comes to deciding student placement, the teacher may be tempted to place the student in lower performance class simply because the student’s work does not comply with her standards of neatness.

Another study conducted by Jussim (1989) also demonstrated the effects teachers’ perceptions could have upon student performance outcomes. In his experiment involving grade six math students, Jussim observed that teachers had the tendency to mistakenly assume that a student’s final performance on a test was a good indication of the amount of effort they put forth in studying. He noted that the more time low performing students claimed to spend on homework, the less effort the teacher believed they exerted. He concluded that, while people often assume that effort influences performance, “the available evidence suggests that effort influences performance to a much lesser extent than many people, including teachers, currently believe.” Since our society tends to place a strong value on “good work ethic”, it is not unreasonable to conclude that teachers who perceive students as expending more effort may be more likely to reward those students by giving them higher evaluations than their success may warrant. Likewise, a student who is perceived as lazy by their teacher may be evaluated more harshly despite their ability to achieve.

Another form of perceptual bias is referred to as “the halo effect” (Tauber, 1997). While research regarding the halo effect is often associated with the role physical attractiveness plays in influencing the evaluations of other unrelated criteria (Dion, Berschield, & Walster, 1972; Downs & Lyons, 1991; Eagly, Asgmoire, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991), “the halo effect” can also be used to describe the process whereby a
teacher who believes a student is successful in one area mistakenly assumes that this success will carry over into other unrelated areas. While an outside observer might recognize the student's limitations with regards to particular subject matter, the teacher, blinded by her high expectations, is unable to recognize the student's limitations and continues to reward the student despite the fact that the student's work may be inadequate. Researchers have found that “teachers overestimate the achievement of high achievers, underestimat that of low achievers, and predict least accurately the responses of low achievers” (Gottfredson, Marciniak, Birdseye, & Gottfredson, 1995, p.155). Thus perceptual biases such as the sustaining expectancy effect and the halo effect can engender a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While students labelled as “gifted” often benefit from perceptual bias in terms of the “halo effect” there are some circumstances where they do not. In a study by Kolb and Jussim (1994) it was found that some students who had received high marks on standardized test scores had low teacher evaluation reports. Jussim speculated that there are several factors that may lead to this discrepancy. First, if a gifted child is not appropriately challenged in a classroom they may become bored. In order to alleviate their boredom, the student may tend to either “act up” in class or withdraw completely from classroom activities. Neither of these actions conforms to most teachers' perceptions of “normative classroom behaviour” and so the teacher may begin to regard the student negatively. Kolb and Jussim have found that even mildly disconfirming evidence may lead people to modify their original expectations of a person. If a teacher observes a student acting out in a way that contradicts their initial high expectations of that student, the teacher may modify their behaviour towards the student in ways that reinforce the student's negative behaviour. By calling on the student less, providing
fewer opportunities for the student to participate in class and by focusing more attention towards other students, teachers may inadvertently influence the underachievement of a gifted student. While some students may have the confidence and ability to change their teacher's misperceptions and convince the teacher of his or her inherent qualities, most students may find it difficult to challenge the teacher's beliefs.

Studies indicate that the influence of teacher's expectations upon student achievement may have more to do with the level of flexibility with which teachers hold their expectations (Brophy & Good, 1974; Clifton, Perry, Parsonson, & Hryniuk, 1986; Jussim, 1986). If a teacher's expectations are rigid, that is if they refuse to readjust their expectation level despite evidence to the contrary, their expectations are more likely to act as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Brophy & Good, 1974). This may be the case if the teacher believes "the basis for their expectations is some stable factor" such as race or gender (Kolb & Jussim, 1994). For example, Rubovitz and Maehr's study (as cited in Kolb & Jussim, 1994, p.5) found that "some teachers discriminate against Black children, even after being told that the children are gifted" suggesting that attributional signatures do have an effect on teachers' perceptions.

These studies give an indication of the significant impact teachers' perceptions of their students can have upon teacher evaluations. Although teachers' beliefs about students' behaviour in the classroom or the amount of effort they put into their homework may not have as large an impact over student's standardized test scores (their actual academic achievement), they do have an impact on the way a student is graded because teachers' evaluations may be influenced by arbitrary factors or their perceptual biases. Since student placement is often determined by teachers, these
findings could mean that life-changing decisions could be based partly on teachers’
misperceptions.

2.2 Accumulation and expectancy

In a study regarding teachers’ perceptions of students, Smith, Jussim and Eccles (1999)
found that while, “self-fulfilling prophecies in terms of effect size were relatively small,
their presence over time was quite remarkable” (p.563). These researchers discovered
that a teacher’s belief regarding a student’s potential could influence that student
several years after the initial point of contact (Smith et al., 1999). They also discovered
that students “who were targets of higher expectations in 7th grade took a greater
number of non-remedial high school math courses than students who were targets of
lower expectations” (Smith et al., 1999, p.559). This process is described as
“accumulation expectancy effect” and describes the process in which self-fulfilling
prophecy or perceptual bias has an increasingly larger influence over a subject as time
passes (Smith et al., 1999). For example, if a teacher perceives a student as a trouble
maker in class and relays this message to the student’s teacher the following year,
there is a possibility that the new teacher may treat the student in accordance to the
previous teacher’s negative perceptions of that student. Likewise, if the student has
been unfairly treated by the first teacher as a trouble maker, the student may begin to
“fulfil the teacher’s expectations” and begin to act like one. The student’s negative
behaviour, triggered by the previous teacher’s erroneous expectations, may continue in
the new classroom. The new teacher, unaware that the student didn't always behave in
that manner may continue to expect the student to behave as a troublemaker and so
on. However, self-fulfilling prophecies may also dissipate overtime if the student
interacts with a multitude of teachers whose different expectations of the student cancel each other out. Self-fulfilling prophecies may also be sustained by situation. For example, if a teacher has low expectations for a student and makes the decision to place the student in a remedial classroom one year, the student may find it difficult to move out of that stream for the remainder of their school career (Blau, 2003; Broussard & Joseph, 1998; Oakes, 1995; Oakes, 1985). The belief that prophecies could be sustained or accumulate over time is disturbing if it is found that teachers tend to expect more (or less) from some groups over others.

2.3 Race, ethnicity and underachievement

In his article “The self-fulfilling prophecy”, Robert Merton (1948) also alluded to how expectations had the potential to shape and maintain ethnic and racial discrimination. He described how the false perception that African-Americans are “inferior” in education was at risk of becoming a reality if the dominant white authorities continued to spend less than one-fifth as much on education for African-American students as it did on white students (Merton, 1948). While Merton’s article did not specifically outline teacher expectations and student achievement, his speculations inspired other researchers to consider the influence arbitrary factors such as race and ethnicity might have on students’ performance outcomes (Bianchi, 1984; Hauser, 1999; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Jencks & Phillips, 1998, Meisels & Liaw, 1993).

In his “Pygmalion in the classroom” study, Rosenthal observed that the Mexican children that teachers had been informed would “bloom” did not share the same advantages as the other non-Mexican children who were also expected to bloom. Rosenthal found that teachers still rated the Mexican children as being less curious
intellectually than their non-Mexican classmates, despite the fact that by the end of the experiment they had made the greatest progress in terms of IQ. Rosenthal remarked that, “for these minority-group children, intellectual competence may have been easier for teachers to bring about than to believe” (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968, p. 178). While the fact that the students had made progress was positive, bias persists if the teacher is unwilling to recognize the improvement made.

Since the findings of Merton (1948) and Rosenthal (1968) were reported, numerous studies on expectation have been conducted to explore the influence arbitrary factors have on student outcome. The findings of these studies suggest that teachers’ stereotypes regarding gender (Jussim, 1989; Tapasak, 1990), particular ethnic groups (Casteel, 2001; Chang & Sue, 2003; Clifton et al., 1986; Murdock, 1999; Wigfield, Galper, Denton & Seefeldt, 1999) and socioeconomic status (Hauser-Cram, Selchuk, & Stipek, 2003; Murdock, 1999) may lead to lowered expectations. These, in turn, could trigger self-fulfilling prophecies or perceptual biases that could potentially harm a student’s academic success. A study by Clifton et al. (1986) on whether a student’s ethnicity or sex influence the expectations of their teachers revealed that after intellectual ability, “ethnicity has the second most powerful effect on both normative and cognitive expectations” (p. 64). A study by Hauser-Cram et al. (2003) found that teachers rated children with a lower socio-economic background less competent than those with a high socio-economic status because of the teachers’ perceived value differences with the parents of lower socio-economic students. Finally, a study by Murdock (1999) which questioned students’ perceptions of their treatment by their teachers revealed that “low-income African Americans and Caucasian students reported teachers as having lower expectations of them than their higher income Caucasian
peers" (p.67). In addition, these students also recalled their teachers as being more disinterested and critical of their overall performance (Murdock, 1999). These studies reveal the powerful influence teachers perceptions (conscious or otherwise) have on the lives of their students.

In interviews conducted with twenty-two minority students, researchers Samuel & Burney (2003) found that each student could recall "experiences of what was interpreted as racism with some faculty members who were unsympathetic and unwilling to give them support and encouragement" (p.4). Other researchers have recounted similar stories and experiences that indicate something is amiss. Fine (2004) describes an incident at an American school where she asked a group of white and African-American students what track they were in. She noted that when she called out for "advanced" students, most of the white students raised their hands and when she called out for "standard" students, most of the African American students raised their hands. After later doing studies on the matter, Fine remarks with surprise at "how profoundly the aggregated numbers, overtime, bore out that simple hand-raising exercise" (Fine, Weis, Powell & Burns, 2004, p.274). Kennedy-Carter (1997) also observes that "many in education, consciously and unconsciously, expect more from some and less from others, and in many instances, race is the deciding factor" (p.510). Kennedy-Carter recalls how she had to intervene to ensure that her son, a high achieving African-American student, was placed in an honours level classroom (p.509). The evocative nature of these accounts offer insights into how seemingly innocuous decisions dramatically affect people's lives. Yet empirical data is still required to ensure that policy makers are able to effectively develop and administer policies and programs that can specifically address instances of discrimination in the classroom. To date there
has been little empirical evidence collected to support many of these anecdotal studies. Some researchers may balk at the notion of having to “prove” that teachers’ stereotypes and biases may indeed affect the lives of their minority students (Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004), but other researchers remark that, without the “empirical evidence to convince teachers of the need for innovation” (Mocdley, 1999, p.148), teachers may be unwilling to change their behaviour and resist the suggestion of a need for change.

Already some empirical studies have indicated the need for teachers to become more aware of their attitudes towards certain groups of students. A study by Phillips, Crouse, and Ralph (1998) found that “even when black and white children have the same prior scores, the same measured socioeconomic status, and attend the same school, black children still gain on average about 0.02 standard deviations less in math, 0.06 standard deviation less in reading, and 0.05 standard deviations less in vocabulary each year” (p.256). This study was reaffirmed by Moller, Stearns, Blau and Land (2006), who discovered that even after low social economic status had been controlled, Black students still had lower initial scores than their white peers and that this racial gap in achievement increased overtime (p.167). Another study, conducted by Riley and Ungerleider (2008), which asked pre-service teachers to make placement recommendations for their grade eight students found that, “Aboriginal students consistently earned lower recommendations than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (F=5.643, p=0.021, df=1,50) despite the fact that the fictional students in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal categories had identical records of prior achievement” (p.383). While generalizations from any of these studies should be done with caution, we have enough information to know that this is an area worthy of further exploration.
2.4 Stigma, stereotypes & attributional theory

Combining theories of stigma and stereotyping with attribution theory will provide policy makers and practitioners a more precise understanding of the subtlety of discrimination and the influence it may have upon student placement. I contend that while critical race theory or whiteness theory are useful for investigating social inequalities at the macro level, the combined theories of stigma, stereotyping and attribution may be more beneficial when investigating discrimination within the micro context of the classroom. The combined theories of stigma, stereotyping and attribution operating on the micro level may provide researchers with an adequate basis for collecting data that would pinpoint specific instances of discrimination within the classroom setting (such as teachers’ decision making). However, I recommend that rather than privileging one theory over another, educational theorists and policy makers should employ all theories as a way to expand their understanding of daily classroom practices. In addition, I propose that by merging theories of stigma, stereotyping and attribution with those of whiteness and critical race, teachers and students will develop a greater self-awareness.

2.5 Attribution theory: What it is and how it works in the classroom

Attribution theory, first articulated by Weiner (1984), is founded upon the assertion that rather than remaining passive observers, people generally seek to understand the causes behind specific events as they occur. By developing explanations or attributions to justify unexpected outcomes people are better able to make sense of what is happening around them (Georgiou, 2008; Janes, 1996). Often it is the interpretation of
the initial event, rather than the event itself, that is most significant (Georgiou, Christou, Stravrinides, & Panaoura, 2002). In attribution theory, causes for a specific event may be seen as (1) external (an event created by something/someone outside the individual affected by the event) or internal (an event created by *something inherent to the individual*), (2) stable (consistent over time) or unstable (changes over time) and (3) controllable (something that the affected individual can manipulate or change) or uncontrollable (something that the individual has little ability to manipulate or change) by the one who makes the attribution. The attributes an individual uses to explain the outcome of an event will often reflect the personal attitudes that an individual holds (Weiner, 1984).

The casual attributions teachers make of their students' success or failure in the classroom are important for several reasons. First, a teacher's attributions regarding a student will influence not only the way the teacher perceives and judges the student but may also influence the way the teacher behaves towards the student. The teacher's behaviour towards the student may not only influence the student's perception but may also affect their actual performance in the classroom. Both the teacher's perception of the student, or the student's reaction to the teacher's perception as indicated through their performance in the class, could influence a teacher's assessment and placement decisions made about that student and lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Clarkson & Ledger, 1984; Fennema, Peterson, Carpenter, & Lubinski, 1990; Georgiou et al., 2002a; 2002b; Peterson & Berger, 1985). The following table illustrates the way attribution theory might unravel in the classroom:
Table 2.1 Attribution theory in the classroom

| External/internal + | A perceived “model” student inexplicably acts out in class. Since the student is not known for disruption, the teacher tries to determine the reason for her behaviour by considering whether the actions were triggered by an outside event or if the reaction signified something more intrinsic to the student (locus of control). |
| Stable/unstable + | The teacher may then consider whether the student has always been disruptive (stable) or if the incident is unusual (causal instability). |
| Controllable/Uncontrollable + | Finally, the teacher may question whether other teachers believe the student is capable of controlling her behaviour or not (controllability). |
| Conclusion | Later the teacher discovers that the student’s reactions were triggered by her parents’ recent separation. Over time, the student reverts to her “usual” well-behaved self. Her behaviour is thus labelled as external (caused by an outside event), unstable (does not last for a long period of time) and controllable (the student when asked, could control her actions). |

This same scenario can also be used to demonstrate how a teacher might determine the cause of a student’s success or failure in the classroom. In this case, the causal attributions are that of a student’s perceived “ability” and/or “effort”. While both the attributions “ability” and “effort” are believed to be internal in causality, “ability” is regarded as stable and uncontrollable since it is perceived as fixed, whereas “effort” is seen as unstable and controllable since it may vary and is under the control of the student (Janes, 1996; Reyna, 2000; Wallace, 1996; Weiner, 1985). A teacher who attributes a student’s success in the classroom to “ability” -something that is internal and stable-may increase her expectancy for that student’s success and therefore be more likely to encourage the student’s persistence in achieving goals. Likewise, students who attribute their success to stable factors such as “ability” may feel confident...
in their ability to succeed and are more likely to participate within the classroom. However if a student’s success is attributed to an unstable factor like “effort” or good fortune, a teacher may have lowered expectations for that student since the need for much effort implies low ability. The student may suffer from lack of confidence regardless of her success if she believes her chance of success requires very hard work or luck.

Alternatively, a teacher who attributes a student’s **failure** to “ability” may develop lower expectations for that student and may even appear to “give up” on the student since her failure has been determined as fixed (Juvonen, 1988; Tollefson & Chen, 1988). Students who identify their failure as intrinsic may also be overwhelmed by feelings of shame, frustration and hopelessness and thus pull further away from the classroom (Gay, Reuth, & Williams, 1993; Juvonen, 1988; Ownings & Magliaro, 1998; Tollefson & Chen, 1988). However, if that student’s failure is attributed to unstable and external factors such as illness, a teacher may continue to have high expectations of that student and the student’s confidence about the likelihood of later success should remain (Janes, 1996). A teacher who perceives a student’s failure as rooted in a lack of effort - something internal and unstable - may be more likely to become angry with the student for not trying hard enough.

### 2.6 Stigma and stereotyping

In his seminal work, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman (1963) describes stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (p.3). Stigmatization is thus created by both the initial recognition of differences based upon the individual’s distinct characteristics and by the subsequent devaluation of that
individual (Dovidio, Major & Crocker, 2000). Once an individual has been stigmatized, the individual is often treated as “less human” and may be subjected to various levels of discrimination that may limit that individual’s life chances (Goffman, 1963). More recent definitions of stigma have included the contextual nature of the stigmatization process. In these definitions, stigma is described as a social construction “determined by the broader cultural context (involving stereotypes, values, and ideologies), the meaning of the situation for participants, and the features of the situation that influence this meaning” (Dovidio et al., 2000, p.3). Such definitions elaborate on how notions of what was once perceived as either “unusual” or “normal” may alter or shift over time.

Goffman identifies three stigmatizing conditions which include the physical (physical deformities); individual character (addiction, mental disability and lower occupational status); and tribal identities (race, sex, religion and nation). Although my argument could potentially encompass all three categories, for the purpose of this section I will focus on “tribal identities”, specifically on variables of race, nation and gender.

“Stereotyping is the generalization about what a particular individual/group is or does without accounting for the individual differences within that individual or group” (Reyna, 2000). According to Georgiou (2008), these generalizations or explanatory labels have two elementary functions. The first is to act as “a basis for immediate action in uncertain circumstances”; the second is to better enable individuals to “simplify complex social environments” (p.119). While a stigma is by definition negative, some stereotypes are perceived as “positive” because collective group members are identified by a trait deemed by society to be beneficial. An example is: “All Asians are good at math” “Jane is Asian. Therefore, Jane is good at math” (Jussim, Palumbo, Chatman, Madon, & Smith, 2000, p.376).
In their research on the effects of race on teachers' assessment of student behaviour, Chang and Sue (2003) note that "to qualify as a stereotype, a characterization must be over generalized or inappropriately applied to members of a group, thereby overshadowing individual difference that may exist" (p.240). What is often not recognized is that all over generalized assumptions, regardless of how positive they may appear can also be hurtful or at least unhelpful if an individual feels they do not fit the designated label. Stereotypes can also be used to rationalize individual acts by stereotyped group members through offering explanations as to why someone did well (or not well) at something. Since it is often assumed that certain characteristics exist among people sharing the same race, ethnicity or gender, individuals belonging to a specific collective group that has been stigmatized may be more likely to be negatively stereotyped than individuals belonging to a non-stigmatized group (Biernat & Dovidio, 2000).

2.7 Stereotypes in the classroom

Teachers are not immune to the pervasive influence of stereotypes and stereotyping. However, their influential position means that the attributions teachers make on students based upon stereotypes can have a larger (and at times detrimental) effect on the lives of their students. Teachers can communicate the attributions they make about their students either directly through their behaviour towards the student in class or indirectly through the grades and assessments they give their student. In addition, the attributions teachers communicate to their students through behavioural cues or academic assessments can also positively or negatively influence the attributional interpretations the student has of their academic potential (Georgiou, 2008).
In her paper, “Lazy, dumb, or industrious: When stereotypes convey attribution information in the classroom”, educational psychologist, Christine Reyna (2000) explains that “although the content of stereotypes varies, the casual components associated with stereotypes are the same” (p.88). Reyna uses Weiner’s (1984) three-dimensional classification model of attribution: locus of causality, controllability, and stability to propose her own model illustrating “the social and personal consequences of stereotypes based on their attributional signatures” (p.88). She claims that,

Attribution conveyed through stereotypes always represent one of three patterns” Stereotypes can communicate causes that are (1) internal/stable/controllable by the stereotyped person (e.g. laziness), (2) internal/stable/uncontrollable by the stereotyped person (e.g. low intelligence), and (3) external/stable/uncontrollable by the stereotyped person (e.g. being the victim of discrimination). Each attributional signature is associated with specific emotions and behavioural responses following either desirable or undesirable events (pp.90-91).

Using Reyna’s model as a guide, I illustrate the various ways in which these attribution eliciting events may unfold in the classroom.

2.7.1 Internal/stable/controllable

Reyna discusses how some ethnic minority groups have been stereotyped as being “inherently lazy.” Since laziness is an undesirable but controllable trait, a teacher influenced by this stereotype may automatically assume that a stereotyped student who hasn’t completed his or her homework has simply chosen to be lazy. Rather than asking the stereotyped individual for a reason why the homework was incomplete, the teacher may simply feel anger towards the student and respond to the stereotyped learner with reluctance, disdain or even punishment for not having completed the assigned work. Research has demonstrated that students with perceived behavioural problems are
more likely to be placed in remedial classrooms (Broussard & Joseph, 1998; Oakes, 1995; Oakes, 1985), thus students of stigmatized group status who are consistently perceived as lazy or as trouble-makers may be more likely to be placed in a lower ability classroom regardless of their ability. The student in turn may be more inclined to feel guilt. The teachers frequent negative behaviour directed towards the student may provoke the student’s rising frustration and eventual disengagement from classroom activities.

Reyna explains that while stereotypes of stigmatized collective group individuals might elicit negative social reactions such as anger, blame and denial of future opportunities, the positive counterpart to that attributional elicited stereotype such as “All Asians are hard-working” or portraying Asians as “model minorities” would result in positive responses. Teachers subscribing to this stereotype may demonstrate an increased trust in Asian students. They also might have more confidence in the potential of Asian students to do well in classroom activities and thus offer students more opportunities and rewards. In turn, the student may feel increased confidence in their ability to achieve as demonstrated by their increased motivation to participate in classroom activities. Despite the seemingly positive benefits derived from this particular positive attribution, Chang and Sue (2003) caution that the positive stereotypes held by some teachers regarding their Asian students’ perceived good behaviour and work ethic can actually be detrimental in that they prevent teachers from identifying and treating behavioural disorders such as problems related to “anxiety, depression and social withdrawal” (p.240). In this case, students who might benefit from a teacher’s extra attention may be ignored.
In addition, teachers who perceive students to be successful in the classroom due primarily to their hard work over their actual academic ability, may reward students for good behaviour but may be less inclined to offer students academic related awards and scholarships. Students who perceive they are consistently being rewarded or praised by teachers for effort may initially feel motivated towards classroom related activities, but may lose their sense of self-worth if they feel they are perceived as being less academically inclined. This too could lead towards a withdrawal from classroom related activities.

2.7.2 Internal/stable/uncontrollable

A group or individual may be stereotyped as low-ability. An example of this is the stereotype that “all girls are bad at math.” This stereotype evokes the notion that a girl’s poor test performance is the result of inherent (and thus uncontrollable) ability. Attributions such as this are particularly damaging to a student’s motivation and self-image. For example, a student who believes her poor performance is due to a lack of effort rather than inherent ability may feel more convinced of her potential for success than a student who believes her poor performance reflects her innate inability. A student who is made to feel her poor performance is innate may feel incompetent and may be more inclined to withdraw from the course or program in order to avoid facing negative feelings (Reyna, 2000; Tollefson & Chen, 1988; Weiner, 1994; Weiner, 1985). In addition, a teacher who believes a student is incapable of success due to their inherent lack of ability in a particular area may be less likely to recommend that student for future opportunities relevant to that subject domain. Such scenarios may help to explain the current under-representation of female students in math and hard sciences.
A group may also be identified as in control of positive outcomes or as "high-ability" students. An example of positive stereotyping of a collective group is the stereotype that "All Asians are good at math." In this case, teachers subscribing to this stereotype would have increased trust and belief in their Asian students' ability to excel in areas where math related skills were required. Outcomes of this might include more Asian students being streamed towards math related domains as well as increased recognition in terms of accolades and rewards in these areas. In turn, the positive reinforcement in this area may increase the motivation of Asian students to excel in this domain. Since math and sciences are areas where Asians are perceived to do well by others, it may also raise the value of these domains within Asian communities since it may be viewed as positively influencing their position within society.

However, it is equally important to keep in mind that while there may be positive outcomes that stem from this stereotype, there are also some drawbacks. For example, the fact that teachers who hold these perceptions may be more likely to steer Asian students towards careers in hard sciences or mathematics may not necessarily be regarded as positive, particularly if individual needs or desires are being ignored. In addition, members of the ascribed group who do not necessarily fulfill the requirements of the "positive" group stereotype (for example, Asian students who are unskilled in math or dislike math related topics) may believe they are in some way inadequate or that something is wrong with them if they do not fulfil such expectations.

2.7.3 External/stable/uncontrollable

In the case of attributional signature "external/stable/uncontrollable" the stereotyped student is perceived by the teacher as having no control over the external factors seen
as influencing their situation. For example, this type of stereotype elicited for Aboriginal students to account for lower graduation rates in education might be “Aboriginal people have adverse life circumstances.” In this case, the stereotype absolves responsibility of the Aboriginal student for his or her situation. Teachers might be more inclined to feel sympathetic towards low-achieving Aboriginal students since they are perceived as being at a greater disadvantage than their non-Aboriginal peers. Teachers may thus be more inclined to offer Aboriginal students some sort of remedial assistance as a form of social support. While this response may maintain the esteem and confidence of the stereotyped individual in the short-term, it could have a damaging influence over time (Roderick, Nagaoka, Bacon & Easton, 2000) if Aboriginal peoples are consistently placed into remedial assistance classes in order to “help” them. In addition, both teachers and students may feel overwhelmed by the perceived barriers faced by the stereotyped individual. Teachers may feel helpless in terms of their ability to assist the student if they feel the problems the student must face are insurmountable or if the barriers within the educational system itself are too much for one individual to overcome. Likewise, stereotyped students may be overwhelmed if they feel there is little they can do to change either their environment or the negative perceptions people have of their ascribed group.

High-achieving Aboriginal students may be more inclined to receive accolades or recognition from teachers for achieving despite perceived barriers. This may seem positive, but the stereotyped individual doesn’t receive proper credit for his/her achievements. Furthermore, their recognition and rewards may be questioned by others, who presume that their accolades were due to their ascribed social status as opposed to his/her ability. This could lead to the stereotyped individual having a
diminished sense of self-worth and increase the frustration at having to “prove” his/her worth or deservedness of recognition.

2.8 Conclusion

In this section I have argued that the combined theories of stigma, stereotyping and attribution may be useful as a theoretical tool to help demonstrate and identify the subtle ways in which teachers’ decisions may be negatively influenced by arbitrary factors such as a student’s race, ethnicity gender or social economic status. However, one might speculate whether such tools would still be useful if it was determined teachers’ decisions regarding students were not influenced by these arbitrary factors and were based solely upon the student’s academic achievement. Might then combined theories of stereotypes and attribution be rendered useless or would they still provide educators with a constructive method of determining the existence of social inequalities within education? I contend that, even if empirical studies determined that teachers’ perceptions were not influenced by factors such as race, gender, ability or ethnicity, theories on stereotypes combined with attribution theory still offer valuable insight into the subtle ways various forms of discrimination may operate in the classroom. For example, failure on academic tests may also be invoked in stigmatized groups in certain situations “where their behaviour can confirm that their group lacks a valued ability” (Aronson, Lustina, Good, Keough, Steele, & Brown, 1999, p.30). Stigmatized groups must address reminders and triggers of particular stereotypes and thus may have developed a heightened awareness of the group stigma. Research has shown that if a group is made aware of their stigmatized status before participation in a test in a subject where their group is deemed incapable, they will not do as well as they would have had
It has not been mentioned at all (Danaher & Crandall, 2008; Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003; Keller & Dauenheimer, 2003; Salinas & Aronson, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). This is referred to as “stereotype threat.”

In addition, a targeted group may feel a certain sense of group loyalty which “may also make the direct target feel more responsible for representing the group and thus be more keenly and chronically apprehensive about representing their group in situations where the group stereotype is relevant” (Aronson et al. 1999, p.41). This means that stigmatized students may be more apprehensive about entering particular subject areas if they feel that they might “let down their group.” This behaviour may help explain why some stigmatized groups choose to disengage from school as a self-protective tactic rather than be continuously abused by the negative feelings triggered by stereotype threat.
3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My master's thesis; *The face of achievement: Influences of teacher decision-making on Aboriginal students* (2005), provided the first empirical evidence of teacher discrimination in the Canadian context. This dissertation extends that research by investigating the reasons teachers give for the recommendations they make about the placement of students in high school programs. In my master's study, 50 pre-service teachers (teachers within the teaching education program) were invited to take part in an on-line task in which they were asked to recommend 24 fictional students for remedial, average or advanced classrooms based upon the program eligibility criteria (Riley & Ungerleider, 2008; Riley, 2005). This study revealed that students whom teachers were led to believe were of Aboriginal ancestry and students whom they were led to believe were students for whom English was a second-language were consistently under-rated in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts regardless of the students' prior academic record. This dissertation follows up on the findings of that on-line study by attempting to *uncover the reasons that teachers give for their recommendations about the opportunities afforded to students*. Twenty-one teachers were invited to participate in a similar task to that which pre-service teachers were asked to complete online. Interviews were designed to explore teachers' ideas regarding issues of race, gender and discrimination in the classroom context in order to offer a rare assessment of the *basis* of classroom decision-making.

The previous study considered the degree to which teachers' decisions were based upon arbitrary characteristics, specifically students' Aboriginal or ESL status. Findings revealed that of those who completed the task, eleven rated Aboriginal and
ESL students as less academically able than their non-Aboriginal, ESL counterparts despite the fact that their achievement was the same. This behaviour raised some concerns because Aboriginal and ESL students were at a greater risk of being placed in remedial classrooms. Some researchers have suggested that students placed in remedial classrooms may have difficulty moving to a more advanced classroom regardless of their academic potential (Blau, 2003; Broussard and Joseph, 1998; Moller, Stearns, Blau, & Land, 2006; Oakes, 1995; Sitrotnik, 1994). Since advanced placements tend to prepare students for university level courses, while remedial classrooms tend to be geared towards more vocational lines of work, Aboriginal and ESL students who have been misdirected into remedial classrooms may be less likely to receive the same opportunities as students placed in more advanced classrooms.

Having worked with pre-service teachers, I recognized that most, if not all, had the desire to do well by their students. The teachers I had spoken to were passionate about their profession and wanted to make a positive contribution to both the education system and the lives of their students. Many teachers I had encountered previously had openly discussed wanting to move away from practices, curriculum and teaching styles that might inhibit their students’ academic performance. So why did some of these teachers make decisions which might inevitably leave some students behind? Were they even aware their decisions regarding particular students were biased? And finally, how might these teachers have responded had I provided them the opportunity to answer these questions? These questions remained after the completion of my first study and inspired me to revisit the questions for this dissertation.
3.1 Ethical dilemma

My interview process was guided by Indigenous methodology which includes the Four Rs of Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity and Responsibility as introduced by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991). Although these guidelines were first intended to “provide guiding values for research with Aboriginal students and Aboriginal peoples in general” (Pidgeon & Cox, 2002, p.102), the Four Rs approach to research is useful when conducting ethical practice in all kinds of research. The first R, Respect, emphasizes the importance of involving participants from the communities in the research we do. This means respecting the ideas of the people we work with and ensuring that all parties involved benefit from the final outcomes of the project. Respect also ensures that the relationship between parties should be built on honesty and trust. The second R, Relevance stresses the importance of considering the needs of both parties. What may be good for the researcher may not always be good for those being interviewed. The researcher needs to be both attentive and flexible towards the needs of the interviewees. This may mean a revision of the original project or even changing the project completely. The third R, Reciprocity, describes the process of sharing. Both parties should be able to walk away from the experience with the feeling that they have helped and guided each other in the process. Finally, the forth R, Responsibility, “ensures that researchers are cognizant of their responsibilities to the research, to the people and to themselves” (Pidgeon & Cox, 2002, p.104). This means that researchers should not only make an effort to ensure that all parties involved are satisfied with the outcome, but also ensure that the needs of all parties have been met throughout the process.
I used the guiding values listed above as a foundation for my interview process. However, I quickly discovered that designing a study while abiding by these values could be problematic. In order to accurately determine on what basis teachers assign educational opportunities to students, it was integral to this study that the teachers not know precisely what the study was about. I was faced with an ethical dilemma. To not reveal the true nature of my study to the teachers did not coincide with the notion of “Respect” which emphasizes honesty and trust between the interviewer and the interviewee. However, to divulge the true nature of my study would inevitably influence the teachers’ responses and thus threaten the integrity of the results.

Knowing that teachers’ decisions regarding student placement not only affects the type of education students receive but may also determine their likelihood of attaining higher education, I concluded that the importance of the issue combined the potential long term benefits of the study was enough to compensate for this minor deception. A list of such benefits include; a) teachers’ greater sense of self-awareness regarding how their decisions may influence their students’ future; b) increased consideration and regard for why decisions are being made about particular students; c) the fostering of constructive action towards eradicating the problem; d) increased funding for social justice workshops for teachers and students; and e) reduction of the gap between the achievement of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students.

Despite these potential long-term benefits, I still wanted to ensure that the teachers interviewed received the respect to which they were entitled. At the end of each interview the true nature of the study was revealed. Teachers were informed that this study was a continuation of a previous study to determine how much of a teacher’s decisions regarding student placement was based upon achievement and how much
was based upon a student's ascribed characteristics. Teachers were then given the opportunity to both reflect upon their decisions and discuss them in relation to the previous study. In addition, all teachers were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. Significantly, not one of the twenty-one teachers opted to withdraw from the study upon hearing the true nature of the experiment. Moreover, many of the teachers responded positively, as indicated by the following response from one of the teachers interviewed:

I think it’s really interesting that you’re doing it this way. I like that you’re um...questioning about ESL and Aboriginal students because a lot of teachers [...] they’re not necessarily cruel towards ESL students but they’re definitely...they don’t have a strong enough understanding of what they’re going through and so they might make judgements about kids and just have sort of biased opinions toward them. And again with the Aboriginal students, I know that some people are biased towards, you know, how they do in school, that kind of thing. Anyway, so I think it’s really interesting that you’re checking on that and seeing what people think.

In addition, by revealing the true nature of the study immediately upon completion of the study task, teachers had the added benefit of being able to identify or reflect upon how their biases may have shaped or influenced their responses, thus making the study more personally meaningful to them. If teachers are able to recognize through direct experience how biases can influence the decisions they make about their students, they may be more willing to consider the reasoning behind each decision. This could lead to decisions based upon accuracy as opposed to perceptual bias and more equitable assessments of all students regardless of their background.

3.2 Sampling

My population of interest was in-service teachers (teachers who had been working within the educational system for two or more years) in Vancouver and nearby districts.
I was primarily interested in teachers who had some experience teaching grades six, seven and eight students since decisions regarding these students are more likely to determine their placement in remedial or advanced classes in secondary school. ESL and special education teachers who worked with students in these age groups were also considered.

A “call for participation” letter informing teachers of the nature of the study was sent around to various teachers’ email list-serves in the region. Teachers were informed that the purpose of the study was “to understand the kinds of decisions teachers make about the programs to which students should be assigned when they make the transition from elementary to secondary school” (see Appendix A & B). Teachers were invited to take part in a one hour interview where they would be expected to perform a task and then answer some questions regarding both the nature of that task and the more general nature of the study (see Appendix C). Interested volunteers were encouraged to respond by phone or email after which an interview time and date would be set up.

“Snowball sampling” was another technique used to recruit participants. In this case, educational administrators and teachers who had heard about the study or volunteers who had previously taken part in the study informed and recruited their colleagues to participate. Two teachers who had already taken part in the study and wished to recruit fellow colleagues to participate were instructed not to reveal the true nature of the study to their colleagues so as not to tamper with the validity of the findings.
3.3 The study task

Twenty-one teachers were recruited to participate in the study. These volunteer teachers were asked to take part in a one hour interview in which they were expected to review 24 records of grade 7 students (see Appendix D). The interviews took place from the beginning of November, 2007 to March, 31, 2008. Teachers were informed prior to the interview that the record cards were fictitious however they were directed to treat the records as if they were genuine. Each record card described a student’s prior academic history from grades 4 to 7 and also provided information about the student’s background. The academic information was systematically varied within each category of students (Aboriginal, ESL, non-Aboriginal) and within each gender (M, F). Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Music and Art were included in the transcripts.

The 24 student records were divided so that 8 would represent ESL students, 8 would represent Aboriginal students and 8 would be neutral. Teachers would be cued to recognize that a student was Aboriginal or ESL by including on the record information that the board had received targeted funding for the student in one or more years. Similarly, by leaving the Aboriginal and English Second Language funding categories blank for 8 students, I hoped the respondent would infer that they were neither Aboriginal nor English as a Second Language. The prior achievement of the students was also manipulated to ensure that students in each of the three categories would have identical records of prior achievement. Record cards were printed and laminated

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3 Interview quotes used within this study will not include the dates of the interview so as not to disrupt the dialogic nature of the discussion.
so as to allow teachers a chance to flip through each card at their own pace. Following the task, teachers were asked a series of questions regarding both the task itself and their views regarding the teaching profession (see Appendix E, F & G).

3.4 Interview procedures
Teacher interviews took place in a quiet area selected by the teacher prior to the date of the interview. Most interviews took place in the teacher’s classroom after class hours. All interviews were audio recorded with the teacher’s permission. Teachers participating in the interview were reminded prior to the interview that the purpose of the study was to explore the nature of teacher judgment. Each teacher was given a brief explanation of the interview procedure both orally and in writing (see Appendix D). All teachers’ were asked to sign a consent form prior to the commencement of the interview (see Appendix B). The consent form stipulated that teachers were free to withdraw from the study at any point in time.

3.5 Think aloud method
Since the objective of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the thought processes involved when teachers make decisions regarding student placement, teachers were asked to explain their rationale for decisions using a technique described as the "think aloud method." The "think aloud" method was employed because this method enables the researcher to have an insight into the participant’s mind from moment to moment as they complete an assigned task. This method, stemming from psychological research, involves the process of presenting a subject with a specific task and asking the subject to articulate their thought process while performing that task. The
method first gained popularity in the 1980s at a time when computer scientists were developing programs based on the work of "experts." Computer knowledge engineers would use the think aloud method as a tool to systematically retrieve expert information on how to do a particular task or run a particular program from "experts" in the field. As a methodology, this technique is thought to work best with people who have higher level verbalization skills and who have some form of expertise with the task being presented to them.4

This technique is appropriate for a study about teachers' decisions for several reasons. First, the think aloud process allows the researcher to gain better insight into the specific reasoning behind teachers' choices. The think aloud method uses the verbal information received from the teacher as data which can later be analyzed to see if any significant patterns emerge through the process. Second, teachers as subjects make ideal candidates since they should have high level verbalization skills and, if given a task related to their teaching profession, they should feel relatively confident as "experts" in their field. They should, therefore, be comfortable enough to do a task while speaking about it. Third, while teachers should feel comfortable being asked to make decisions regarding student placement, the task would be difficult enough to ensure that the risk of teachers giving an automatic responses is minimal. Finally, there would be enough information on the record cards to elicit some form of discussion from the teachers regarding the rational for their selections.

4 Researchers using the "think aloud" methodology have found certain tasks are more conducive to this approach than others. Tasks less suited to this method are those that involve non-verbal information or those where speed is inherent in the nature of the task.
While the think aloud method is relatively straightforward, some emotional and motivational problems may disturb the subject's cognitive process if certain procedures are overlooked. Some problems that may occur are incompleteness due to synchronization; i.e., the subject may find it difficult to talk at the same time as the cognitive process or that the cognitive process may take more time because the subject may slow down their thought process in attempt to synchronize it with verbalization. This may lead to certain "holes" in the observation which may indicate that a thought occurred that wasn't articulated. It is also important for the interviewer to consider that although subjects may be able to perform a task well, they may not always be able to explain why they make certain decisions. In addition, the pressure of being supervised may influence the reasoning processes of teachers, especially when they think aloud (Van Someren, Barnard, & Sandberg, 1994). Teachers may not want the interviewer to know that they cannot always easily justify their answers and therefore could attempt to adopt a more rational reasoning style for the sake of the study (Van Someren et al., 1994). In order to circumvent such problems, I worked to ensure that teachers were comfortable during the interview process. If the teachers were more relaxed during the interview process they would feel more at ease while they completed, helping to ensure their responses were natural. I first made sure that interviews took place in a location of their convenience. For most teachers, this meant in their classroom after class hours. Once teachers were comfortably seated, I informed teachers of the nature of the task both orally and in writing (see Appendix D), giving them an opportunity to ask me any questions or address any concerns they had about the process. Teachers were informed that I would be assigning them a task which would require them to make decisions about the placement of 24 fictional students. I informed them that while they
were making their decisions, I wanted them to articulate anything that came into mind. I then gave teachers an opportunity to practice “thinking aloud” by engaging them in an exercise similar to that required for the study. This sample exercise involved teachers looking at two photographs. One photograph showed the image of a duck while the other had the image of a dog. Teachers were also shown two folders, one labelled “park” and the other labelled “pond”. Teachers were instructed to place each photo into the folder they felt to be the most appropriate while simultaneously explaining why they were making that decision. The objective of this exercise was two-fold. First, it gave teachers an opportunity to see what was expected of them. The trivial nature of the exercise helped to put teachers at ease. It also allowed me to clearly establish the guidelines for the task prior to the teachers completing the exercise. For example, if teachers placed the photos in the folder and proceeded to explain their decisions after having completed the task, I was able to explain to them the importance of “thinking aloud” during the process.

3.6 The process

Once the teacher was ready to begin, each teacher was presented with the 24 student record cards. Teachers were again reminded that the record cards were fictitious but should be treated as they would treat a record card of an actual student. Teachers were instructed to one-by-one (a) review the 24 fictitious permanent student records, b) consider the criteria for program options (remedial, standard or advanced), and (c) place the card in one of three folders laid out on the table before them labelled either “Supplementary Learning assistance”, "Regular Grade Eight Program" and "Rapid Advance program" (an accelerated program in which five years of secondary education
is compressed into four years). I explained that student record cards teachers regarded as quite strong were to be placed in the folder labelled Rapid Advance program. If a teacher perceived a student's prior academic history to indicate they would benefit from more assistance, they could place the card into the folder labelled Supplementary Learning Assistance. As a third option, they could recommend a student be registered in the Regular Grade Eight program of study. Teachers were again reminded to "think aloud" while making their decisions.

While teachers were making their decisions, I recorded which student record cards teachers had been placed into what folders. Prior to the interview, I had attached a list within my notepad which clearly indicated under what folder each fictional student should be placed if judged by their academic ability alone. This process allowed me to immediately identify any instance where a teacher either under or over-rated a student. It also enabled me to determine if that student was Aboriginal, ESL or non-Aboriginal, non-ESL. The subject's think aloud comments were recorded electronically.

3.7 Interview questions

Once the teacher had completed the exercise, teachers were requested to answer a series of questions regarding the decisions they made about the student record cards. These questions were designed to reveal the reasons for the teachers' decisions about the cards and enabled the teacher to reflect upon the decisions they made. Using the notebook as a guideline, I would begin by asking the teacher a relatively "neutral" question. A "neutral" question would be a question that involved a teacher responding to an inquiry about a record card that had been placed in the appropriate category. One example of this would be to ask a teacher to explain why they placed a high-achieving
student record card into the folder labelled "advanced." I would then move on to more "challenging" questions. These questions involved asking teachers to reflect upon placement decisions where the student's ability did not coincide with the level to which they were placed. For instance, a teacher might be asked why they placed an "average" student in a remedial classroom. If there was a discrepancy in placement, I would ask the teacher to compare a student that they had placed in a remedial classroom with a student whose record was the same that they had placed in a regular classroom seeking their reasons for placing one student in one folder and one with the same record in the other. If the teacher recognized that the students were of the same ability level, I would give the teacher the option to change their decision and would ask them why they wanted to make the change.

In addition, I asked teachers to follow-up on or expand upon any comments they had made during the "think aloud" experiment. For example, if a teacher noted some surprise, confusion or disappointment while regarding a particular student's record card, I would ask them to explain their reaction to that card in more detail. Finally, teachers who had placed all students into one folder were still asked to respond to selected student record cards individually. These teachers were asked to compare student record cards of varying achievement levels and then to respond to any differences noted between the two cards. If teachers could note the differences between the achievement levels of the cards, they were asked to reflect upon why they opted to place record cards of varying levels within the same class. Once teachers had had the opportunity to respond to each of these questions, teachers were informed that they were at the final stage of the interview process.
The final series of questions pertained to the general nature of the study rather than the task itself. Each teacher was asked to respond to the following series of questions; a) Do you think achievement expectations should be modified if a student is Aboriginal? Why or why not; b) Do you think achievement expectations should be modified if a student is ESL? Why or why not? c) To what extent might background factors influence achievement and what do you consider as being background factors? d) To what extent might gender influence achievement? Why or why not?

The final question for the teachers involved revealing the true nature of the study to the teacher by comparing this study to the previous study I had done with pre-service teachers. Teachers were informed that in my previous study regarding teacher decision making, I had found that eleven out of fifty pre-service teachers had consistently rated students they were led to believe were Aboriginal or ESL students as being lower than their non-Aboriginal, non-ESL counterparts, regardless of the student’s prior academic record. Teachers were then asked to give their opinions as to why that might have happened. Those who had made biased decisions were informed and given the opportunity to explain their rationale behind the decisions they made. Some teachers recognized their bias prior to being informed and would discuss their reasoning for the decisions.

3.8 Data analysis

Once interviews were completed, each interview was transcribed for analysis. All twenty-one teachers received a copy of their transcribed interview for review. At this time, teachers were given the opportunity to make any revisions they felt were necessary. Only one teacher opted to make revisions to her original transcript. Her revisions were minor and did not affect her initial decisions.
Final transcripts were read and re-read for emergent themes and individual concepts relating to the literature. What was looked for, in essence, was not a validation of previous, pre-determined theoretical understandings but rather an understanding of teachers' interpretations and observations. The connections noted between and across interviews helped to examine pre-conceptions and assumptions. Once themes were identified, they were coded and processed using Atlas software.

Because this research discusses personal biases and their influences upon the decision-making process, a method was devised to minimize the possibility that my own bias might taint the results of analysis. In order to do this, a strict guide line was created to ensure both the relevance of the code being used and the legitimacy of its application to the findings. Using a method adapted from Boyatziz (1998) and outlined by Rubin and Rubin (2005, p.216), a list was created to work out ways of recognizing and labelling each concept. For each theme used, the following questions were considered: a) how would the concept be labelled/coded; b) how would each code be defined; c) how would the concept be recognized in interviews; d) what would be excluded and e) what is an example of the concept? The list was kept on file for referral so as to ensure that findings were consistent with the code to which it was applied.

3.9 Context and interpretations

The study takes as its point of view that Canada strives to ensure equality among persons such that no person is discriminated against on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability or any other prohibited grounds without good reason (The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 15, 1992; Ontario Human Rights Act, Part 1, Freedom from
Discrimination, 1990). As moral and political philosopher John Rawls (1971, 1985) states, “each person has an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties, which scheme is compatible with a similar scheme for all” and that all positions must be “open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity” (p.227, 1985). For example, one should not be denied an opportunity to become an airline pilot unless there is a demonstrable reason as to why such a person should not have such an opportunity (such as physical or mental incapacity).

The study is situated in the context of contemporary public schooling in Canada in which opportunities are intended to be allocated on the basis of ability (merit) rather than on the basis of one’s gender, ethnicity, socio-economic position, or one’s attributed ‘racial’ identity. The task asked that teachers make recommendations about the students’ placement based on the grades they received for their prior school performance. While grades, like any other shorthand, are subject to interpretation both in their assignment and in their evaluation, it was assumed that, as an indicator of merit, grades would be relatively unambiguous markers of student achievement. I refer to placement in remedial, regular, or advanced high school programs as opportunities, a descriptive term without any intended evaluative judgment as to their desirability. Judgment refers to the ways that the teachers evaluated the information on the record cards in arriving at their recommendations regarding the placement of the students. When a teacher’s judgment concurred with the grades on a student’s record card, I describe that judgment as accurate, meaning that it conformed to the instruction to make the recommendation on the basis of the student’s prior achievement as indicated by the grades the student had earned. When a teacher makes judgments on any other basis, I describe those judgments as biased or exhibiting bias. In the study, I describe
non-Aboriginal, non-ESL student records cards as "neutral". The term neutral in this case means it was not given a specific designation or label such as "Aboriginal funding" or "ESL". This does not mean that these cards were "neutral" in terms of a teacher's interpretation of the card. The very fact that cards which did not have the aforementioned designations were less likely to evoke commentary from teachers also indicates various assumptions and stereotypes teachers were making about those particular students and is something I discuss further in chapter five.

3.10 Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the methodology for the study and have explained the think aloud process that was used to clarify the reasons for teachers' decision making. In addition, I have discussed my attempt to maintain the integrity of 4 Rs approach (Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity and Responsibility) to qualitative research as introduced by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991). Clarity of the objectives of the project has been maintained through open communication and mutual respect between researcher and participant. The research is relevant in that it addresses one of the most critical issues in Canadian education today, that of ensuring Aboriginal educational success. Reciprocity is achieved through the heightened awareness educators may derive through the sharing and understanding of information obtained from this study. Educators may recognize how their perceptual biases affect their decisions and opinions regarding various groups of students. This may increase their sensitivity towards the factors affecting these decisions. Finally, participating educators in this research project will know that it was their honesty and willingness to contribute their time which has provided greater insight into furthering the success of the Aboriginal learners they teach.
In this chapter I present the findings from the interviews with the teachers. I begin by describing the participants and presenting a general overview of the findings. Following this, I present the various themes uncovered throughout the research. I consider teachers' reluctance to make decisions based solely on grades and then go on to consider other factors that had an influence on the decisions that were made. Finally, I reflect upon the voices of the teachers as they describe their rationale behind the decisions they made.

The following three tables illustrate: a) Grade levels of the fictional student record cards; b) An overview of the teachers' placement of these students; c) Teachers' current teaching grade level and the number of years taught. I will discuss my findings in relation to these three tables.

Table 4.1: Grade levels of fictional student record cards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lowest Achievement</th>
<th>Aboriginal Students</th>
<th>ESL Students</th>
<th>Neither</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Minnie Skwistwugh</td>
<td>Sharmeen Aziz</td>
<td>Tracey E. Spencer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>James D. Mannuel</td>
<td>Kyun-Yin (S) Poon</td>
<td>Brooks J. Grayson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Middle Achievement</td>
<td>Jean Billie</td>
<td>Nisha A. Advani</td>
<td>Jenna S. Peters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>John Koitleamugh</td>
<td>Abdul Farooq</td>
<td>Christopher A. Burns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Middle Achievement</td>
<td>Irene Battiste</td>
<td>Tao Li</td>
<td>Melissa J. Doyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Thomas Mraiteskel</td>
<td>Nabil Hasan</td>
<td>Jamie M. Nelson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Achievement</td>
<td>Rosalind Wallace</td>
<td>Young-Ja Park</td>
<td>Michael Remmington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hubie Jack</td>
<td>Hiromasa (M) Morika</td>
<td>Tammy L. Field</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.2: Summary of teachers' decisions regarding student record card placement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students' names</th>
<th>Miriam</th>
<th>Emma</th>
<th>Michelle</th>
<th>Judith</th>
<th>Shane</th>
<th>Rachel</th>
<th>Charles</th>
<th>Andrea</th>
<th>Rebecca</th>
<th>Sharon</th>
<th>Violia</th>
<th>Janet</th>
<th>Steve</th>
<th>Derek</th>
<th>Peter</th>
<th>Stephanie</th>
<th>Vanessa</th>
<th>Sarah</th>
<th>Nicole</th>
<th>Carly</th>
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<td>James Darren</td>
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<td>Minnie Skwistwugh</td>
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Legend:  
Supplemental Program = S  
Regular Program = R  
Rapid Advance Program = A
Table 4.3: Teachers’ current grade level(s) and number of years taught

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<th># OF YRS</th>
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<td>Stephanie</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
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<td>Cathy</td>
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<td>Steve</td>
<td>Grade 7</td>
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<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Grades 8-10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>Grade 6 &amp; 7</td>
<td>25 yrs</td>
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<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>18 yrs</td>
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<td>Judith</td>
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<td>Violet</td>
<td>Grades 8-10</td>
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<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Grade 5 &amp; 6</td>
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<td>2 yrs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Derek</td>
<td>Grade 6</td>
<td>16 yrs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Grade 2 &amp; 6</td>
<td>10 yrs</td>
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<td>Shane</td>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>16 yrs</td>
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<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>5 yrs</td>
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<td>8 yrs</td>
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<td>Andrea</td>
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<td>Emma</td>
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<td>Rebecca</td>
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4.1 Participant backgrounds

While in many ways the task I provided in the present study paralleled that previously undertaken by pre-service teachers, there were several factors (aside from the actual research questions) that made this study unique. A major difference, as previously noted, is that of the participants themselves. The teachers in my previous study were pre-service teachers who were completing their teacher education. While pre-service teachers had completed a teaching practicum, their experience could not be compared to the wealth of teaching experience that characterized the in-service teachers interviewed for this study. All teachers interviewed for this study had a minimum of two
years teaching experience - some had been teaching for over thirty-five years. These teachers taught in various areas in and near Vancouver including North and West Vancouver. One teacher interviewed taught in New Westminster and two taught in Surrey. Many of the in-service teachers had had teaching experience at not one but several schools in different areas such as Burnaby, Surrey, New Westminster, Squamish, Coquitlam and Prince George. One teacher had experience teaching outside of the province and at least three teachers had taught abroad in Mexico, England, Scotland, Taiwan, Korea and Australia.

While most teachers interviewed had had some experience teaching grade seven classes where decisions regarding student placement were more likely to be addressed, many of the teachers had experience teaching various grades. There were some teachers who noted specific experience working in ESL or learning assistance classrooms, other teachers mentioned teaching enriched classes. Several teachers also noted having some experience with multi-aged classrooms. As these teachers noted, the wealth of experience and expertise that come from years of practice may account for some of the differences between this study and the previous study and, therefore, should be taken into account when considering study findings.

4.2 On-line verses face to face

Another difference between the present task and the task completed by the fifty pre-service teachers was that the first involved an online survey and therefore was strictly anonymous. The twenty-one teachers I interviewed did not have the luxury of anonymity since I observed all teachers perform the task. This difference alone, without question, influenced the behaviour of my respondents. The task, when completed online
in the first study, took respondents no longer than ten minutes to complete. The similar task, when completed face to face, took respondents anywhere from twenty-five to forty-five minutes \textit{without} including the interview process. This additional time was due to teachers being asked to “think aloud” as they made their decisions. Teachers, aware they had an audience, may have been more likely to demonstrate the time and care they took when making decisions they knew could influence the students’ futures. The greater amount of time taken meant responses were less automatic and may have given teachers the opportunity to exercise their “control thought process” tools. This means that while labels such as “Aboriginal” or “ESL” or the student name itself may have elicited an automatic stereotypic response associated with that label, teachers may have been able to reflect upon the fact that they do not endorse that stereotype or at least, they do not endorse making decisions that may influence the lives of their students based on such stereotypes. In addition, without an observer to potentially pass judgement on decisions made, pre-service teachers may have felt less inhibited than their in-service teacher counterparts, who were more keenly aware of the fact that their decision making skills were under scrutiny. Performing the task in front of an observer may have encouraged in-service teachers to be more conscientious when making their decisions and therefore more likely to internally monitor their decision making patterns. In addition, being requested to reflect aloud upon their decision making process may have led to more thoughtful and less spontaneous decision making.

Finally, since the task pre-service teachers had completed was online, these teachers had the privilege of completing the task at a time and place of their convenience (in fact, records showed that some pre-service teachers completed the
study while still attending the class in which the study was announced). Teachers who participated in the present study were required to commit at least one hour of their time to complete the think aloud and the follow-up questions. This is not easy for teachers who are often overextended in terms of what they have to do in a day. Despite this, I found that the teachers who were willing to volunteer were the ones who were already deeply committed to their school's activities and had the tendency to play an active role in their educational environment. Several teachers had reported taking additional courses or were currently improving their educational knowledge out of interest alone. Some teachers reported attending workshops or leading committees on social justice issues. A couple of teachers had to reschedule or delay their interviews because they were involved in after-school activities with their students. These teachers were "do-ers" who were, without question, committed to their practice. Teachers agreeing to partake in this study were offered no compensation other than the knowledge that their participation may contribute "towards the improvement of existing educational programs and workshops designed for both pre-service and in-service teachers", giving some indication of the extent to which these particular teachers were willing to go out of their way for the benefit of their students and their practice.

4.3 Overview of the findings

The teachers were asked to make decisions based on the records of 24 fictitious students. Each card described the student's prior academic history in grades four to seven while also providing hints about the student's background (Aboriginal, ESL). The academic information was systematically varied within each category of students between high-achievement, high-medium achievement, low medium achievement and
low achievement. Responses of teachers fell into one of four categories; 1) Teachers who placed student record cards accurately according to three levels of achievement, 2) Teachers who placed according to two levels of achievement, 3) Teachers who refused to differentiate between student record cards regardless of achievement level, 4) Teachers whose placement decision demonstrated bias toward one or more students.

4.3.1 Accurate placement according to three levels of achievement

Of the twenty-one teachers, only one teacher (Veronique) placed student record cards accurately according to three different levels of achievement: supplementary learning assistance, regular grade eight and rapid advanced. Veronique placed all students designated as “low-achievers” in the supplementary learning assistance folder, all low-medium and high-medium in the regular grade eight folder and all high-achieving student record cards in the rapid advanced folder. Students were only differentiated by grade level and not by group affiliation. When examining the student record cards, Veronique specifically noted that that she would first examine how a student was doing in core subjects such as language arts, math and science. She noted that for her, math and science were of primary importance since she believed those were the subjects “valued in our educational system.” After that, Veronique chose to focus specifically on a student achievement. She noted that if she came across a student who had received quite a few Cs or B-s, she would place the student in supplementary assistance because she was not confident in that student’s ability to handle the transition into a grade eight classroom where courses would be more challenging. When questioned, Veronique did note an awareness of student designations mainly because she was surprised they were included since she believed they could incite biased student
placement decisions. She advocated the importance of recognizing each student as an individual and credits her pre-service training program for preparing her for her teaching practice by encouraging teachers to recognize and acknowledge their values and belief system. She cites a course where she was trained to identify biases in classroom resources as being particularly useful. Veronique also credits her experience teaching in Oaxaca, Mexico, an experience which was part of her teacher training program, as enabling her to both experience and understand difference. In addition, Veronique mentioned that she was pleased that her training program offered a course in ESL methodology, something she was surprised more teaching training programs didn’t advocate considering the number of ESL students there are in schools across Canada. Finally, Veronique noted that being an English Second Language speaker herself, she may have been less inclined to undervalue the academic achievement of ESL students. Interestingly, Veronique - the only teacher who placed all low-achieving students in the supplementary learning assistance folder - consistently referred to herself in the interview as being considered an exceptionally hard marker by both her students and her peers.

4.3.2 Placement according to two levels of achievement

Of the twenty-one teachers, five teachers placed all student record cards within two achievement level folders: regular grade eight and rapid-advance. These teachers opted to place student record cards ranging from low, low-medium to high-medium in the "regular grade eight folder" regardless of group designation. These teachers did not seem to feel comfortable placing the students depicted in the student record cards in the supplementary learning assistance folder. When asked specifically about their
refusal to place students in the supplementary learning assistance class, teachers relayed the fact that none of the students represented on the student record card grade received a grade below C. This fact was observed by many of the teachers, largely because they were visibly surprised by what they consider to be the “remarkably high grades” of students. Their reactions indicated that they were not accustomed to seeing so many students with such a high achievement. Several teachers remarked that unless a student was getting a C- or lower, they would not consider them a candidate for a supplementary learning assistance classroom. The surprise generated by the “high marks” of the students gave a clear indication of what teachers were accustomed to seeing and this wasn’t being represented on the student record cards.

While these five teachers did not differentiate according to group designation, two of the five teachers did have some difficulty deciding whether to place two low-achieving ESL students in the supplementary learning assistance class or the regular classroom. After some hesitation, the two teachers decided to place the low-achieving male ESL student in the regular grade eight class.

4.3.3 Refusal to differentiate between student record cards

While most teachers complied and placed students in the folders they felt best corresponded to the achievement level depicted on the record card, there were four notable exceptions. These four teachers made it clear that they objected to streaming and placed all students, regardless of their achievement level, into a regular grade eight classroom. These teachers claimed to be opposed to student placement for at least one of the following reasons. They felt: a) all students, regardless of achievement level, should be able to learn from each other; b) students placed in a rapid advanced
classroom would miss out on benefits of elective courses like art and music; c) opposition to fast-tracking students through school; d) placement according to ability may socially disconnect student from their peers. Of the four teachers, two of the teachers announced their decision not to place students according to ability prior to looking through the student record cards. Denial of opportunity without good reason constitutes discrimination. While all four teachers were articulate when it came to advocating and promoting ideas around social justice and equality, by placing 24 students into a regular classroom, all four teachers had effectively denied 8 high-achieving students from the possible benefits and opportunities accrued from advanced placement.

4.3.4 Teacher placement bias

Of the twenty-one teachers, eleven teachers showed some bias towards one or more students in their selection process. The variance among these biases and the reasoning behind it will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter. The following is a brief overview of the various types of biases that were noted.

With the exception of the four teachers who refused to place students in the rapid advance classroom, most teachers were consistent in placing all high-achieving students regardless of group affiliation into the rapid advance class. However, there was one exception. One teacher decided to place only one student, Young-Ja Park, a high-achieving female ESL student, into the rapid advanced class, while all other high-achieving peers were placed into a regular classroom. This teacher noted that this was because she was an ESL student who had achieved an A+ in language arts, something he regarded as “exceptional” and demonstrated her high capability for achievement.
Overall, the tendency to place high-medium and low-medium achieving students in the regular grade eight classroom was consistent. Another notable exception was the decision by one teacher to place mid-achieving Nisha Arjan Advani and Melissa Jannette Doyle in rapid advanced classes, but not their male ESL and Aboriginal counterparts of equivalent performance. The teacher later attributed this discrepancy in part to the fact that they were girls and would mature faster. In addition, there were some minor concerns over whether to place Jamie Mathew Nelson, a non-Aboriginal, non-ESL male student and high-medium achiever in a rapid advance class due to his A+ in language arts. In the end, four teachers elevated him to rapid advance status, while after some hesitation three other teachers finally placed him in regular grade eight class. One of the teachers noted that the A+ in language arts was particularly noteworthy because he was a male.

While only one teacher placed all low-ranging students in the supplementary learning assistance folder, there were several occasions where some but not all of the low achieving students were placed into the remedial classroom. With the exception of one outlier, all of these students were either Aboriginal or ESL students. Minnie Skwistwugh, a low-achieving female Aboriginal student was placed into a supplementary learning assistance classroom three times but considered (but not placed) for supplementary learning assistance by two other teachers. Kyun-Yin (Stanley) Poon, a low-achieving ESL student, was placed into the supplementary learning assistance nine times and considered for supplementary learning assistance an additional two times. His ESL female counter-part, Sharmeen Aziz was placed into supplementary learning assistance five times and considered for supplementary learning assistance once. With the exception of outlier Brooks James Grayson, (who
was subsequently switched to the regular grade eight classroom during the question portion of the interview), non-Aboriginal, non-ESL students were not placed in supplementary learning assistance unless it was later pointed out that they had received the same grades as the other either Aboriginal or ESL students who were placed in the supplementary learning assistance folder.

One teacher (Olivia) placed a high-middle achieving, female Aboriginal student (Irene Battiste) higher than her non-Aboriginal peer (Melissa Janette Doyle) and a low-achieving male Aboriginal student (James Darren Mannuel) higher than his non-Aboriginal, non-ESL peer (Brooks James Grayson). When questioned, Olivia responded that she made her decisions based on the fact that both students were Aboriginal. She supposed that she was trying to replicate “affirmative action” with her decisions. She felt that her awareness that Aboriginal students have a lower graduation rates than their non-Aboriginal peers may have subconsciously inspired her to place the Aboriginal students into a more advanced class as a way to increase their chances of enrolment in higher educational institutions. However, in the same interview she also claimed to be more impressed with the high achieving records of the Aboriginal students because she felt they faced more adverse circumstances than their non-Aboriginal peers. It is important to note that Olivia’s decisions to place Aboriginal students in higher levels than non-Aboriginal students were not consistent. For example, Olivia placed all high-achieving students into the academic folder regardless of group designation and she also placed all middle-low ranging students into a regular classroom regardless of group designation. In addition, Olivia later opted to remove Brooks James Grayson from the supplementary leaning assistance and place him back into a regular classroom with James Darren Mannuel, his Aboriginal peer of the same ability range.
Olivia also placed low-achieving ESL students, Kyun-Yin (Stanley) Poon and Sharmeen Aziz, into the supplementary learning assistance folder. When questioned why she had placed these two students in supplementary learning assistance over non-ESL students in the same grade level, Olivia noted the students' ESL designation as being the primary factor behind her decision. Interestingly, when it was noted that both Tracey Spencer, a non-ESL, non-Aboriginal student and Minnie Skwistwugh, an Aboriginal student had virtually the same record card as Sharmeen Aziz, Olivia chose to remove Minnie Skwistwugh from the regular folder and place her into the supplementary learning assistance class with Sharmeen Aziz while opting to allow Tracey Elizabeth Spencer to remain in the regular classroom. When questioned, Olivia cited "extenuating circumstances" in reference to the lifestyle of Aboriginal peoples as her justification for removing Minnie Skwistwugh and not Tracey Spencer from a regular to supplementary learning assistance classroom.

4.4 Summary of findings

When teachers were asked to rate students based on their student record cards, most teachers (with the exception of four) responded to the student's prior academic achievement. Some teachers' recommendations were also influenced by arbitrary factors such as the students' group membership. The themes in the following section outline the various factors teachers took into consideration when making decisions regarding student placement.
4.5 Teachers' resistance to the exercise

Of the twenty-one teachers interviewed, fifteen expressed anxieties when making decisions that would determine student classroom placement without personally knowing the student. Of these teachers Andrea\(^5\) was perhaps the most agitated. I watched as she rolled her eyes for the fourth time since I had asked her to begin the task of assigning fictitious student record cards to either supplementary learning assistance, regular grade eight or rapid advanced programs based on the student's eligibility criteria. One by one she flipped through the student records, sometimes muttering to herself and at other times, letting out long and frustrated sighs. After one such sigh, she turned her gaze towards me and explained:

I'm responding because I'm looking at letter grades which we don't give in this school. And I'm so glad to get away from them. Because I look at this and I know how arbitrary they are. I know the kinds of work that will determine, you know, whether a student turns out to be an A, B+ or a C+ in any term. Like the range can be quite, quite different and I respond to that. And I mean, so I'm looking at these across grades four through seven, looking for consistency, looking for changes over time thinking of how kids develop because these are all grades that I've taught over a number of years. I've worked in multi-aged groupings a lot so this is a five, six, seven group right now and I, you know, I do respond to that, Andrea paused briefly mid-sentence and sighed again, "I don't give marks a lot of credence is the bottom line."

When faced with the task of assigning the record cards of fictitious students to programs based upon eligibility criteria, Andrea was clearly the most visibly frustrated teacher. However, Andrea was not alone in her apprehension about making decisions about students based on grades alone. Steve paused briefly before placing the first student record card into the folder, turned to me and explained,

\(^5\) All teachers' names are pseudonyms.
Okay, first of all, I guess I'd have to say that, not knowing the individual students, this is somewhat challenging to base this solely on a report card grade because a report card grade is pretty limited in its scope as to what a student is capable of, um, achieving, producing and doing.

For teachers like Steve and Andrea, grades alone don't adequately articulate the way in which a student would interact in a classroom environment. These teachers, and others like them, could and would acknowledge high achieving students based on their student record cards. However, they found it difficult to place a student into a high achieving class without having some insight into how that child would behave socially in the classroom environment.

Some teachers expressed the concern that while some students may have good academic grades, they may lack the social skills to excel in an enriched classroom or that the environment of the enriched classroom would isolate them from their peers if they were not socially mature. These teachers suggested that students who lack social maturity may benefit more from a "mainstream" classroom where they could learn how to interact with other students. Rather than focusing on the grade as a reflection of the student's ability to achieve, teachers like Steve and Andrea held the belief that knowing the students personally would enable them to place them in a classroom that was appropriate to the students' needs.

In general, teachers appeared to be uncomfortable with the responsibility of making a major decision about an unknown student's future. Some teachers acknowledged that they would not feel comfortable assessing a student's placement without having had at least a half-year experience in a classroom with the student. For example, Sarah explains, "I wouldn't be comfortable doing it before maybe March in the year so that I really understood the student. So I would be looking much more about
um, how independent they are, how motivated they are, their social, um, social
development.” For Sarah, letter grades alone do not provide insights into other factors
that may be crucial to classroom achievement. For Andrea, even a half year with a
student may not be enough to fully comprehend a suitable classroom placement. She
asserts, “I feel very comfortable, um, recommending programs for students once I’ve
had them for one or two or three years. But not in this situation...like this.”

I asked teachers what additional background factors they would consider, aside
from letter grades, in making decisions about student placement. Vanessa, who had
been teaching for over sixteen years, had no difficulty elaborating:

Um, family concerns, lifestyle concerns, um, work habits that a student has are
really important. Um, you know even cultural influences as well are really
important to a student’s success and achievement and I mean just looking at
these cards it’s really difficult to decide where you’re going to place somebody in
a program without knowing their history outside of how a report card looks
because a report card doesn’t tell you everything about a student, it doesn’t tell
you how hard they work. I could have one of these, these regular program
students that are solid B+s that work really, really hard and are really making
gains, steady and you know, fully capable and not knowing much about what that
program, the rapid advance program would look like, they could be a candidate
for it, um, so I think that those play huge, huge factors in terms of deciding where
a student places or in terms of how successful they are.

For these teachers, it quickly became apparent that it was not only the grade that
mattered but the student’s family background, their lifestyle (and presumably socio-
economic status); their cultural heritage and even the way in which they managed to
obtain the grades were all factors that teachers wanted to consider. Teachers
consistently mentioned behavioural factors such as work ethic, work habits, and a
student’s general attitude towards school as factoring into their placement decision. In
addition, teachers seemed more willing to reward students if they perceived the student
as being both socially mature and a hard worker. However, a teacher’s perception of
work ethic could also be detrimental to the student if that teacher perceived the student was spending too much time and effort to achieve certain marks. Such behaviour was noted at times with teachers’ assignment of high-achieving ESL students, as is discussed later in this chapter.

Many teachers expressed that while a letter grade might indicate a student’s achievement, it would not provide insight into the student’s potential. For example, Miriam suggested that one reason she doesn’t like to make decisions based solely on report card evaluations is that she feels it sometimes doesn’t accurately represent academic potential. According to her, a student’s potential might be high but could be thwarted by low motivation. In a case like this, she claims she would be tempted to place that student in an advanced class where there would be more opportunities for such a student to be challenged. However, she says that without any personal experience with the child she would be hard-pressed to make that judgement. Steve, a teacher for four years, agrees. He states, “I’ve even seen students who are not necessarily high achievers, but they really have really big picture ideas when it comes to math, they can really see how things are supposed to fit together and can work and can explain it very well.” Steve goes on to explain that these same “big picture” students may not necessarily be high achievers on written tests and so he would like to know whether student record grades are more reflective of a student’s performance on a written test than the teachers’ overall observations of that student in the classroom.

Rebecca also feels that letter grades alone are misleading. She observes that “C- a lot of the times they [the students] need it, um, and sometimes it’s, ah, teacher code for ‘you’ve really failed but I don’t want to give you an F so you get the lowest grade I can give you’.” In each of these cases, letter grades have meanings which may
be deciphered by other teachers with the assistance of anecdotal comments or staff room conversations. Without access to this informal information, letter grades become ciphers that make it difficult for the teacher to determine suitable classroom placement. Perhaps it was for this reason that several teachers expressed a desire to have access to anecdotal comments from teachers who had prior experience with the student.

While casually flipping through the cards, Sharon observes, “It’s hard when there are no comments and it’s just letter grades because I automatically go for the comments as well.” When questioned as to why comments were so important, Sharon responds, “Um, sort of overall, well rounded, strong, problem solving skills. That type of thing also is really important for going into a rapid advance class. Sometimes, a letter grade is a letter grade is a letter grade.” For teachers like Steve, Sharon, and Rebecca comments from other teachers were less arbitrary because the comments contained valuable insights into that child’s behaviour which would help them make a more accurate decision about student placement. However, for teachers like Andrea, even access to teachers’ comments may not be enough. Andrea explains,

I’ve worked in twelve different schools and I know how various teachers work. I know that marks can be highly punitive. I know that they can be a way of rewarding behaviours or not. So the idea of making judgements about suitability of programs just simply based on grades makes me very anxious. So all of a sudden, I’m resisting this as an, as an activity.

As she aggressively flips through the cards, I can feel her tension mounting and so I ask her to discuss what she looks for personally when evaluating her students for classroom placement. She responds without hesitation:

Oh well, that’s building criteria with a student. It’s getting to know where they are, it’s looking towards where their personal goals are. It’s looking at their weaknesses and looking at strengths and it’s seeing that development, that maturity, that sense of establishment as a learner...overtime. And that’s what
determines suitability for a program. Sometimes I would look at these marks and think, you know what? Maybe that kid is ready to be pushed into a group that will stimulate her or, or push her, um, same with some students...may be suitable, may have reached, um, really what one might expect as being the high point for them. And so, it also depends on maturity. So where does this [holds up student record card] recognize the maturity of a learner or the maturity of a student? So there are some students on principle where I would say, ‘No, they need, they need five years at this stage of their life’. That may change through time. So, I can do these quickly but I’m finding myself really resistant to this.

Both a student’s social skills and a student’s personal desire to be placed in a particular classroom were also important factors in determining suitable classroom placement for some teachers. Veronique explains, “It is four years instead of five years right [the rapid advanced program]? So they do have to be highly motivated and they do have to want to be placed in that program I would think.” She goes on to suggest that she would be hesitant to place a student in a rapid advanced class if she felt unsure the student was able to handle the extra work required of the fast paced classroom or if they stated a specific preference to remain in a regular classroom with their peers.

While she agreed to place students into what she felt would be their appropriate placement, she made it clear that in her classroom she would prefer to consult with a student prior to making any final decisions.

Sharon agrees with the notion of consulting with students about decisions regarding their placement in the rapid advance program for different reasons,

Some kids really don’t want to miss out on their electives. Um, and if they were in a, the advanced class, does take their elective, um, out of there. And so it really depends on the kids as to how, um, how much they’re willing to give up their elective because if they’re particularly interested or skilled in the arts or in music, to have that balance for them.

For Sharon, making decisions based on letter grades alone was challenging because she didn’t want to deny capable students the benefits derived from electives such as
music and art. While she had no difficulty identifying which students would do well in rapid advance, she expressed concern that this placement may restrict their potential in areas such as music and art where they may also excel. For her, knowing the student prior to making decisions about placement was imperative since it would give her a greater insight into their motivations. However, she also noted the additional opportunities the student may receive from an advanced classroom. She spoke of ideally having the opportunity to consult with both parents and students before such a decision was finalized. Olivia agrees. She dislikes letter grades for what she perceives to be their failure to depict a more well-rounded interpretation of the students. This is why she advocates a more criteria-referenced approach when it comes to her own grading and assessment:

I mean marks are just so artificial anyway. And marks don’t tell the whole story about, ‘hey, you know, he actually knew the answer to that one time’ or, ‘he actually, or she actually, did a really beautiful piece of artwork for that project’, and that’s why I try to do criteria referenced assessment that rewards, say, the artist, to some extent, the writer, to some extent, you know, the person who’s very social, to some extent. And there’s a little bit of that in each, each criteria referenced project.

Several teachers expressed similar views to those of Sharon and Olivia, but unlike these teachers who continued to place students in folders geared towards their ability as expressed by letter grades, other teachers made a conscious decision to not differentiate among students of different ability. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Sarah also discusses her apprehension about basing decisions on letter grades alone. For her, a student’s social ability plays a crucial role in determining a student’s classroom placement. She observes that, “Some kids need to, to be in a situation where they don’t have to be super academic even if they could be because they’re so low
socially, so they might not benefit from having a lot of academic pressure, even if they could handle it.” She concludes, “...obviously you wouldn’t put somebody with low marks in rapid advance but at the same time you might not put somebody with high marks there either.” For Sarah, a student may be academically competent but if the student is perceived as less socially adept than peers, she may be less likely to place him/her in a high achieving classroom. Other teachers expressed similar views, particularly with respect to ESL students.

Teachers, when asked to reflect upon their feelings after completing this task, also remarked upon their discomfort in basing decisions on “students’ grades alone” without having the opportunity to consult with their colleagues. Cathy elaborates,

These kinds of decisions I would never be making on my own. So when you've got, um, partners, teaching partners, and colleagues who know these students as well or understand the history of them as well, there's a lot of discussion that can happen before kids are actually placed and, um, I guess I find that as a bit of a comfort as well because even just discussing with you and looking things over there’s a lot of grey areas and not having that additional information on kids, looking at this blindly. I mean, you just don’t know where to put them and, and some of these regular program candidates maybe rapid advance, and maybe some of them in rapid advance might not be able to handle it and should be...[voice trails off]. So I really appreciate the ability to bounce those things off colleagues who do know kids, do know histories, do know those other factors that, um, affect their progress in school. Um, so it’s nice to have that instead of being on your own [Laughs].

The above comment was made shortly after this teacher was informed that when making her placement decisions, she had placed Aboriginal and ESL students of similar rankings lower than their non-Aboriginal and non-ESL counterparts. When this was pointed out, she was visibly concerned and requested the opportunity to change her decision. For her, the opportunity to discuss students with her colleagues helped to reassure her that she would not make unintentionally biased decisions.
Vanessa also discussed the value of being able to discuss her decisions with teachers and counsellors prior to a final decision being made. When asked to reflect upon how she felt about making decisions regarding student placement based on student record cards, she states:

I would never, ever want decisions to be made about students based on, um, half a dozen letter grades and, um, this certainly isn’t the way we do things. We don’t send off the report cards and then someone at the high school sits and sorts them, we sit with the counsellors from the high school and discuss each child one on one, and we’re bringing a lot more than their letter grades to the table. And issues like work ethic and, um [Pause] maturity and home support and what the child really wants...

Once again, this teacher observed the importance of factors external to the student’s actual achievement noted on the student record card. Throughout these interviews teachers’ consistently mentioned things like work ethic, social maturity and family background as being key factors that they would consider before making a decision regarding student placement.

I return, at last, to Andrea, who at this point in the interview is ready to toss the record cards on the floor. Like Olivia, she refers to the whole idea of letter grades as “arbitrary.” She believes in the value of considering the “many aspects of the whole child”, before making a decision regarding placement. I ask her to once again define these aspects. She responds emphatically:

The whole child. I would look at the, the maturity of the style, the self-understanding about what it means to be motivated as a learner. To, ah, I'd, you know, matching a high school program and a student particularly if it’s rapid advanced would mean knowing whether that is something that would have family support. And I would never want to make a decision like this without knowing the family, because I feel that they, it is my job to, to work with them, to inform them, to inform myself, and through that it is a mutual decision. It is not mine to judge. Um, and so given the support of the family, what their hopes and expectations are, and where that child is in terms of his or her academics, as well as, a sense of the work habit, the ethic, the work ethic [pause], the um, leadership potential.
Perhaps a five year program is a better place to be. So there are a myriad, um, of factors that would affect how I judge. And it would never be based on grades. So I resist this as an activity as such. What am I looking at? I'm deliberating avoiding, trying to avoid [pause], male, female. I don't, that's not an issue for me. Um, it shouldn't be an issue for me...probably is, um, by the time we finish. Um, I'm looking at ESL. I'm looking for a change of grades overtime and patterning. And I'm trying to do this quickly because...it's an unconscionable way to make a decision about where a child is or isn't.

Andrea directly states that she is trying to avoid being influenced by arbitrary factors such as a students' gender, however, she acknowledges its potential to influence one's decision, although it did not affect her own.

The evaluation of students is a large part of a teachers' job description. Despite this, some teachers were apprehensive when asked to make decisions regarding student placement without actually meeting the student. This reluctance highlights the importance that many of the teachers attached to factors external to a students' actual reported achievement. This is a crucial point to consider when assessing the ways in which external factors like race, gender, socio-economic status and cultural background influence a student's educational achievement. In the following section I discuss the second factor that emerged as a reason for teachers' decision making. This factor represents a constellation of curricular issues.

4.6 Curriculum factors
A second theme that emerged from the interviews was teachers' perceptions of the relative importance of different aspects of the curriculum. Perhaps this is not unexpected given the increasingly high expectations for academic achievement and institutional accountability. Further, it should be noted that it was often in the curricular
areas that issues related to differences in performance between Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal, ESL and non-ESL began to emerge.

4.6.1 Core subject matter

When asked what qualities would one look for in a student that was to be placed in rapid advanced, Sarah responded;

Definitely strength in, in math and language arts because language arts in the high schools is going to be so much a part of how they succeed in science and socials ....and with math...just the math in high school is very complex...so they need to have a really strong...really strong foundation to be successful.

Overwhelmingly, the greatest determinant of where a teacher would place a student record card was a student’s performance in math or language arts, subjects consistently referred to as “core subject matter” by teachers. Of the twenty-one teachers interviewed, sixteen teachers acknowledge how a student’s performance in math or language arts would contribute greatly to their consideration of student placement. This was followed by the student’s consistency in maintaining those grades over time. When considering where to place Tammy Lynn Field, a high-achieving non-Aboriginal, non-ESL student, Vanessa focuses on what she earlier identifies as being the “two core areas” before deciding where to place the student. She observes, “Once again exceptional marks in the language arts and math and that would be what I’d be looking at the most strongly.” She decides to place the student in rapid advance.

Janet went so far as to physically cover letter grades achieved in arts and music with her hand so as not to be distracted by what one teacher referred to as “extraneous” or “non-academic” subject matter. “I don’t want to look at the music and the art. I’m looking at the other stuff,” she explains, “and so I think just to make it easier for me, I
would hide those two and just look at the top four." The top four courses were identified as language arts and math with science and social studies following closely behind. While Violet may not have used her hand, she too concurs that when considering a record card she "...would always check the language arts and math for an indication as to where to place them and only later look at the others." When asked to explain why, Violet reasons:

Because language arts is so important for attacking, understanding other subjects, and if you...they haven't got a grasp of maths that can hold them back really a lot in secondary. There's [sic] a lot of problems there. I personally think it goes too fast, too quickly and doesn't give them time to grasp the concepts. But, so that's why I look at these two first because it, it indicates how they're going to do in other subjects as well.

Other teachers agreed that a student's success or failure in subjects like math or language arts was crucial in understanding how that child would be able to cope in secondary school classes. A high achieving grade in a core subject such as language arts would be enough to elicit strong reactions from teachers, as was often the case with the fictional student record card for Jamie Nelson. Jamie Nelson's record card depicted a student who had attained a mid-to-high range achievement level. The subject area where Jamie excelled was language arts in which he obtained an A+. This was the only subject in which he had achieved an A+, yet it still managed to evoke positive conjectures from teachers like Olivia such as, "I bet you anything this is a writer" or elicit suggestions from Stephanie for the student "...to participate in the school newspaper." While other student record cards depicted high-achieving students who had also achieved A+ in language arts, their cards did not evoke the same reaction. Regardless, the A+ in language arts on Jamie's record card created considerable
confusion among seven teachers with regard to suitable classroom placement. When asked why she had difficulty determining placement for Jamie Nelson, Cathy stated,

        Um, he’s been very strong in, in the language arts all the way through. Ah, the math is still strong, even, even holding a B+ it’s very solid. ...I guess the hard part in looking at that for me was that it looked like somebody who [Pause] how do I say it? Who could...who really had a handle on it, I guess. I don’t know. For some reason...that one stuck out in my mind. When I looked at the others they seemed very clear to me. This one was a bit of a challenge...

Finally, Cathy places Jamie in the “regular grade eight” classroom concluding that, without knowing him, she could not be sure of his potential to meet the standards expected in an enrichment program. For other teachers, an A+ in language arts was all it took for Jamie to stand apart from his “high-average” counterparts and move into the realm of those with advanced standing. When asked why she had placed Jamie in a rapid advanced over Thomas, a male, Aboriginal student with the same grades, Rachel explains,

        ...as a matter of fact, he [Jamie] has an A+ in language arts which according to the ministry, he’s excelling in language arts and when I scanned Thomas's, he has a B+ which means that he’s demonstrating good effort but is certainly not excellent and outstanding and I think a child who goes into a rapid program...there’s going to be a lot of writing and would need to have those basic writing and reading skills at an excellent level, not just a good level.

For Rachel, a high level of achievement in language arts signified the student’s potential ability to handle the work load expected from students in enriched classes. While for Rachel, the decision was obvious, other teachers remained torn. After scrutinizing both program criteria and Jamie’s A+ in language arts, Peter and Stephanie found themselves wishing for an alternative. Like Cathy, they felt uneasy about placing Jamie in rapid advanced without knowing him. However, both stated a preference for an option that would facilitate, as Peter describes, “challenge in one particular area rather
than a complete advancement.” Something like this would reassure these teachers that Jamie was getting the mental stimulation needed to hone his writing and reading skills, but would not, as Vanessa describes, put him at risk of “getting in over his head.”

For teachers like Vanessa, low performance in language arts and math could also indicate whether a student should be considered for remedial placement:

Students recommended for learning assistance are usually struggling across the board but, um...if their language arts and math are...are shaky, minimally meeting expectations and I think that if you are going into grade level with a C...especially C-...your chances of passing the next grade level without something changing...it's very slim.

While a C in a language arts and math would be enough to trigger a warning to many of the teachers I spoke with, so too would C in a “lesser” core subject such as science, for an ESL student like Kyun-Yin, another of the fictional students.

Interestingly, Brooks Grayson, a non-Aboriginal, non-ESL student depicted as having the same low grade level status as Kyun-Yin, was only placed twice into a remedial classroom. Once by a teacher who felt all students with lower grade level status could benefit from supplementary learning assistance and once by mistake (the teacher rectified her decision after placement). While Brooks and Kyun-Yin had achieved almost identical grades in all their other grade seven subjects, Brooks had received a B- in science whereas Kyun-Yin had achieved a C. This discrepancy had Kyun-Yin relegated to the remedial class no less than nine times, seven times more than his counter-part Brooks and nine times more if the two teachers who had difficulty making a placement decision around Kyun-Yin were also included. The responses from teachers who placed Kyun-Yin in the remedial class left the impression that while the C grade may have leaned the decision towards remedial placement, Kyun-Yin’s ESL
status solidified the deal. When asked to explain why she placed Kyun-Yin in a supplementary learning assistance class rather than the regular class where she had placed Brooks Grayson, Nicole rationalized her decision as follows:

Okay, um, Brooks Grayson, they pretty much have almost the same marks. It looks like Brooks has slightly better marks in science but then, yeah, he has, Stanley [Kyun-Yin], has better marks in social studies, just a B between a B-. So their marks are pretty average but because Stanley, it looks like they're [sic] still an ESL student. I'm assuming that they're taking a supplementary ESL class, maybe instead of, I'm assuming this [laughs] instead of language arts. Instead of being in a regular language arts class a lot of the elementary schools put the ESL kids in an ESL class instead so, um, and they might be getting also a little bit different work as an ESL kid than what Brooks is doing and, because Brooks has probably been speaking English all his life, he's going to be fine in a regular grade eight. Whereas Stanley probably will need more assistance and it might be, it's already kind of a shock to go into grade seven to step into a new school and also be put in with the regular grade eights when you've been in grade seven, an ESL student since grade four. Um, supplementary might be a good way to give them a step up and then the next year for grade nine he could maybe work into some regular problems. [Laughs] I don't know.

Nicole was not the only teacher to make these assumptions. Peter, who has also placed Brooks in a regular program and Kyun-Yin in a supplementary learning assistance program, explained:

...Well, I'm making some assumptions. I notice that Stanley [Kyun-Yin] is an ESL learner and has been receiving some ESL support, achieving his, his grades with support and I'd like to see that that support, at this point, still continues unless I'm made aware of any reason that he's not needing that support. Um, so, kind of as a safe guard, I would continue that support...

When asked why she placed Kyun-Yin in supplementary learning assistance, Cathy responds:

Ah...Stanley Poon. Stanley's [Kyun-Yin] an ESL student. Four years of ESL. Um, he showed great gains from grade four to grade six and then he sort of maintained that, struggling, it looks like a bit with science. I might offer him a bit of learning assistance being that he's an ESL student. He may need that just as a check in point with, with some subject and with, the, any ESL concerns or issues that might come up in his learning.
While the C in science definitely was a factor for teachers with respect to Kyun-Yin’s supplementary learning assistance placement, it appeared that his ESL status was of greater importance than the curriculum grade. When asked why the fact that the student is ESL makes a difference to her, Janet explains while looking over Kyun-Yin’s record card;

I think they struggle. I think the ESL kids struggle and if these are true marks... sometimes teachers want to encourage an ESL and you can tell the kids smart but it’s a language issue. Sometimes teachers will put it up just to encourage them but if you’re assuming these are accurate marks... then I think it looks like he’s had four years of ESL maybe. And I think it’s pretty hard to be an A student when your ESL in things like language arts, math not so much. I think you look at usually the ESL kids all have good marks in math because the language isn’t, but science and socials are definitely, especially social studies... based on language and language arts. ESL I think has a huge affect on their performance academically.

Despite this, Janet still opts to place Kyun-Yin in the regular class coming to the conclusion that, “his language arts is C+ but if he’s English as a second language, that’s probably good for him. Yeah, um, just looking at that, I don’t think he has any learning problems. I just think he’s ESL, a bit of ESL. Yeah, probably just ESL.” Assuming he has had ESL support previously, she suggests he take the full five years of ESL support (as provided in BC) to assist him with his vocabulary development as a suitable alternative to the supplementary learning assistance program.

For teachers like Sharon, a student’s letter grade in a subject such as science may have as much to do with a teacher’s classroom practices as a student’s ESL status. For her, science is a subject where student’s marks may vary in accordance to the teacher’s chosen teaching methods. When looking at a student’s science mark she considers that,
Science tends to be a subject area where, um, some students will excel if it's very hands on and different teachers have different sorts of styles of teaching science. Some it's more text, some it's more hands on...

For Sharon, knowing the way in which science was delivered in previous years would help her better understand a discrepancy in marks. She attributes Kyun-Yin's sudden drop in grade seven science, to a "teacher who used more text material and in grade four, five, six was more hands on." Despite this discrepancy she still believes Kyun-Yin will be able to achieve in a regular classroom.

For four teachers, the ranking of subjects such as language arts and math over other subjects such as music and art is part of the reason they are opposed to letter grades. It is for this reason that teachers such as Judith and Michelle insist on placing all students in the regular grade eight class regardless of their letter grade achievement. Judith, who has had three years of experience in learning assistance classes (LAC), explains, "I think that there's some limitation that can occur when there's so much emphasis placed on academics as opposed to elective classes as less important and I don't even know if that's necessarily true or if that's necessarily the message that should be um...told to students." When asked to discuss why she feels that students could benefit from elective courses such as music and art, she elaborates,

I think it gives kids a break from academic classes and it's some sort of respite. The kids that I talk to in my LAC classes seem to like those classes, I think it gives a chance for, for people who may not necessarily be as gifted in academics to have some success at schools and to have some good marks in their report card and I think it's a chance where, you know, the playing field is flattened a little bit because everybody does okay, you know, as long as they show up and [laughs] try hard. And, um, I think that, it provides opportunities, I think, for kids to get, you know, some cultural experience to learning how to cook and the type of art that they do, the type of music that they do in band or choir or whatever they're taking. Those are some advantages that I see.
For Judith, high school is already a challenging transition for the student without taking away elective courses like art or music which she feels may help ease the transition by offering the student balance. She advocates an approach she describes as “situation dependent” in order to benefit the various needs of all students:

If um, an ESL student is, you know, an incredible artist but not so excellent, essay writing, to maybe, um, weight marking differently so that, you know, more, more marks are given for the graphics on whatever they’re doing instead of the, the words. Or um, if, um, an Aboriginal student would like to read a story that’s more connected to their heritage or to write something about something that’s more connected to their heritage, then to give them an alternative writing assignment. I don’t know [laughs]. Those types of adaptations would be appropriate to me. But I don’t necessarily think that that’s limited to those two groups of students, that, that would be extended to, um, but that’s so difficult for teachers to do, you know? You have thirty kids in your class. But, I think, I think a better way to teach would be, to mix up your types of assessments or your types of learning opportunities so that, so that First Nations students or ESL students or special needs students can all have the opportunity to showcase their success. And that doesn’t necessarily mean that every, everything they do is successful but there’s a chance for each of them to have opportunity for their, um, skills to be, um, celebrated or whatever.

Judith places all of the student record cards into the folder marked “regular grade-eight class” because she does not want to send the message to students who may not necessarily excel at language arts and math but do excel in other areas that their skills are somehow “less valuable.” While she states that she respects gifted learners and acknowledges that some adaptations may be required for an enriched student’s program, she does not feel she is limiting their opportunities by sending them into a regular classroom because she believes enriched students can also “benefit in doing elective work” and feels “that it is excellent when there’s a wide variety of students and different types of learners in classes.” She acknowledges that this may be partially due to her experience as a learning assistance teacher where she witnessed first-hand the
benefits students perceived as struggling have gained from being in classes with
students who do not struggle.

Michelle, a teacher for ten years, believes that students who struggle are not the
only ones to benefit from mixed ability classes and elective programs. After having read
through the student placement criteria, Michelle looks up and informs me that she has
probably already determined where each student record will go without ever having
looked at the cards.

I’ve already somehow made up my mind because um, several reasons, one, is, um, I don’t really think that in most cases, and I mean most ninety-nine percent of
the cases, it’s productive to have a child rush through school or, or move through
school in such a way that they, they lose their electives because those are
sometimes the very children, the children that do very well academically that
need to be exposed to electives so I probably wouldn’t be putting many children
in there, um, I think that a regular grade eight study of program is probably, um, the
way that most children should approach high school because it offers the
balance of academics and, and, um, electives which is most desirable in my
[pause] in my opinion.

Like Judith, Michelle does not feel she is doing a disservice to students by placing them
in a regular classroom. If anything, she states she is doing the opposite. For Michelle,
elective courses make for a well-rounded student. She fears that by taking elective
courses such as art and music away from enriched students for the sake of an
accelerated program, may limit the students in unforeseen ways. She explains,

...and you know, electives are fun, interesting because I’ve taught them before in
high school and something different happens in classrooms when your teaching
an elective. If you’re doing art or you’re cooking or whatever. There’s a sharing of
ideas and there’s an interaction and a social aspect sometimes that doesn’t
always occur in other classes...

For Judith and Michelle, elective classes offer the student an opportunity to grow in a
way that core subjects like language arts and math (courses that often tend to be more
structured in nature) do not. The opportunity for students with diverse abilities to interact
and learn from each other becomes part of the benefit of elective courses. Michelle believes that in elective courses the notion of "success" is determined less by traditional benchmarks of achievement like test scores and more through alternative ways of learning that promote creativity and original thinking, or collaborative activities that rely on a student’s ability to interact with their peers. Michelle states that she has no difficulty envisioning teaching a classroom filled with various levels of ability as she feels that it is the diversity itself that creates for students “new learning opportunities.” When asked how she would feel about having Michael Remmington, a high achieving, non-ESL, non-Aboriginal student in the same class as Kyun-Lin Poon, a lower achieving ESL student, Michelle has no reservations.

But why wouldn’t they be in the same class? I mean they should be offered the same academic program and, now that’s not to say that the teacher that teaches Michael Remmington, um, may find in particular areas, like, looks like maybe math and language arts, maybe needing more challenging work, more, a more challenging program. You know... something that’s more adapted like for language arts, you know, something, um, that would be more, possibly more interesting and challenging depending on the child. You have to kind of know the child. Um, but other than modifying it so that he’s more challenged, um, why wouldn’t they be in the same class? They would have, you know, they have, they both have ah, equal, um, views to share in class, in terms of if they were in, in, um, English class, you know, giving their opinions on a novel or whatever, they, it’s important that Michael hears the views of a child who’s an ESL child, possibly an immigrant with a different cultural background and has different things to offer and vice versa.

While Michelle acknowledges that it may be necessary to adapt or modify Michael’s work so that he continues to be challenged in the classroom, she does not like the notion of tracking students in terms of ability because she feels that all students, regardless of their achievement level have something to learn and share with each other. Michelle states that there may be some situations where it might be beneficial to place a student in a learning assistance classroom if the placement had the potential to
accelerate them into a regular grade eight classroom, however, she admits that she
would only consider this in extreme circumstances where the student was really
struggling. Michelle glances towards the record cards once again. Warily, she picks
them up and then looks at me directly before re-stating her position.

So...there'll probably be nobody in rapid advance and very few, if any, in
supplementary learning assistance. I don't believe in, in not exposing children to
electives especially children who are so academic that they need exposure to
that and children who are non-academic they usually, well, not usually, but they
can often, um, find great success in electives and so why would you, why would
you withhold that from them? It's probably going to be pretty fast for me [Laughs].

True to her prediction, Michelle places all students in the regular grade eight classroom.

Teachers Emma and Miriam also reject the concept of the “rapid advanced
program” in principle. For them, a student's social development also helps to influence
their decision to place all student record cards into the regular grade eight program.

These teachers are wary of placing students in an advanced standing classroom
because it means the student will complete their schooling in four instead of five years,
a factor which they feel may inhibit a student's social growth. Miriam explains:

For me personally, I wouldn't recommend that anybody do their high school in a
shorter period of time because their whole social development is tied to this and I
don't know that if it's necessarily a big benefit to come out of high school at
sixteen, um, so I don't know even...no, even the really, really strong students, I
would still say regular grade eight program.

For Miriam, while a student may be achieving well academically, to “rush” a student
through high school would be doing that student a disservice because high school is, as
she states, “a rite of passage for a lot of children.” She clarifies, “I'm not sure going to
university at sixteen, unless it’s like an extremely, you know, rare case...I don't think
necessarily going and being in an adult world when you're not yet an adult is
necessarily in the best interest of the child.” Like Judith and Michelle, Miriam also does
not want to deny high-achieving students the electives she feels may help to broaden those students' experience and better prepare them for life in an "an adult world." She explains, "I think it's valuable that kids experience that even if you're not going to be a mechanic you should still experience that, um, that sort of environment and you know, even if you learn how to change your own car tire. I mean, that's a good thing." While Miriam is opposed to fast-tracking a student through high-school at the expense of elective courses, she is willing to change her stance if it is something both the parents and the child both want. However, she admits to being reluctant even then to consider it as an option.

So I'd have that conversation with the parents but if they felt very strongly that they wanted that [rapid advanced standing] and that I believed the child wanted that [pause], then I would say okay. But it wouldn't be something that I would necessarily, you know, offer up as an option.

Luckily for her, she explains, her school offers advanced placement programs that do not eliminate a student's electives, so she has never been placed in that position.

Emma also objects in principle to categories like "rapid advanced placement." When asked to discuss why she has chosen to place all of the students in the regular program, regardless of their academic standing, she states;

Well, I think that high school is a huge transition for kids anyways coming out of grade seven from an elementary school that they've spent maybe a lot of time in and it's a big transitioning from possibly one or two teachers to seven or eight different teachers and so I don't know that a huge academic pressure starting in grade eight is necessarily a good idea. I think that kids are given five years to complete a secondary program for a reason and I think it's not just for academic reasons but also for social reasons and I don't really think that it's necessary, necessarily a good idea to rush them through five years of programming in four even if they are obviously, pretty bright kids academically.
Emma believes that part of the teacher’s responsibility is to try to meet the diverse needs of the learner regardless of that student’s ability. For her, the activities and lesson plans used in the classroom should be “open ended enough to include all kids and challenge all kids at whatever level they were coming in at.” She feels that teachers should still be able to meet the challenges necessary to fulfill the needs of high-achieving students such as Michael Remmington in a regular classroom without isolating him from his peers. Like Michelle and Judith, Emma believes that academic intelligence, does not necessarily equate other intelligences, such as social or emotional, that the child may also need to develop:

Some kids are quite strong academically but really are able to only work on their own independently and if we want to...we want to encourage cooperative skills for all adults when they come out into the world because it’s very rare that anyone is just working in a vacuum on their own and it’s important to make sure that kids do have opportunities to work with other kids in the class and, and, all types of different kids, because that’s real life. And so you want to make sure that Michael isn’t just maybe able to work either on his own or maybe only with other kids that are at the same level as him academically, but also that he would be able to develop many leadership skills within...where he would be able to use his own strengths to bring a group together as well.

Emma feels that a combination of group work in a classroom of diverse students combined with independent work that inspires and challenges the student’s academic potential may be most appropriate for high-achieving students like Michael and more beneficial later in life. When asked to discuss whether she would feel comfortable having high-achieving student Michael Remmington in the same class with lower achieving Brooks Grayson, she reiterates that no classroom will ever be exactly homogeneous across the board. In addition to this, she wonders what the differences between the two students actually mean. Like Andrea, she is somewhat sceptical
towards previous teachers priorities with regards to the way in which a student's marks were obtained. Observing the student cards of both Brooks and Michael, she inquires:

And based on what, exactly, did he...Michael, how did he achieve that A+? What kinds of skills was the teacher looking at when that mark was given? Um, and the same for Brooks, getting maybe a C+ in language arts as compared to Michael's A+. Is it from the same teacher? Is it based on...the same kinds of activities or skills? Is one teacher looking at effort and the other one only looking at a finished product? Is one teacher taking into consideration creativity and originality and maybe writing and the other one maybe not as much? So I guess, to judge a kid and whether or not they belong with anyone else is really difficult for me when all I'm looking at is a letter grade because I have no information about where that letter grade came from.

Both Emma's and Miriam's belief systems regarding the students' best interests appear to have some influence over where the students were or were not placed. Emma, like Andrea, is also aware that teachers tend to base grades on more than a student's actual achievement. The previous teacher's value judgements may become another factor that some teachers consider prior to placing a student. Whether or not the previous teacher is known to value factors such as creativity, originality, outcomes and effort may influence how a teacher interprets the grades of a learner.

4.7 Achievement expectations

A student's level of achievement and the value teachers placed on various subjects had a significant influence as to where that child would be placed in a classroom. However, these were not the only factors teachers considered when observing the fictional student record cards. In the following section, I will discuss how factors external to student record grades such as a student's Aboriginal, ESL or non-Aboriginal status influenced the way in which a teacher regarded a particular student.
4.7.1 What's in a label?

The student record cards were basic in design. Aside from the grades achieved in grades four to seven, the cards did not contain much additional information except for the student's name and whether the school board had received funding because the student was identified either as Aboriginal or as ESL. I believed that these differences on the record card were subtle, but they triggered some interesting responses from teachers. For example, when giving the interviews, I observed that teachers had a tendency to spend more time looking at the record cards of Aboriginal and ESL students than student record cards without these identity markers. While record cards of non-Aboriginal, non-ESL students did not elicit much commentary, record card marks of Aboriginal and ESL students often would. The following section looks at the different ways in which Aboriginal, ESL and non-Aboriginal, non-ESL student record cards were perceived by teachers.

4.7.2 Expectations of Aboriginal students

Despite having no difficulty placing high-achieving Aboriginal students into a rapid advanced class (unless they were opposed to the concept of “rapid advance” themselves), eight of the twenty-one teachers interviewed made remarks that indicated that high-achieving Aboriginal students had somehow exceeded their expectations. Some teachers were pleased because they had heard about the low graduation rates of Aboriginal students. Other teachers related the student record cards of Aboriginal students to their personal experiences working with Aboriginal students, still other teachers relayed to me that they found teacher expectations regarding Aboriginal student's ability to achieve were lower than expectations about their non-Aboriginal
peers. Regardless of the reason, it was interesting to hear the various comments Aboriginal designated record cards would elicit.

After coming across several students whom he perceived as being capable of handling the challenges of a rapid advance class, Steve arrives at Hubie Jack’s card. Before moving on, he pauses briefly to make the following observation;

Given what we know about Aboriginal people and not necessarily always achieving at the levels where they should be, um, this is really impressive that Hubie has achieved A+ in a variety of grades and a variety of different subjects over the years and I would recommend that Hubie be put in the rapid advance program as well.

For Steve, Hubie’s report card is remarkable not only for the student’s high achievement, but also because the student is Aboriginal. The student’s Aboriginal status becomes a noteworthy trait for Steve because he has heard that Aboriginal students have struggled in the Canadian educational system. Knowing this, he is pleasantly surprised with record cards such as Hubie’s that seem to challenge that perception.

When asked why there may be a lower graduation rate for Aboriginal students, Steve admits that, not being a person of Aboriginal decent, he has difficulty understanding what it must be like living as an Aboriginal person in today’s society. Despite this, he speculates that it may have something to do with the long history of “great oppressive forces from the Western world imposing their way upon them.” When Steve takes into consideration Canada’s history with regards to Aboriginal peoples, he acknowledges, “It may become culturally more important for the student to do something other than achieve in the quote, ‘White man’s world’.” Rather than holding Aboriginal students responsible for their lower achievement, Steve suggests that Aboriginal peoples may react against an oppressive educational system and may also have different priorities.
Steve also speculates that an alternative explanation for lower Aboriginal achievement may be the person's background. He explains that it is his understanding that Aboriginal people are more likely to live less affluently than their non-Aboriginal peers and suggests that this too may have an impact on a student's achievement.

Sarah, like Steve, is also pleased with the success of the high-achieving Aboriginal students she encounters in the record cards. When asked to discuss her decision to place Rosalyn Wallace, a high achieving Aboriginal student, in the rapid advance class, she states:

...Same thing as Hubie Jack. She has high, um, high marks in the main, like the core subject areas that I mentioned before and also maintains them in all her other subject areas. Um, yeah...I wonder, I wonder if these kids, if I knew these kids, like I do have one Aboriginal kid in my class, he's very strong. And, um, I think he possibly impresses me more in his strength than a kid who is not Aboriginal because it's more remarkable to see it in an Aboriginal student. So I don't know. I mean, I would try not to let that influence me but it, in honesty, I think sometimes when you see Aboriginal students really excelling, It's almost like they're excelling more than sort of another kid, who, who you see that with more, more regularly.

Expanding on her comments, Sarah explains that "it's something out of the norm."

Sarah, like Steve, maintains that one of the primary reasons successful Aboriginal students stand out is because she is so accustomed to hearing about Aboriginal students' lack of educational success.

You don't, you have no idea, you don't really know why some kids are successful or not academically but, um, like, the general trend I think that people are, or our society tells us we're not use to seeing that Aboriginal kids aren't necessarily successful academically, so when you, when you see it, you're like, "Oh great!" You know? You kind of notice it maybe more than an Asian kid who our society tell us, well, are always academically successful right? So maybe it stands out more. But, um, certainly when I made the choices, I tried not to make that a determining factor one way or the other. Like ah, I kind of ticked this column right out because it shouldn't be, I don't think necessarily, something that the judgement's based on.
Sarah acknowledges that she is not immune to the media portrayals of particular groups of students and recognizes that this too may shape her opinion of Aboriginal peoples. Realizing her biases, Sarah makes a concerted effort not to be affected by them when determining classroom placement, however she admits to noticing when something challenges her current perceptions.

While flipping through the student records, Violet pauses to remark upon the status of two high achieving Aboriginal students. Having just placed the record card of Minnie, an Aboriginal student of lower-range achievement into the regular classroom, she comes upon the record of Rosalyn Wallace. Scanning the record, Violet notes the student's high achievement.

Rosalyn Wallace. She is doing very well. A+ in both language arts and mathematics so she would be a possibility for rapid advanced I would think because she's A-and A in socials, A-in science and A in socials so I would say be a possibility for rapid advance. [Pause] Interesting that both these are ah...Aboriginal. Yeah.

I ask Violet to explain why the students' Aboriginal status is interesting.

Well, it's just interesting that the two are Aboriginal. Quite often Aboriginal children don't do that well, in, in the school setting.

Violet, like Steve and Sarah, has noted that Aboriginal students have had difficulty in the Canadian educational system. Interestingly, while Violet distinguishes the differences in academic achievement between Minnie, a low-achieving student, and Rosalyn, a high achieving student, she speaks of them both as exceptional when considering their Aboriginal status. Later, I ask Violet to reflect upon her placement of Hubie Jack, another high-achieving Aboriginal student, in rapid advance. She responds,

Yeah, yes, I mean I was interested because there are expectations of course, but it, I mean, I think I had two in a row that...Aboriginal ones that came in here [rapid advance], um, they often, um, Aboriginal students have difficulty in the regular...in the school system. I don't know, they talk about left, right brain and
just different culture. I mean, of course, this is not all of them at all, but I mean for him to have such high marks right through. That shows that he's excelling in, um, all the academics really and that's great.

Regardless of her interpretation, she appears to be pleased that her perceptions of Aboriginal students have been positively challenged. Janet also expresses pleasant surprise when referring to high-achieving Aboriginal students such as Hubie Jack. When asked whether she had considered that Hubie Jack was an Aboriginal student, she remarks,

Well, I saw that and I noted that but I thought, hmm. If we're assuming the marks are accurate, it doesn't really matter. It's just, "oh, cool [laughs], an Aboriginal student that gets really good marks." That's great. Um, yeah. I noticed it but it didn't affect my decision.

Janet's comment indicates that while she clearly had no difficulty placing a high-achieving Aboriginal student into a rapid advanced class, the student's Aboriginal status was enough to trigger a reaction. Despite this, she clarifies that she does not believe that achievement expectations should be modified for Aboriginal students simply because they are Aboriginal, unless the child faces extenuating factors such as pronounced learning disabilities or family problems.

Olivia, a teacher for just over two years, also acknowledges being impressed by high achieving Aboriginal students and demonstrates this through her decision making placements. When considering options for students, she consistently places mid-range Aboriginal students in a rapid advanced class, one level higher than their non-Aboriginal peers at the same level of performance. Noting this, I later ask Olivia to suggest why she placed Melissa Janette Doyle, a non-Aboriginal student of mid-range achievement, in a regular classroom while placing Irene Battiste, an Aboriginal student at the same academic level, in a rapid advance class. Olivia reacts with surprise and then explains:
You know, I hate to say it, because of the Ab. Ed. [sic] Because I felt like, you know, these kids have so many, [pause], a lot of times they have so much going against them and the fact that she had scored this kind of record, I mean, I know nothing whatsoever about her background. I have to say, I based it solely on the Ab. Ed. [sic]. And I felt like, you know, if she’s doing that well against whatever her circumstances may be and I’m assuming she has circumstances which is probably wrong but, you know, I am assuming that she’s up against [pause], a few things. I know nothing against Melissa Janette Doyle except that she has no indicators of any kind. I mean she just seems like a plain, old, regular student so I would have to say the Ab.Ed.[sic] was the deciding factor. So I guess it’s kind of like affirmative action. [...] That’s interesting, I never even thought about that because their records are virtually identical aren’t they?

Olivia is cognisant of the lower graduation rates of Aboriginal students. She speaks emphatically of wanting all of her students to excel regardless of their backgrounds and so she places a higher value on the achievement of Aboriginal students due to the barriers she perceives them as having to overcome. Consumed by good intentions, she does not seem to feel that her decision could be seen as offensive to the child or Aboriginal people nor does she appear to consider potential difficulties that might arise from placing a lower-achieving student in a high-achieving classroom. Rather, she relates her decision making to “affirmative action” suggesting that she feels that her decisions, though biased, may actually help to create equilibrium in the educational system. Despite this, Olivia, when asked if she would like to change her initial decision, opts to place Melissa in the rapid advance class with Irene. Later in the interview, I ask Olivia if she feels teachers’ expectations should be modified for Aboriginal students.

Although Olivia is surprised with the directness of my question, she responds:

Wow! That’s a loaded question. Ah, modified? You know, I’m probably doing it not even thinking about it because you know, I’ve, my Aboriginal students are often so poorly achieving that when I see someone who really is doing moderate or better, I might kind of tend to say, ‘Yeah, yeah! You go!’, and perhaps put them in the higher, in the higher class, yes. Now, I don’t think stud...I don’t think that the expectations for these students should be dumbed [sic] down at all. I think, I was probably, you know, you know, tipping over the other way, if
anything. Because, you know, you feel like you want to give these kids...if these kids are doing well at all in the school, you want to give them more of a chance. That's kind of what I was doing I think. Maybe, kind of, it's like there's a saying, 'it's just as easy to fall flat on your face, as it is to lean too far back...as it is to fall flat on your face.' So I think maybe I was leaning too far backward for some of these kids. They should probably all be, but I can't, you cannot judge these kids, particularly, if you know their family history and everything, and just say, 'Oh, they're just like, you know some...you know, like every other kid.' They're not. There are extenuating circumstances in their life history.

Olivia has just learned that she has placed lower-achieving ESL student, Sharmeen Aziz, in the supplementary learning assistance class while placing an Aboriginal student with the same record, Minnie Skwitswugh, in the regular classroom. Olivia again reacts with surprise and reiterates that she probably placed the Aboriginal student at a higher level as a way to give her a boost, however discovering that Minnie's and Sharmeen's record cards are virtually identical, she changes her mind and places them both into the supplementary learning assistance folder. At this point, I note she has placed Tracey Spencer, a non-ESL, non-Aboriginal student with the same record card in a regular classroom. Rather than deciding to place all three students into the supplementary learning assistance class, Olivia opts to keep Tracey in the regular classroom. When asked why, Olivia justifies her decision:

Once again, I put Sharmeen in the supplemental because of ESL and Tracey, I mean her marks aren't spectacular but they're not terrible. I don't see tons of Cs and C-s. I mean, she seems like a fairly ordinary student to me. Now Sharmeen, yeah, an ordinary student too but who knows what kind of help she's been getting all along. I'm guessing she's been getting supplemental ESL help cuz [sic] she's on the registry so I would ensure she could...she should continue to get it until she feels like she's ready to move on.

For Olivia, Sharmeen's ESL status relegates her to a lower level classroom than her non-ESL peer Tracey despite having record cards that depict the same level of achievement. She reasons that as an ESL student, Sharmeen should continue to receive additional language support before being placed into a regular classroom. I then
remind Olivia that non-Aboriginal, non-ESL Tracey shares the same achievement level as Minnie, a non-ESL, Aboriginal student who she placed in the supplementary learning assistance class. I ask if she is still satisfied with her decision.

Yeah, I think so. I know their marks are similar, but you know there are extenuating circumstances that go beyond the marks so, all other things being equal.

For some teachers, the obstacle Aboriginal students have to face, is the educational system itself. When Sharon looks at the grades on the reports of the Aboriginal students portrayed in the record cards she is also pleasantly surprised. However, she clarifies that her surprise is not due to a belief that Aboriginal students do not have the ability to do well but has more to do with her experience within the educational system. She explains that having worked in a number of schools throughout Vancouver she has, at times, felt that there is a perception that Aboriginal students do not have the capability to do as well in the classroom.

It's great for the students who are Aboriginal to be doing so well in the program which is, which is great for the, great for the program because I've worked in schools where the Aboriginal students, some did well and some had a really difficult time and it's really great to see that in this group [rapid advanced] there are students of Aboriginal background who are doing really well because sometimes, sometimes they get a, um, there's sometimes an assumption that because they are Aboriginal they may not do well, um, which is unfortunate.

When asked to explain why she thought this might be the case, Sharon explains that it is in part due to the stereotypes that exist about Aboriginal people in general. She goes on to say, that while she makes a conscious effort not to be influenced by these stereotypes when it comes to assessing the students' abilities, she has been in situations where a student's Aboriginal status is given more importance than she feels is
necessary. She describes a situation she encountered in one school in which a
student’s Aboriginal status is pointed out to her by her peers.

One little guy had blond hair and blue eyes and, um, he was Aboriginal and I
found it, coming into, coming in to a school as a new teacher, um, it wasn't, it, it
was a non-issue for me, but the fact that it was [pause], I was made aware of the
fact that even though he didn’t look Aboriginal, he was Aboriginal, um, and
academically he was strong, as if somehow that was going to make a difference
as to how I may perceive him. Um, so it was interesting.

Sharon parallels this with the reactions she received from educators after transferring
from a non-inner city school to an inner-city school where she recalls that it was
suggested to her that maybe her “expectations shouldn't be as high” for her new, inner-
city school students. Based on these experiences, Sharon is pleased with the high
marks of the Aboriginal students not because she questions their ability to achieve, but
rather because her experience was that sometimes teachers’ perceptions of students
could be negatively influenced by arbitrary factors.

Other teachers also acknowledged awareness of the negative perceptions of
Aboriginal students both in schools and society. When asked if she had noticed the fact
that some of the students were Aboriginal, Veronique responds:

You know, I actually noticed that some of them had it, right? And I could see that
they were of Aboriginal heritage but I actually didn’t look at that at first in making
my decision. It did occur in my mind after I looked at it and I was like, ‘Oh, look at
that’, but then, I mean, I think it would be, I think that this information here,
whatever, can be very bias because people can have like, um, preconceptions
about how they should be doing and they would have maybe a tendency to think,
like all were lower achievers, but so, I actually try not to take that into
consideration, but just looking at her achievement and how she is doing in class
and how she would feel about it. It doesn't matter if she’s an Aboriginal student.

But for some teachers, the fact that these students were Aboriginal and were high
achievers was important, as they were seen by teachers as having the potential to
challenge some of the misconceptions that both Sharon and Veronique talked about.
These teachers felt that by placing high-achieving (and in some cases, low achieving) Aboriginal students in rapid advanced or regular classrooms, these students could challenge misperceptions of Aboriginal students as being inherently low-achievers while simultaneously being role models for future Aboriginal generations. For Steve, student record cards like those of high-achieving Aboriginal students, Hubie Jack and Rosalyn Wallace are significant not only because of individual success but also because their success may contribute to the well-being of Aboriginal communities as a whole.

And then noticing that they’re Aboriginal, ah, I’m not up on my statistics as to how many Aboriginal students in British Columbia do not graduate high school, um, but I know that it’s lower. There is a lower number of Aboriginals who do not complete high school than the number of non-Aboriginal people. And knowing that these people are Aboriginal as well as, um, high achievers is really a reason to have them in that rapid advance program to help boost their own individual self-esteem as being an Aboriginal student as, as contributing to the, the self-esteem of the Aboriginal community as well. Knowing that they have some high achievers in their...in their community, if that makes sense.

Stephanie agrees. When speaking about the record card of Rosalyn Wallace, her primary concern is whether the child has family support to guide her through what can be a challenging class. However, she clarifies that if Rosalyn does have this support, it is an excellent opportunity for Rosalyn to become a role model for other Aboriginal woman.

And then if indeed, she did make it through the rapid advance and did well, then what a great role model for other Aboriginal girls to sort of look to her and say, you know, ‘Wow! She did it! If she did it, I could do it’ So, that’s sort of my reasoning in there.

Judith makes it very clear that she is philosophically opposed to the concept of classes like “rapid advance” and has placed all of the students in a regular classroom. Despite this, when asked if would ever place Rosalyn in a rapid advanced program, she
hypothetically considers what may be one potential value of such a placement for a high-achieving Aboriginal student.

I'll...only because, and she would be a candidate for me in terms of this rapid advance program if I philosophically thought this was a good idea [Laughs]. Like, absolutely I would place her there and not, not take into account, this [points to Aboriginal status]. And if anything, I would, see, I would place her here even though she doesn't have straight As because I think that it would be...I don't want to say like, the...yeah. Because it would be really good I think to give a First Nations person this opportunity, um, to shows case their academic skills so I think that I would consider her even if she was slightly less than straight As.

For teachers such as Judith and Stephanie, successful Aboriginal students are celebrated not only for their own achievements but also for their potential to act as role models for their Aboriginal peers or simply to challenge misperceptions that Aboriginal students are not capable.

4.7.3 Expectations of ESL students

While Aboriginal student record cards had the tendency to elicit responses that indicated that students' marks had somehow exceeded teachers' expectations, the responses towards ESL student record cards were mixed. High achieving ESL students met two kinds of reactions. For some teachers, high achieving marks signified a student's exceptional ability to achieve. Others were more sceptical, believing instead that high achievement may indicate that grades had been inflated because of student's ESL status. Low-achieving ESL students did not tend to generate the same sort of surprise as their high achieving peers. In addition, more attention seemed to be paid to the grade achieved in language-based courses for ESL learners. Regardless of the reason, it was interesting to see how it could evoke such varied reactions.
Like high-achieving Aboriginal students who were admired for achieving high marks despite perceived obstacles, eight teachers responded to mid-to high achieving ESL students more favourably than to their non-ESL peers because they were impressed with student’s ability to achieve high marks despite difficulties with language. Peter places the student record card of mid-ranging ESL student Tao Li, into a regular class but suggests he may later consider her for rapid advance. When asked why, he responds,

Well, I just noted that she’s received ESL support for the last few years, just been one year without that support. But I know that when students are pulled from ESL support they’re often not up to, ah, the same level, um, of written English particularly, um, usually even oral, spoken English as well. There’s still a fair bit of improvement even though they might not be receiving that support. There’s still often a fairly substantial room for growth. And so I see her achieving very high Bs, B+s, um, having not had that support and with the likelihood of continued growth in her spoken and written English. So I see her as a candidate for, for more potential growth than other B students.

Peter is pleased by the success of many of the ESL students depicted on the student record cards, in part, because of his own experience that ESL students tend to struggle even if after they receive ESL support. His experience has indicated that students tend to improve gradually over time as they gain proficiency with the English language. Because of this, when Peter looks at Tao’s report card, he sees not only her current academic achievement but also her potential to improve. Peter is not alone at being impressed with the academic ability of high-achieving ESL students. Shane, a teacher for sixteen years, places all student record cards with the exception of Young-Ja Park’s, a high achieving ESL female, in the regular folder. When I ask why he has placed Young-Ja Park in the rapid advanced class ahead of her non-ESL peer, Tammy Lynn Doyle, who shares the same high-achieving record, Shane explains that he sees
Young-Ja as having greater potential than her non-ESL peers because she has managed to achieve high marks *despite* speaking English as a second language.

Tammy wasn’t ESL. According to the card, Tammy wasn’t ESL. She showed improvement in language arts but I, ah, I don’t know if, if the ah, improvement, um, I don’t know. She may be, ah, she may be able to go into rapid, rapid advanced. Cuz [sic] she did show improvement since grade four in language arts but she didn’t have the same, um, obstacles to language arts as the other kid did because the other kid was ESL.

Shane perceives an A+ achieved by Young-Ja as having more value than an A+ achieved by her non-ESL peers because Young-Ja had to overcome a language barrier, an obstacle her non-ESL peers did not face. For teachers like Peter and Shane, high marks combined with a student’s ESL status potentially elevates that student to a level beyond that of their non-ESL peers because students are deemed as having a greater potential to improve.

While Veronique agrees with the notion that high-achieving ESL students have more potential than their non-ESL peers, she attributes this potential to the fact that they *are* ESL students rather than *despite* the student’s ESL status.

I actually happen to think that children that are multi-lingual, obviously I’m probably a bit biased cuz [sic] I am myself! [Laughs] But [...] I actually have the tendency to think that people that can really, for kids and teenagers that are multilingual, they actually have an advantage on other students. They are able to play better with words and they’re more [pause], they have a better mental-linguistic awareness. Obviously this one [Himomasa] is doing really, really good [sic] so that wouldn’t be, and that I’ve seen that in grade four he was classified as an ESL but doesn’t seem like he is afterwards and so obviously, that hasn’t been an issue. And when I look at the grade and I highly doubt that language is a problem here so, I wouldn’t worry about that.

Veronique has no problem allocating high-achieving ESL students to rapid advance folders, because she see their ESL status as a signifier of the potential to explore and play with language in a way that their unilingual peers cannot. For her, ESL status is an
asset, not a barrier, which is why she tends to view ESL students as having greater potential than others. Nonetheless, she places ESL students at the same level as their non-ESL peers of equivalent grade card achievement.

Not all teachers share Veronique’s notion of ESL students' potential. While ESL students with high marks tended to impress, lower achieving ESL students did not fare as well. Of the twenty-one teachers, eight placed ESL students in a lower level class than both their Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal peers. Some justified their decision to place Kyun-Yin Poon (a low-achieving ESL student) at a lower level than his peers, because he had achieved a C in science, a course considered by many to be one of the “core courses.” However, this concern was always partnered with Kyun-Yin's ESL status, thus suggesting that had he not been an ESL student, the C grade would not have been as problematic. Underlining this point is the fact that both Brooks Grayson and Minnie Skwitiswugh received a C+ in language arts, a course deemed as a “core subject” by many teachers, and yet this grade did not evoke the same concern as Kyun-Yin’s C in science. In addition, four of the eight teachers who had placed ESL student Kyun-Yin Poon at a lower level than non-ESL students with similar records also placed his lower-achieving ESL peer, Sharmeen Aziz, in the learning assistance class despite the fact that her student record grades were identical to that of non-Aboriginal, non-ESL student, Tracey Spencer, who was never placed in supplementary learning assistance.

While high-achieving ESL students were more likely to receive praise than their non-ESL, non-Aboriginal peers, the grades of lower-achieving ESL students were more likely to be scrutinized and teachers were more likely to request that ESL students be “monitored” or “observed” during placement. For example, Stephanie, who upon observing the report card of mid-range achieving Tao Li, remarked:
So then I have student Tao Li, who looks like they’ve [sic] had English, ESL support for three years and then not in grade seven. Knowing what happens at our school, often a student will get ESL support and then back off in grade seven to see how they do. But they kind of monitor them, they sort of still keep track of them and they see how they are doing. The grades are stronger. I wouldn’t say they were strong enough to go into a rapid advance program so I would put this child in regular and probably send a note to the high school to just kind or monitor the language stuff and make sure they’re [sic] okay, but I wouldn’t recommend that they get specific assistance.

While Stephanie had no problem seeing Tao as capable of achieving in a regular classroom, she suggests the child be monitored, a request that is not made for her non-ESL peers. Some teachers even speculated whether the grades ESL students had achieved were equivalent to those of their non-ESL peers. While reviewing Sharmeen’s record card, Sarah reasons:

I think that because Sharmeen is still identified as a second language it would probably be good for supplementary learning assistance and because that, if sometimes when they’re in a modified program, their marks are modified and that doesn’t really say on this card if they are or not so those might not be. That B+ in language arts might not be the same B+ that it is for somebody else. I don’t know.

Erring on the side of caution, Sarah places both ESL students in the supplementary learning class away from their non-ESL peers. While Rebecca accepts the ESL student record grades as unmodified and places all ESL students at the same level as their non-ESL peers, she can understand why teachers like Sarah might be more speculative of the grades of ESL students. Rebecca notes that some teachers modify the grades of their ESL students simply because they’re ESL, a practice she clearly does not advocate.

I find that that happens sometimes. It’s like you know, oh, you know, ‘well, this is an A, it would be an A if they weren’t ESL so we’ll give them an A’, so people give them an A and it’s like well, NO! It is language arts in English! You need to mark it based on the same scale as everybody else because, if, you know, you
went to Japan and wrote an essay in Japanese and your ideas were great but your Japanese wasn’t so hot, that’s what you’re going to get judged on. Um, at least I would assume you are.

Although Rebecca believes ESL students can use extra support, she makes it clear that while she may modify her expectations “in terms of what they can do,” she will not make exceptions because she finds that making exceptions is a disservice to both the student and academic integrity.

You can’t say, you know, this is an A for you because you’re an ESL, but if you were this person over here, it would have been a C+ because then, you know, that’s not a level playing field for anybody.

For Rebecca, an “even playing field” means assessing the level of all students using equivalent standards. If an ESL student is not achieving the same standard as their non-ESL peers, they shouldn’t be receiving grades that indicate that they are.

While Aboriginal students were more likely to be celebrated for doing well in any course, admiration for ESL student’s accomplishments tended to be course specific. Teachers seemed to expect ESL students to do well in mathematics. While this may initially seem positive, teachers who noted this appeared blasé about the high math marks achieved by ESL students. The assumption perhaps being that ESL students were inherently good at math and therefore did not need to be praised for this accomplishment. ESL students seemed to be perceived as having not put as much effort towards achieving high marks in math which may have, for some teachers, decreased the value of the mark achieved. While teachers seemed to expect ESL students to be successful in mathematics, high achievement in language arts was seen as rare and was therefore more likely to be noted if the child either excelled or did poorly. Rachel in commenting on Nabil Hasan’s A+ in language arts remarks:
Nabil Ha-san, ESL male, appears to be ESL from 2001 on...Oh! Interesting... ESL but in grade four was getting A+s. Excelling at language arts and mathematics. Mathematics never surprises us with ESL students cuz [sic] math is fairly consistent internationally but [laughs] right at an A+ level when he first comes in is an [pause] interesting grade.

Violet agrees. When asked about modifying experiences for ESL students, she admits having difficulty deciding how to grade the ESL students in her own classroom. She mentions that while her ESL students can be very bright in other subjects such as math and science, they tend to struggle in the language based subjects. She describes her frustration that many of her ESL students leave the ESL program too early because “they are so desperate to graduate”, a fact she finds detrimental to the students’ achievement. She informs me that in her grade ten classroom she has recently failed three grade twelve students for the third time because of their difficulty with the language. Similarly, while Janet places all of her ESL students at the same level as their non-ESL peers, she acknowledges that in her experience she has found that while “they [ESL students] are ambitious kids, they’re smart in math, they’re straight A in math”, language arts is a challenge for them and thus a challenge for her assessing their performance. When I ask why, Janet doesn’t hesitate,

The language. Yeah. I totally see that because I have five ESL kids in my class this year and I’ve never had ESL kids before and they’re bright kids, but [pause] it’s challenging for them. [...] in, in grammar, in the grammar. It can’t be A work because their grammar. Mind you this is after four years. We have kids who after two years and their grammar is still lacking even after four years they’re not the same. They’re just, academically in the use of language, not the same.

Teachers were more likely to place ESL students at a lower level than their non-ESL speaking peers because they didn’t feel that the ESL students would be capable of
producing the same kind of quality of work without having the English language capabilities of their peers.

While ESL students who received high marks were occasionally deemed as being more capable of achieving because of their ability to overcome the language barriers, lower-achieving ESL students were a concern because teachers assumed that students would need to work extra hard in order to maintain the same standards as their non-ESL peers in language arts based subjects. Such is the case for Sarah, who explains why she has placed low achieving ESL students below their non-ESL counterparts.

I tended to look carefully at the ESL students to make sure that they were capable independently cuz [sic] that's important. And I guess with the ESL students I feel it's a little more justified than it is with the Aboriginal kids to mark them low because there is an academic factor here. They are learning a new language, you know what I mean? It would be like, it would be like, if you were trying to tell me where to put, ah, [pause], kids into hockey teams, all stars, medium or low and you told me that some of them were entering with no arm. Like, they are at an academic disadvantage with a new language unless they've been in Canada for a long time and it's no longer, um, it's a second language but it's no longer a new second language.

Sarah looks at the ESL designation and assumes that the students may not have the same language proficiency. This is a factor that she feels will inhibit their ability to succeed. However her statement does indicate that her expectations of the students' ability shifts as they become more fluent with the language.

Unfortunately, sometimes a lack of confidence in a student's language capabilities influenced more than the teachers' perception of the ability to succeed in language arts based courses. Rebecca discusses an ESL student who has worked incredibly hard but still has difficulty achieving in language arts. "Bizarrely", Rebecca remarks, "the same child is getting an A in French." Veronique, a former French
teacher, does not find ESL students' ability to achieve a high marks in French bizarre at all nor does she find it odd that another teacher might. She explains,

I was teaching French as a second language for a really long time and I was going, I was working for the Vancouver school board and Burnaby school board and I was going into ten and, like, fifteen different schools at a time to go and teach the classes and often there was [sic] ESL students in the classes and some teachers would say, 'Oh, this student is ESL, we're going to take him away, or her away, from the class in French', and I was like, 'Whoa! Wait a second here. They're usually the ones that do best in this class!' [Laughs] They assume, it's like, 'Oh no, it's going to be too overwhelming', but no, they were often the kids that were actually doing better in that class because they already had, like, first of all they had like this [pause] concept of, even if it was subconscious right? ...of how to apply languages and how to transfer these skills but also they felt better about themselves because it put them at the same level as all the other students, all the other students were also learning this language, so they weren't behind in anything. So I think that was a chance for them to actually stand out. But yeah, I think, you know, I've heard, like comments, you know going in schools. Like some teachers really complain about all these ESL students in the class and I think they just assume that they will be lower achievers, but I think it has mainly to do with the support that you give them.

Veronique sees ESL students as having a greater advantage in language courses such as French for two reasons. The first is that in their attempts to learn English they may have already acquired some of the skills necessary to adapt and play with words. The second is that they finally have the chance to begin class at the same starting point as their peers rather than constantly being one step behind. Veronique acknowledges that ESL students may not be at the same starting point in other subjects as their EFL peers, however she prefers to offer ESL students extra support rather than diminished expectations. Support may come in a variety of forms. If a student arrives in class with very little exposure to the English language, she will adapt both the assignment and her marking scheme. She explains that when she works with ESL students, she creates what she calls a "micro-class" within her classroom. In this "micro-classroom" she adapts assignments to the level of the students’ English speaking and comprehension.
level and will continue this process until she feels the students are ready for the next level. She maintains that while she may modify assignments, her expectations remain the same.

Teacher Michelle agrees that it is the curriculum, rather than the achievement expectations for the child that should be modified.

I think it’s, it’s not about modifying achievement expectations. It’s about modifying the way in which the curriculum is delivered in order to, for children to be successful at achieving these, those, um, benchmarks. That it’s not about lowering the bar as much as supporting the child to reach the bar.

For Michelle, enabling an ESL student to reach that bar means that first the teacher must be able to identify that the student is having difficulty achieving the standards of that grade level. After that, the teacher can then work towards establishing the support systems necessary for that child to achieve. She suggests contacting the parents and meeting with the principal to clarify the work that needs to be done to ensure the child can achieve. It may also mean modifying achievement indicators until the student can meet the same standard as the rest of the class. She emphasizes that this must be assessed for each student and clarifies that it should never be assumed that what works well for one ESL student will work for them all. For Emma, it is also important to understand that as the child’s proficiency with language progresses, so too must the teacher’s ability to adapt to the changing learning needs of the student.

When asked if expectations should be modified for ESL students, many teachers had the tendency to agree. While teachers expressed themselves in different ways, most tended to articulate that while achievement expectations should not be modified, some adaptations might be necessary in terms of both the work assigned and the assessments made. Miriam explains that at her school ESL students don’t start
receiving letter grades until they're seen as capable of meeting the classroom standards. Prior to that, it is necessary for the teacher to work in tandem with the student and the resources to ensure that the necessary language proficiency is attained. Until that time, she will not assess that student against the classroom standards.

I think that ultimately the goal of our entire system should be that they do get to the same spot and then, yes, I do think that they should be assessed and the expectation should be the same.

While this was overwhelmingly the response of most, if not all, of the teachers interviewed, it was interesting that in placing ESL students into one of the designated folders, there were several occasions when a student's ESL status affected their final folder designations and never a time when their ESL status was completely ignored.

4.7.4 Expectations of non-Aboriginal, non-ESL students

Unlike the record cards of both Aboriginal and ESL students, decisions about non-Aboriginal, non-ESL students were made quickly and did not tend to evoke much additional commentary. When non-ESL, non-Aboriginal students were discussed by teachers (usually when asked to compare their student record card with the record card of an Aboriginal or ESL student) they were often referred to using words such as "normal", "average", "regular" and by one teacher, "plain, old, regular student." The one exception to this rule was with reference to Jamie Mathew Nelson, a non-Aboriginal, non-ESL student of mid-range achievement, who had received an A+ in language arts - a grade that that stood out, perhaps because of the perceived value of language arts and, in some cases, the fact that a male student had achieved so well in the area of language arts.
4.8 Background factors

All twenty-one teachers agreed that factors outside the classroom could influence a child’s achievement. Many teachers wished to “know” the student because they felt these factors provide an indication of the most appropriate placement. Factors listed ranged from family and lifestyle, socio-economic status, work habits, students’ expectations of themselves, attitude towards school and the school environment itself. All twenty-one teachers identified family as a key contributing factor to student achievement, with sixteen of the twenty-one teachers placing “family” first on their list.

Stephanie lets out a deep sigh after I ask her to describe what extent might background factors influence a student’s achievement. “Oh, huge...” She sighs again. “Background like family, yeah, it’s huge...” Stephanie explains to me that one of the things she is really proud of about her school is the intake interviews in September when parents are expected to meet their child’s teacher. She explains, “it’s not a ‘if you want,’ it’s a, we say to every family, ‘you need to come in’ and we don’t tell the parents how the child’s doing and that, but we say, ‘Tell us about your kid, tell us what’s going on’.” For Stephanie, what is going on in a student’s family not only gives her a better insight into the life of that child but it also may influence the way she treats the child in class. She describes a situation she experienced in which two high achieving students failed to return a classroom assignment. One child had a parent who was battling cancer, while the other had undergone a recent move. Stephanie reveals,

If I didn’t know the background, I’d have said, ‘that’s it, bring it in tomorrow, you lose the mark, you know, I’m disappointed in you,’ but, because I know the background, I pulled them aside. I said, ‘Look, I know you guys aren’t having a good day. I know this is tough for you. Give it to me tomorrow and we’ll just call it even.’
Stephanie explains that when she knows a child's personal situation, she is better able to adapt her behaviour to the needs of the child. She states that it's not about changing her grade expectations of the student but that she may readjust her behaviour expectations for that child until things stabilize at home. She admits that when she doesn't have access to information about a child's family it becomes more difficult.

I've had kids who've pulled crazy stuff and I've gotten really upset with them because, you know, it is unacceptable behaviour and then to find out two weeks later, you know, that was the day their Nana died or, you know, something like that. And without knowing that I can't adjust how I handle them.

Other teachers have similar responses. Janet explains that a child having trouble at home may be taken into consideration when assessing a student's achievement. She states that at times like these, "you need to kind of [pause], lessen your expectations for a little while here because this is happening." However, like Stephanie, she agrees that it's often hard to know what is going on in the lives of all of her students, particularly if that parent teacher relationship has not been established. Not having access to the private lives of all her students, Janet admits to making generalizations based upon the school's geographic location. When reflecting upon her experience at her current school she states,

You know, if I look at my kids, they're all happy, they all seem happy, but they don't seem to have any background issues. I would say in my class, no one has background issues. It's a really good class, um, but it's not a, it's not, um, it's not a neighbourhood that, even though like, it's a well to do neighbourhood. So I do think you see less background issues. I, I don't know of any. But when I taught in East Van there might have been a few. Um, one little guy, and it was a Black guy and, he had a big brother that was mean to him and kind of abusing him and his work wasn't very good and I remember just thinking about that. I don't know if I ever changed. I still marked him according to the grid. But at the same time, you've just kind of got to understand that maybe you try to help those kids a little more.
Janet assumes that the lives of her students in a more affluent school are less troubled than those of the students she encountered at her inner-city school. Interestingly, Janet also makes reference to the race of the child encountered despite its apparent lack of relevance to the rest of story. She concludes that one must try and understand that "those kids" may need a little more help. While it remains unclear whether "those kids" refers to students from less affluent background or students of a particular race (or both), what remains clear is the extent to which Janet's stereotypes influence her perceptions of needs of her students.

During the interviews it was interesting to see the kinds of associations that teachers made between arbitrary factors such as a student's race, ESL or socio-economic status. For example, several teachers, when discussing "family" would discuss a student's aptitude for success in relation to the families' perceived socio-economic status as was the case for Steve. Steve states that his experience has taught him that the children of parents who are really involved in their child's education are the same students who seem to excel in school.

I have seen over the years a number of students who've come from...ah...family backgrounds that are very, very supportive and have parents who are very involved and I see those students being high achievers. Those parents who tend to care a lot about their, their children providing them with opportunities to do things that go beyond the regular school program, you know, putting them into extracurricular activities and so on. I think that helps them in their, their school learning things other than just the curriculum. Um, and I've seen students from ah, I'd guess I'd say low socio-economic backgrounds with parents who I'll, for instance, parents where there's only one parent such as a single mother raising a couple of kids and those kids are...[voice trails off]. Sorry, the mother might be working two jobs. I've encountered mothers like that who work during the day, come home, ah, meet their child for an hour and then go back, or go to another job and work for the evening when the child is left at home alone. So, yeah, ah certainly a student's background can have some serious implications for their success in school.
For Steve, successful students tend to have access to both the parent's time and to extracurricular activities outside of school. Steve then compares this with students he has met from single parent, lower socio-economic families who did not necessarily have the time or money to spend on the child. He is careful to acknowledge that "no great generalization can be made for all students" and "there are some students who come from really low socio-economic backgrounds [who] have very little parental support and yet are exceptional achievers." His use of the word "exceptional" to describe students' who have achieved success despite external barriers seems to suggest that these students are unique when compared to high achievers who have not faced the same obstacles. The implication is that children from affluent, two-parent households may have fewer obstacles than their single parent, less affluent peers, making it easier for them to obtain academic success. For Steve, this is an acknowledgment and appreciation for what he sees as being the reality of many of the single parent families.

Teacher Sarah's experience offers a valuable reminder of this.

I have a student who, um, lives in a home where the parents are very professional and academic but are so busy and always at meetings and there's no real guidance for her to have quiet spaces to focus on school. So things like that, um, are a factor also I guess.

Despite living in a family that is both highly academic and financially secure, Sarah reveals that this child also suffers from neglect from a lack of time, an important factor that may be overlooked if teachers generalize their understandings of the personal lives of their students.

Derek believes that a parent's involvement and concern for their child's education is paramount to a student's academic success. It is a factor which he, like Steve, also seems to link to the parents' socio-economic status. Derek explains that during his
sixteen years of teaching, he's encountered some parents who seem to believe that their role in their child's education "ends when the cheque clears." He states that these parents play a less active role in their child's education as it is assumed that the teacher will take the responsibility for the success (or failure) of the child. He believes that parents who are more involved in their student's education place a higher value on it and spend additional time both in and outside of the classroom working with both the teacher and the child to ensure the child's success. He informs me that this was apparent in his previous school, one more affluent than the one where he currently teaches.

You've got some parents and there's quite a few of them here at this school too but, ah, at my previous school there's probably even more cuz [sic] of their background, right? They're professional people, you know, maybe just dad's a lawyer, mom's a homemaker or mom's an interior designer and dad works in an office or whatever, whereas here, you know, you got people who are janitors, who are, you know, working at MacDonald's or Burger King or, you know, working two jobs just to support the general family. So like their view of education and their background obviously influences what the kids do. In a lot of cases the parents are just concerned that they behave themselves and they do their work. How well they're doing their work really doesn't matter. If they get a B or an A, then great! Then there's some other parents who are, put a greater value on education, so they're extremely supportive of the teachers and they're supportive of their kids too and trying to give them as many opportunities to succeed because, especially coming from those countries like Vietnam and the Philippines. They know that education is key to future success so if they want their kids to be a doctor or a lawyer, that's always the most popular one, right? Um, they know they need to get good grades, like, all the way through. So background has a lot to do with it. Like you know, when I mentioned earlier about socio-economic status. [...] The number one deciding factor on how kids do at school is their socio-economic status, right?

In Derek's experience, families with a higher socio-economic standing have a greater tendency to value education and are more likely to play a supportive role to teachers in order to help ensure their child's academic success. These parents are seen as giving their children more opportunities to succeed than parents of a lower socio-economic
status who may be more concerned that their child simply behaves in the classroom. He also assumes certain groups may place a higher value on education than others which could influence his perception of how particular families regard education.

For some teachers, a parent’s social-cultural capital, such as whether or not they have had an education or if they have read books to their child in the home, also influence that child’s success. Shane observes that “there have been studies done that show that the higher education the parents have, the better the kids usually do.” Sarah notices a profound difference among students who have had access to books before they hit the classroom. She describes her situation at a west-end school where students enter kindergarten with “a thousand hours of reading time.” According to her experience, these students are motivated to learn and have had that passion towards education instilled in them at an early age from parents who also placed a high value on life-long learning. This was something that she felt was lacking in the school where she taught up North. Sarah seems to feel that because the parents do not have books in their houses or teach their children to read at an early age, they do not place the same value in education as parents who do. When asked what she does when she feels she is faced with students whose parents do not place a high value on education, she explains in exasperation:

I feel like it’s almost, that one I feel like it’s almost impossible, [laughs] to really overcome. Um, which is one of the reasons why I left teaching in the North because I felt that I needed to develop more tools to be able to, cuz [sic] I just realized I can’t convince kids to believe something their parents aren’t teaching them to believe because the parents are the people they look to most. The parents are the people that influence them the most.

Shane states that for him background factors such as a family’s attitudes influence that child’s success “upwards of ninety-five percent.” Shane thus regards a students’ family
background as being a primary factor towards a students' potential success or failure in the classroom. He explains that he feels that the more nurturing and stable the student’s family environment, the more likely it is for that child to be successful in school. Many teachers felt that when a child’s life was chaotic at home, their school work inevitably suffered. This is why teachers like Nicole enjoyed working in a smaller school environment to have the opportunity to keep tabs on a student’s situation at home.

I mean every time a kid comes to class they’re bringing everything that happened the night before home, or whatever happened over the breakfast table into class and so you know, if a kid didn’t eat that day, they’re not really going to be ready for the test or if they didn’t sleep the night before, for, you know, just because they’re parents let them stay up and play video games or, who knows why. They, it absolutely affects them. Um, I, that’s, I think that’s what nice about smaller schools is you get to know the kids better so you can really know maybe what their family situation is like or if they work, if they have work, you know, when they’re in grade ten because they don’t have enough money.

Nicole explains that since her school is quite small and is often perceived as “the last chance school” for students with difficulties, it’s very important for her to understand what is happening to her students outside the school walls. This way, if a student’s marks take a sudden downward spiral, she may be able to pinpoint what went wrong. Nicole describes her bond with the parent community at her schools as “strong,” which she feels (like Stephanie and Janet) is helpful for her as a teacher because it means that parents and teachers work in tandem when investigating reasons a particular student may not be keeping up with classroom standards. Janet agrees that having insight into a student’s family background can be helpful, particularly when there has been a sudden drop in the student’s academic performance. She acknowledges that awareness of a student’s difficulties at home may even influence her evaluation of the student.
Not that people can't rise beyond it, but it takes an exceptional kid to rise beyond unfortunate family situations. Um, so I think as teachers we have to be understanding of that and the better you know your kids the better you're not able to push them when they're about, if they're having a hard time at home, then, you modify because of the situation.

Considering the value teachers seem to base on background factors such as a student's family, socio-economic status or social situation, it is important to consider the potential pre-conceived notions regarding particular groups of students may have upon student achievement.

4.8.1 Family, background and expectations: Aboriginal student record cards

Aboriginal record cards and questions regarding expectations of Aboriginal students were more likely to elicit inquiries into a student's background than the records of their non-Aboriginal peers. High-achieving Aboriginal student record cards were sometimes deemed exceptional due to the perception that these students had managed to achieve despite the various obstacles they were perceived as having to overcome. This issue has been articulated in previous sections; however it is worthwhile at this juncture to reiterate some of the concerns that consistently arose over the course of the interviews. Obstacles frequently referred to with regard to Aboriginal students included problems at home, parental disinterest in education, alcohol and/or drug abuse, foetal alcohol syndrome, absenteeism and the residual effects of residential schooling. These perceptions of Aboriginal students stemmed from a number of factors including a teacher's personal experiences, the experiences of other teachers and external sources such as the media.
It was noted previously that some teachers, upon recognizing the high marks of Aboriginal students, expressed surprise at their high achievement. In some circumstances, this was accompanied by the teacher’s desire to know more about the student’s background before assigning them to a class. While these teachers had no problem placing high-achieving Aboriginal students in rapid advance classes, they sometimes expressed concern over whether or not the students had the social maturity or family support necessary to achieve in a challenging class. For example, as Rachel is about to place Hubie Jack’s student record card in the rapid advance pile, she notices his Aboriginal status. After making this observation, she remarks:

Now even though he’s displaying strong grades, this is a snapshot of his academics. We know that some First Nation children often have social skills or difficulties or behaviour problems so again that would be a decision that you would discuss with the transition teachers at your high school.

While she finally places Hubie in the accelerated classroom, her perceptions of Aboriginal students as having behaviour problems creates her initial concern about Hubie’s capacity to achieve in the rapid advance class. Stephanie was also more inclined to want additional information on the family background of high-achieving Aboriginal students than their non-Aboriginal peers. This may be due to a strong belief in the influence “family” has upon a student’s educational success combined with pre-conceived notions of Aboriginal children’s performance in the classroom. When looking at Hubie’s record card, she remarks:

He’s self-identified as an Aboriginal kid but he’s, you know, often Aboriginal kids struggle but he’s done really, really well. I would urge him, I would probably put him in the rapid advance or at least recommend him but without knowing the family history, it’s really hard to say for sure. I mean I would, as a teacher myself, I would always look in the family history and whether the student wanted to do, whether or not, you know, I think, knowing kids have gone through something like rapid advance, we don’t call it that here but, it’s very tough on them, or can be
and if they don't have the family support and the family help, they sometimes fall by the way side.

When she encounters high achieving Aboriginal student Rosalyn Wallace, she again mentions her desire to know more about the student's family background. For Stephanie, the family history is important because she recognizes that a rapid advance class can be challenging and wants to ensure that student will have family support. Her belief that Aboriginal children tend to struggle more may increase her desire to refer to the Aboriginal student's family background. Despite these concerns, she still places both Aboriginal students in the rapid advanced folder based on their grades alone.

Derek expresses a similar desire to explore the background of the two high-achieving Aboriginal students partly because of his interest in the effects family's socio-economic status may have upon a child's learning. After observing the two record cards, he turns to me and inquires, "Um, can we imagine, is this an inner-city school these kids are at? Is it West end, East end, or does it...? His voice tapers off and so I ask him to explain why this information is important to him. He elaborates:

Just cuz I know that socio-economic status does influence things. I'm just wondering cuz these two kids with the A+s both have received some Aboriginal, you know, education or at least funded as such so I'm just wondering, sort of, what city they're from, or if it even matters.

After listening to his response, I ask him where he imagines the students might be from.

He responds:

Well, that's what I'm wondering cuz [sic] they're both, so far the ones that I've put into the rapid advanced were Aboriginal kids and it's like, I've never taught Aboriginal kids so it's just, I know that, I know the [pause] kid's family background and everything with socio-economic status does influence, you know, how they, how they perform, so, [pause], just curious.
Like Stephanie, Derek also expresses the desire to have a greater insight into the background of the two high-achieving Aboriginal students before finalizing his decision on placement. While Derek did not elaborate precisely why these two specific record cards provoked such a question, it is conceivable that the high-achieving status of the two Aboriginal students conflicted with his perceptions of the educational performance of Aboriginal students. Once again, it was interesting to note that these particular record cards were more likely to elicit speculation into the student’s family background, geographical location or socio-economic status than those of non-Aboriginal, non-ESL students.

All twenty-one teachers were asked whether expectations should be modified for Aboriginal peoples. While twenty teachers said no, one responded yes. Olivia’s “yes” response was based largely on background factors. When asked to clarify those factors, Olivia elaborates,

Well, I'm thinking about things like poverty, like maybe moving around a lot, alcohol, the possibility of FAE [Foetal Alcohol Exposure] or FAS [Foetal Alcohol Syndrome] Cuz [sic] FAE might not cognitively affect the child but you know it could have affected him behaviourally, there could be, um, what kinds of other things going on? And like I say, this is just based on my own experience. And fortunately, plus, you know, Aboriginal, now a days you can be on the Aboriginal registry if you have a grandparent, which is kind of crazy. But, pretty much every student I've had who's been on the Aboriginal registry has had some kind of social problem.

Although she does not give any specific examples, Olivia states that she bases her perceptions of Aboriginal students on her previous classroom experiences with Aboriginal students. While Olivia was clear that she felt there were times when expectations should be modified for Aboriginal students, other teachers disagreed. Some teachers felt that expectations for Aboriginal students should not be modified but
teaching methods should be. For example, Veronique believed that the school should make more of an effort to accommodate Aboriginal students in the classroom.

I think what should be changed is, um, definitely include more of their ways of learning, learning styles in the classroom. And so I think it’s important for a teacher to know that and to actually understand better their learning style and their cultural values and try to include that into the curriculum so I don’t think your expectations should change, but what should change is how, how you see your teaching methodologies and how you can actually include that kid so that that kid is successful in your class and obviously make him or her, like they have, they struggle through standard, standardization, you know, exams, standard tests. And so, I think I would try to do a broader, kind of different evaluation style than just standard tests knowing that overall, they tend to score lower on standard tests which doesn’t test them for what they actually know.

Judith agrees. Like Veronique, she feels that schools prioritize certain ways of knowing over others and that this may be detrimental towards Aboriginal students.

I think our school system is very empirical and very, um, driven on, sort of this White, middle class way of doing things so I think that people who land outside of that, um, stereotype, like First Nations students or people like ESL students or people from different cultures or whose families come from different cultures or whose families have less of an advantage in schools because they may not, um, know how to navigate through schools as well as, you know, White, middle class students who grew up in White, middle class, families who are very, very good at playing the game of school which is eventually the game of life.

Michelle also feels that while achievement expectations should not be modified for Aboriginal students, she too believes that the school programs need to be modified to accommodate what she feels are the needs of Aboriginal learners. One way she envisions this happening is offering Aboriginal students the option of attending Indigenous language courses.

Some children may benefit from program modifications. Like for example, um, we have some Musqueam children, um, well, all Musqueam children are very, really do not, um, have a good knowledge of their, of their language. And that’s a concern I know, to the, to the band. And they would like the children to be learning, um, really get some exposure to their own language during school time. So that, for example, I mean, other than adding it on, the other option would be to, to do that [Musqueam language course] instead of French, for example.
Rebecca feels cautious not only about modifying expectations for Aboriginal students but also about modifying programs specifically to accommodate Aboriginal learners as she feels that is unjust to the learner.

I, I, don't like the idea of modifying for one specific ethnic group or racial group. Um, certainly not if we're modifying our expectations downwards because then, oddly enough, they live down to them! Um, you know, I think, you can have the same expectations with an understanding of, you know, their situations. You know, are they coming from a, you know, poverty or are they coming from a, you know, lacking the cultural knowledge if what they might need to know in a system that's not based on Aboriginal culture. And certainly take things into account but, um, I'm a big fan of, you know, your background can provide understanding but it doesn't need to become an excuse for not doing well. So, you know, I mean we modify for kids for all sorts of reasons, or at least have a better understanding of, you know, 'okay, I can't expect you to be doing this because, you know, you're not being fed in the morning' or whatever else it is. I don't know that it's specific. I would have a problem with making these sweeping, 'Okay, we're going to modify these expectations for every Aboriginal student who walks in the door,' because that's assuming they're all the same. And, you know, which would be, if I was Aboriginal, I'd find that as offensive as someone saying, you know; 'All the white people, we're expecting you to do this, because you're white.' So, I mean, no. I think it needs to be a case by case thing and, you know, problems might be encountered, but I wouldn't go for modifications across the board.

While Rebecca acknowledges that it's important for teachers to keep in mind a student's particular situation and to be aware of factors such as the student's cultural background, she is hesitant about the notion of modifying programs for one particular group of students and prefers to work with each student as an individual without relying on any assumptions.

Asking teachers to respond to a question regarding modifying their expectations of a student of Aboriginal ethnicity seemed to leave many teachers uncomfortable. For those teachers who did raise perceived differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, they tended to clarify that their perceptions were shaped by
something they had heard from other teachers or as influenced by the media’s portrayal of Aboriginal peoples. Derek, shocked by the question, responds:

See, that’s a bit of a charged question, isn’t it? [Laughs] I think it’s, er, I would say it’s, it’s so dependent on so many other factors though. If a student is Aboriginal and the student is doing well, like some of the kids I put in here [rapid advance], then I don’t think they need to have their expectations, you know [modified]. But if a kid, and just to use the term Aboriginal, I, ah, I remember a few years ago I was teaching, I was marking FSAs [Foundation skills assessment] and I, I was marking with a teacher who came from, and I can’t remember the community, but it was somewhere up North in the interior and it was like all her students were Aboriginal and there were kids who were doing fine and there were other kids who were, you know, one poor little kid, he would never bathe and he would never change his clothes and she just really had to help them out so, just the fact they’re Aboriginal doesn’t mean, you know, they’re having difficulties with learning or cultural expectations or [voice trails off]. Some could be Aboriginal and be a lot more, um, integrated into you know, White society or whatever, however you want to term it. I would have to say that it would just really depend on, on the kid and their own factors. But just for the very fact that they’re stamped Aboriginal, I would say no.

Violet suggests that:

...Depending on their, [pause], their level of achievement. I don’t think they should be ah, just because they’re Aboriginal, no. Because, I, I [voice trails off]. Perhaps they should be taught in a different way. I think they [Aboriginal students], they have a different outlook on school. The whole cultural thing is different. They don’t attend [pause], this is a generalization, they don’t attend as regularly, often, as other kids or they tend to be poor attenders [sic] and this has an effect on their learning, and I know that in North Van they have a, there is an Aboriginal school on the reserve which seems to be able to deal with that more because it’s more free flowing and the teacher gets to know the kids a bit better, you know. And I think it works that way. But in this system, I wouldn’t make the standards any different.

When Vanessa, who does not have a large number of Aboriginal students attending her school, was asked if expectations should be modified for Aboriginal students, she reflects both on her personal experience and that of student teachers who have previously worked in large Aboriginal communities.

I grew up in a community where there were lots and lots of Aboriginal students. I grew up in Northern BC. Should you change your expectations? I think you need
to be culturally sensitive to, um, what's going on. I've worked with student teachers and I've had student teachers who've ended up in Fort St. James and all kinds of small communities in the North where they're working with high numbers of Aboriginal communities and dealing with issues like absenteeism and, um, their family expectations around school and family values with school [pause]. I think that you need to be aware of who you're dealing with and what their perceptions might be but, should standards be lowered? No. No certainly not. But I think you need to know who you're dealing with [pause] no matter what culture people are from.

Like Vanessa, Nicole was raised in a large Aboriginal community and feels this may be why she is more immune to existing stereotypes regarding Aboriginal peoples. When asked if expectations for Aboriginal people should be modified, she informs me:

I have some Aboriginal kids in my classes and they're just, they're fine, like they're average students. Um, but then again, I think it depends on home life and the assumptions we make about the home life that's happening in residential areas and things like that. Sometimes, yeah, maybe the parents aren't there or, but that, I really don't know. I guess that happens everywhere. I grew up in Kamloops and there's a strong, like really strong First Nations band there and they do really well academically at school and it's just a really, really supportive band and quite a [pause], a wealthy band, I guess, so, um, I didn't really grow up with biases towards Natives because the guys at my school were just, whatever, they weren't failing. So, [Laughs], so then I come here and then they talk a lot about how there's a lot of Aboriginal kids that go to [Name of school] and that a lot of them, cuz [sic] that's just the area that's right by the rez [reserve], um, so that's the catchment area. And then, ah, you know, [Name of school], cuz [sic] of that, there's maybe more fighting or there's more disruption, there's a lot more kids failing and, I don't know if that's really because of the Native kids or people are just blaming them. But, this rez is a little more rough [sic] than the one I grew up around. So maybe, yeah, maybe they're not getting sleep at night, not getting food to eat. I don't know [laughs]. It's hard to make judgements about something, like where you haven't lived in it. Like, I don't really know.

Thus, for many of these teachers, although they were asked to base their placement of students on the common factor of student grades, there was an insistence on wanting to know more about the students and their families. Without this information some teachers were hesitant to make decisions or were unable to be certain about the decisions they made. What is not acknowledged throughout the interviews was the
degree to which teachers perceptions were tacitly influencing their placement. Probing them for the reasons for their decisions caused those perceptions to become explicit. For example, when Sarah remarked casually that she was pleasantly surprised by the marks of high-achieving Aboriginal students, I questioned her on why that may have been the case. That one question provoked a notable response where Sarah revealed that she had spent time teaching up North. Contemplating on why the high achieving student record cards triggered such a response, she reasons:

You're, you're not use to seeing it necessarily from Aboriginal students and the reasons why you're not necessarily used to seeing it we don't always know. Sometimes it's family situations or, um, you know, having parents who are professional or who value education. So, like I taught up in the North too and it was really hard. You really notice the difference between the parents who value education and the parents who didn't because it just showed so clearly in their children and how successful their children are.

Sarah's experience up North helped shape her belief in the significant role parents play in their child's academic success. While she acknowledges she found her role as a teacher up North fascinating, she admits that it was a "challenge" because of what she perceived as families' general disinterest in education. However, Sarah does recognize that the problem may be attributed to a Western European educational system that may not mesh with the students' backgrounds.

Teachers like Sharon also demonstrated an awareness of the historical biases against Aboriginal peoples that may still influence the ways in which education is both perceived and received by Aboriginal communities. When discussing what kinds of background factors may affect student achievement she mentions the effect residential schooling may have had on some Aboriginal families and how that experience might influence the family's current notion of school and education.
...And sometimes with [pause], sometimes with the Aboriginal families, particularly if generationally, if the parents and grandparents have had to deal with residential schools. And so that’s a really, emotional, tough connection. I know of a fellow who, um, I’ve known for a number of years now and he was one of the last, one of the last students on the prairies in one of the residential schools and he said he had a really, really tough time, sort of dealing with any connection with schools at all because of his, his history and the negative aspects of being in a school that was pretty toxic. So, in this educational system we have many First Nations parents who have moved from other areas, maybe be it up the coast, be it in the prairies and, ah, sometimes for them it’s hard to, um, deal with the schools in general because if they have been through a residential school scenario or their parents were and there was a disconnect between, um, with themselves, with parents having to, to deal with the really bad memories and, and everything that connected with that as well. I remember one mom saying she found it really difficult even coming to school and had to get over that. She said, ‘I’m trying to help my daughter but trying to get me through the door was the hardest thing.’ So, yeah, so in terms of background, because we were talking about Aboriginal families and English as second language families, sometimes there are factors that can either help or be difficult for the families to deal with.

Sharon acknowledges that there may be other reasons why a family may not get as involved in classroom activities as a teacher may hope. She feels that her understanding and awareness of these issues has better enabled her to relate to the parents than she might have otherwise.

Janet regards media as both a problem contributing towards the lower graduation rates of Aboriginal students and a potential solution to it. Her statement also seems to reflect the influence “media” has had on her own perceptions of Aboriginal peoples, something she does not acknowledge explicitly.

If they had more, if more Aboriginals...and Aboriginals can help themselves too by being in the media, having their successful representatives being more visual. All we hear is about the drunk ones [sic] that are shooting the cops and things like that. Huge media on that! Yet I was, there’s a Native winery in Oysoyoos, and there’s this fellow there that’s running it, a Native man...the Chief. He’s all about making money and, instead of just taking from the government. And it’s tremendous. He’s, he’s made a big resort. I can’t remember what it’s called. Friends of mine go there. It’s gorgeous. It’s got a winery and education centre, an Aboriginal centre. Very, very positive and kind of pro-active and he’s now going
around to other bands up in the Okanagan and trying to preach, ‘Let’s not take handouts anymore, let’s create and let’s be business people.’ I think they [Aboriginal people], if I was in the Aboriginal community, try, try and get that out more. Get that in the newspaper. They’re just so stereotyped and their so [sic] painted with this bad brush but they have to help themselves by, oh, that’s tough, I think it’s tough because I think there’s a lot of bad stuff happening in the Aboriginal communities. So who rises out of that? The few. You know, few [pause]. But you know, if they’re going to school and they’re getting As, I think that’s awesome. Celebrate that and maybe if you can get an Aboriginal kid in the rapid advance, that’s great. If, you know, it’s cuz [sic] you’re going to be [pause], an inspiration to maybe the younger people in your, if your living on one of those reserves, ‘so and so’s skipping a grade.’ Maybe other kids would believe it’s possible. But if they just see their drunk people [sic] all over the place, you start thinking, ‘That’s what we are. We’re just drunk people.’ Instead of Johnny or whatever is name is up here [points to rapid advance folder], Jack Hubie. It’s like, ‘oh cool! Jack can do this.’ We need more of that.

Janet expresses her belief in Aboriginal students’ capability to do well and acknowledges the negative influence external factors such as media may have on both Aboriginal academic achievement and the way Aboriginal peoples are perceived in society. However, her statement also seems to reflect the contradictions that exist within her own perceptions of Aboriginal peoples. This is a subject of which will be discussed in greater depth in chapter five.

4.8.2 Family, background and expectations: ESL student record cards

When discussing the student record cards or background factors for ESL students, family and social behaviour arose again. There also seemed to be more attention paid to the child’s ethnicity. Some teachers expressed the opinion that families of ESL students of Asian descent had extremely high expectations that their child would excel in school. The high expectations of families were regarded by some teachers as being beneficial. For these teachers, it was assumed that families who valued education would support their child and maintain a positive influence on their achievement. For
example, when Cathy was asked why she placed high-achieving ESL student Hiromasa Morika in the rapid advance program, she reasoned that his record card demonstrated “a good command of the language, enough to, you know, exceed the expectations at that grade level for those subjects.” However, Cathy acknowledged that it was not only Hiromasa’s high grades or capacity with the English language that helped determine his high placement.

I think another part of it is that this might be, well, it’s an Asian student of some sort, Korean or, or, Japanese, um, I don’t know but typically they tend to have a lot of systems in place to help them take on all their academics and then some. There’s a lot of ah, emphasis on doing well and exceeding. Working really, really hard, lots of extra study so, I guess when I say that he was very capable there and sort of, I guess culturally looking at it, um, believed he would be able to handle the rapid placement.

While Hiromasa’s academic achievement remains paramount in Cathy’s decision to place him in a rapid advance class, she is also influenced by his ethnicity. The perception she has about the work ethic of her Asian students also plays a role in her decision making.

In general, the record cards of ESL students with Asian names tended to elicit more commentary than those with South East Asian names which may be due in part, because of the high Asian population at many of schools I visited. However, a conversation with teacher Janet did leave me speculating once again about the influence different kinds of ethnicities could have upon teachers’ perceptions. Janet, new to teaching ESL students, described some of the challenges she was currently facing with her students:

...And that little girl there that I was talking to, that’s an ESL girl who just came to community in August, came without speaking a word. And the modifying! Like now she does the same in three months. She is doing the full thing as everyone else is doing. Because she wants to and I’ll, yeah, yeah, I don’t really know how to, I’m winging it as we go. But that’s what I find to be [pause], I’ll just watch
them. I watch each student. And that other guy, there's another guy in here from Iran. He does very little. Still. But he has no desire to. He, he shows no, ah, self-directed, ah, trying to improve himself. So his, they've both been in the country [voice trails off]. I think she's a much brighter girl than he is. Ah, I think he's a lazy, a lazy, not interested in helping himself so he learns really nothing and I don't have time to sit down and teach him, so he goes to ESL two times a week and he has an attitude that he doesn't want to work there either. But he's from a different country. We don't know his background. So to compare these two kids, they're both ESL.

I was intrigued by Janet's statement, "But he's from a different country. We don't know his background." Curious, I inquired into what country the little girl was from. Janet responds matter of factly;

Korea. [Pause]. And my Iranian boy is really good in math too. But he's, talk about modifying! You know, the little Iranian boy, when we're doing a full page in the voice of a character saying the importance of family, he writes, 'I love my family.' And that's it! That's it. Um, so he, he's just not growing. So when you talk about modification, you've got to wing it. I can't say to him, 'you should now be writing this' because he's incapable. And I don't know how to teach him faster. But she [pause] is obviously doing things on her own. She gets the same amount of ESL yet she is making herself. She's a hard worker. She's making herself, with some sort of support from somewhere, to do these full page things. So, I don't know, whatever that means. It's challenging. ESL...so challenging. And it depends on the personality of the kid and the family support. I think there's got to be family support for that little girl that she's coming with all this work done. She's a hard worker and I think her family is supporting hard work and I think the little Iranian boy [pause], I don't think anything is supported at home. I think, they think he's at English school and he'll learn English. I think, I think it takes more than that. I don't think just sitting in a class teaches you to be able to write in English.

Janet's remarks had me considering whether her perceptions of the two students were based more upon the actual achievement of the two students or if she was being influenced by the stereotypical perception of Asians as being "model minorities."

However, aside from relaying her experience and pointing out the boy's Iranian background, Janet's comments gave no further insight into how her perceptions of these two students were shaped.
For some teachers the notion of Asian people as being "hard working" was also accompanied by the belief that the parents of these students placed too much emphasis on success and achievement. This was seen as being detrimental to the student, particularly if the student was not doing well but perceived as being pressured to succeed. While reflecting upon the student record card of lower achieving ESL student, Kyun-Yin (Stanley) Poon, Olivia remarks, "That's another thing, when I get a Korean student who has marks like that in the face of overwhelming pressure from the family you have to wonder what's going on." I ask Olivia to explain.

Well, well, because the family, Korean parents, once again I'm generalizing, often put great pressure on their kids to achieve. They expect As and Bs. And when kids don't achieve they're often very hard on them. I've seen this time and time and time again. So, ah, the fact that he's, he's got those kinds of marks in the face of what may, I know, what may be pressure from his family. What's going on with him?

Olivia, like Cathy, has the perception that the parents of Asian ESL students place a great deal of emphasis on academics. However, Olivia perceives this emphasis as potentially negative for a student. She relates Kyun-Yin's student record card to her experience with a Korean ESL student in her own class. She remarks,

I have a kid like this in my class right now who, if he wanted to, could be a phenomenal student but he doesn't. He doesn't really want to bother with it and he uses the ESL as a way out. [Mimicking] 'I don't understand. I'm just going to sit and draw and tear paper up all day.' Of course, he may be a pretty exceptional case but, you know what, I'm thinking that Stanley (Kyun-Yin Poon) could be a better student than he is, than he's showing here, particularly in, see, I see improvement in math. He dropped down in science and he went from Bs to Cs. Something's wrong there. I don't know if he's not being challenged or if he's just kind of being lazy or what. Sometimes I see with Korean kids when they are so pushed by their families, they rebel by not getting the kinds of marks that mom and dad expect or hope for so, I'm wondering if that's what might be going on here. Ah, he likes music, he's kind of 'eeinh' about art. I might, I think I might put him in supplemental assistance because I think he needs a kick. And some help. Plus he's ESL. I don't know what his level is. He could have started at reception and only be at maybe level two or three now. He could still... it could still be a problem with him.
Olivia relates Kyun-Yin’s report card to that of her own ESL student who is not achieving at the level she expects, a factor she attributes to the family’s excessive emphasis on achievement. Olivia is not the only teacher who compares Kyun Yin’s cards to Asian ESL students they have worked with in their classrooms. Vanessa explains, “What I find hardest is my, many of my ESL students’ expectations for themselves. You know, if it’s not a high A, it’s no good and how can they ever tell their parents?” Like Olivia and Vanessa, Stephanie also feels that the parents of her Asian, ESL students may exert too much pressure for the students to be, what she refers to as, “normal, average kids.” She elaborates while looking over Kyun-Yin’s record card.

Now, the other thing is that, that’s a Korean name at least I’m almost positive it is and a lot of Korean families don’t want their kids in ESL. It’s like, ah, because we have lots of Korean families here. They don’t mind it for a year or so but then they want their kids in with everybody. They want them to be normal, average kids. So his family may say, ‘hey, he’s had four years, we don’t want him there,’ but as a teacher that would be my recommendation. That he at least, would have that support. If he needs it, it’s there.

For Stephanie, being “normal, average kids” is equated with not being in an ESL classroom. It is her experience that the parents of ESL students want their child out of the ESL classroom before they are ready. In this case, both parties believe they have the child’s best interest at heart. The parents of the ESL student may believe it is in their child’s best interest to move into a non-ESL classroom where they might not be labelled “ESL” and may be offered the same academic opportunities as their non-ESL peers.

Vanessa explains,

I have a student who is an international student, Korean, who I think has some extreme learning disabilities as well as some big issues that he needs to see a counsellor about and yet I know that culturally that is going to be very difficult for his family to hear. So I’ve brought in the family, I’ve brought in the translator and tried to, um, put it in terms so that they could hear more easily. I guess that we were a bit less blunt and spoke more about finding out his strengths and finding
out how to reach his best potential and making sure that I wasn’t using a word like ‘disability’ because I felt that would shut down the conversation even to the point where I know of students who have been pulled from the school the moment we start talking about, um, testing for disabilities.

Vanessa feels that, in these cases, being “culturally smart and knowing what other people, how other people might interpret what you’re doing” is crucial for the well-being of the child. Her perception of ESL families as having excessively high expectations for their children has led her to think carefully about how she might broach sensitive subjects such as “disability” with parents of ESL students.

While some teachers were concerned with what they perceived as being excessive pressure placed by ESL families on their children, others were equally concerned with the ability (or perceived lack of ability) of ESL students to make friends and get along with their non-ESL peers. Sharon observes:

It can be emotionally frustrating for them because it’s more than just language, cuz [sic] they’re dealing with the social aspect of being in a new country at a very social age where chances are they have, um, they’ve, I mean they’ve had a full social life with their peers, to be put in a scenario where they don’t understand the language. Socially that’s quite difficult for them at times.

Concerns like these could also influence a teacher’s decision regarding student placement. Rachel contemplates the card of middle range ESL student Nisha Advani.

After looking over the card, Rachel looks up and remarks,

Nisha Advani, ESL, second language, appears came in grade four. She’s female. B+, B+, B, B+, B+, B, not falling into excellent and outstanding in that that’s As. She’s come from grade four getting some Cs and Bs to B+s. She probably is obviously borderline A and depending on her social skills she may do well in a rapid advance program as well but some of these children don’t have a lot of self esteem, the ESL students, and it would be one of those ones I’d probably evaluate the student itself, or herself, and talk to the parents and say, ‘she’d probably do just fine in the regular program but if some of her friends were going in the rapid advance, she certainly has a discipline academically.’ Again, she might do well in the rapid advance. And not knowing the social components of the child, I’ll put her in rapid advance but it’s sort of an either/or based on, it’s
more than just their academic scores that we look at when their going in that
transition from grade seven to grade eight. We look at the big picture. So we look
at their physical development, their social development, their emotional
development and their academic and what you’re giving me here is a snapshot of
their academic and so when I place them in here, I place it based on that, with
you knowing that as a grade seven teacher I take a lot more of [voice trails
off]...into consideration that just a snapshot of their academics.

When I ask Rachel to elaborate on what she meant when she said that ESL students
may have a lower self-esteem, Rachel reflects upon her own in-class experience.

Some children who have ESL, for instance, I have a young girl in my class right
now who came here from South Korea last year, only had five words last year.
So she was a beginning ESL student and although academically, last year she
was in my class, this is the second year I have her. Her writing skills went from
virtually non-existent. As her verbal skills increased, she went gradually from
getting C-s to Cs and on her last report card I gave her an A in language arts and
she is a stronger writer than some of the other children who have been here
since kindergarten, however she has no friends. Her social skills are, she’s a
very quiet, very timid, very reserved individual. Their innate traits and if she was
in Korea she’d probably, still would be very timid and very reserved and so she
might not do well in a rapid, in a rapid advance where having your social skills
are an important component of your development. And that maybe she should
go through a regular program so she has that extra year to develop some of
those social skills rather than go rapid advance and be through in four years
instead of five.

These concerns were specific to ESL students and did not arise when Rachel looked at
the record cards of their non-ESL peers. Again, Rachel is acting on what she believes to
be the best interest of the child. She recognizes both the effect and importance a
student’s social life can have on that student’s achievement. She hesitates before
placing Nisha or Young Ja Park in regular or rapid advance classes because she
believes a student’s success (or lack of success) socially will have an influence as to
how well that child achieves scholastically. Rachel hesitates before placing Nisha in an
advanced classroom stating that she relates this ESL student to an ESL student in her
own class who, while academically capable, is socially reserved.
While family and social behaviour had the most influence over the way teachers viewed the student record cards of ESL students, one teacher remarked upon how "gender" also may affect the achievement of an ESL student. Steve remarks:

Another factor too, I'm going to focus on females here, um, I have seen a number of students who come from, um, who come as an ESL student from another country and come from religious backgrounds or maybe not religious, but more, more sort of socially ingrained backgrounds that favour males over females and, um, because of that, I think that can have a detrimental impact on, on female students when they are culturally seen as to be, culturally seen to be inferior to males. Then they can easily think of themselves as inferior to males and they can achieve, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy, and, um, on the other hand though [laughs], I can see gender in terms of males who might come from that same type of background where males are put on a pedestal and females are, are thought to be inferior, that some of those males think, 'Well, I'm going to have the world handed to me on a silver platter and therefore I don't need to put any effort into anything I do. I'll just wait back, sit back and wait for people to give me everything I want and need in life.'

Thus, Steve's comment illustrates how social categories such as race and gender can be intertwined and may also have influence upon the way a teacher views male and female students from different backgrounds.

4.9 Gender

Although it was not anticipated in the study design, an unexpected finding was the division teachers noted between the learning style and social development of their female and male students. While a student's gender did not generally affect placement, twenty of twenty one teachers had much to say with respect to what they viewed as differences between the sexes in the classroom.
4.9.1 Playing the “school game”

“But girls like to sit and make work.” Janet asserts while talking about the differences she perceives between her male and female learners. She continues emphatically, “even as young little girls...they like to play school...it suits girls better than boys.” In general, teachers expressed the notion that girls appeared to be better at “playing the school game” than their male peers. This phrase came up five times in interviews with teachers. The “school game” refers to the idea that there are rules and regulations that students are expected to follow. If they do, they get rewarded for their efforts; while if they don’t, they may be punished for misbehaving, something that, while not implicitly stated, was suggested could affect that child’s performance in class. Girls were felt to benefit the most from this “game” since they were viewed as being more compliant to the classroom demands set out by the teacher. Boys on the other hand, were seen as fidgety, having short attention spans, more disruptive, inattentive, untidy and more likely to refuse to adhere to classroom guidelines. Many of the teachers seemed to feel that the school environment was “naturally” more suitable for their female learners and so would often speak of having to modify their teaching practice to accommodate the male learner who was described as needing a more tactile, active or hands on approach.

All twenty-one teachers were asked to respond to the question, “to what extent might gender influence achievement or does it?” While Michelle clarifies that she doesn’t like to differentiate between male and female learners, she does state that she feels the school environment has the tendency to benefit her female students.

...there are a lot more girls that find it easier to sit for longer periods of time sometimes, their fine motor sometimes is, can be, a little more, um, but not all, but some, in general, sometimes, especially in the primary grades you really see that, ah, not in the subject areas but more in, more in, the way in which they, they take in information, um, girls, you know, the girls will be very, they’ll sit and they’ll
make eye contact more and they'll listen. Boys, boys don't often don't make eye contact and it can be misconstrued for not paying attention, for not listening but they are, they are. They just don't make the eye contact, they need to move more, they need to, [Trails off]. So you know, whatever, um, girls sometimes are just better at doing the things that schools often demand which is, you know, not right but that's, that's what happens, and so they, you know, they tend to look like they're achieving more when maybe they aren't. Maybe the boys just haven't had the opportunities and it hasn't been presented in a way in which or given in a way in which they are able to achieve success.

Michelle feels that the school environment doesn't facilitate boy's learning style and thinks that this may adversely affect boys' achievement not because they are academically incapable but rather because they are not behaving in accordance to the rules of the classroom. She sees this as potentially detrimental to academic evaluation if the teacher is influenced by factors such as social behaviour and work ethic. Stephanie agrees.

I think gender influences how teachers relate to kids. Um, a lot of teachers see boys as being sort of “less then” in a lot of ways, and I think it's because boys don't play the “school game”, they don't sit still, they don't listen politely, they, they can, but it's not their first instinct, where as girls are really good at doing that. And because of the way we have school structured where everybody sits in their desk, and they work and, um, boys right off the bat are at a disadvantage.

Teachers speculated over the reasons they felt there were these differences between their male and female learners and the most mentioned factor was maturity.

4.9.2 Social maturity: “Boys are like puppies”

Cathy describes the differences between male and female children as beginning long before they've even set foot into the playground: “I know, through child development that boys tend to, um, usually start speaking when they’re babies a little slower than baby girls do and the mechanics of writing aren’t always as neat as girls are.” Most
teachers, however, preferred to reflect upon the differences between their female and
male learners once they’ve come through the classroom door. Regardless of the
timing, it seems that for most teachers the major differences between female and male
learners were social maturity and behaviour. When asked whether gender influences a
students’ achievement, Violet asserts,

…it does affect achievement as we all know because they learn differently. I
mean girls are so much more mature than boys and they like to sit down and,
and settle, where boys are way more active and, um, and boys, [pause], there’s
definitely a difference. I’m just trying to think, girls want to please generally and
boys are not that, it’s not that important for them to please. They want to be
interested. I would say is a part of the difference.

Many teachers felt that female learners were more mature in comparison to their male
counterparts who were described several times as more “like puppies.” While female
learners were believed to be attentive, aiming to please and generally adhering to
classroom decorum, male learners were described as being somewhat “all over the
place” and usually more difficult to control. Derek explains,

Well, the boys at this age always tend to be puppies. I always call them puppies’
cuz [sic] they just want to have fun. So it’s always a challenge trying to make
things, you know, fun enough to catch their interest and try to get good stuff out
of them.

Derek admits that in his experience female learners generally display a greater maturity
than their male peers. Stephanie feels that the “immature” and “puppy like behaviour” of
male learners may also have some influence over the teachers’ impression of that child.

I think that affects how teachers look at kids at times and that can affect their
achievement. Um, then I think also boys take longer to mature. Um, not
necessarily physically, although that happens as well but they just take longer to,
um, to again, kind of hit their stride in school in general. I often see kids, boys in
grade seven who are just like German Sheppard puppy dogs, arms and legs
everywhere, brains aren’t going, they’re firing off in all directions, but by the time
they hit grade ten they’re doing well, they’ve gone through that kind of yucky,
grade seven, grade eight, grade nine stage that, that kids go through and they’ve
come out the other end and they're doing as well as the girls, if not sometimes better. So I think there's kind of that middle school area where boys have to be handled a little bit with kid gloves to make sure that they come out on the other end intact.

Stephanie may be speaking from personal experience; her own decision making reflected the importance she placed on the gender of her students. When asked why she decided to place female ESL student Sharmeen Aziz in a regular grade eight classroom while placing male ESL student, Kyun-Yin Poon in the supplementary learning assistance class, Stephanie doesn't hesitate.

Right. So I look at a couple of things. Number one, she's a girl. Which shouldn't make a difference [laughs] but it does. Um, at this age in grade seven going in to grade eight the girls tend to be more mature. A little more capable, usually more organized, not smarter by any means but just better able to play the whole school game. Better able to listen to the teacher and follow instructions. And then I look at her grades.

Stephanie's remarks are particularly interesting because Sharmeen Aziz's student record card actually depicts a mid-range ESL student where as Kyun-Yin's record card depicts a lower range student. Considering this, Stephanie could have simply responded that the different placement of the two students correlated to their actual achievement on the record card. However, rather than focusing upon the grade discrepancy, Stephanie's initial response is prompted by the gender of the students. Only later does she consider the student's differing grades. Stephanie was not the only teacher who noted gender while making decisions regarding the placement of the student record cards. When scanning the student record card of Thomas Mraitskel, a middle-ranged, Aboriginal male, Rachel remarks:

Thomas, interesting last name again, I'll spell it-M-R-A-I-T-E-S-K-E-L, male, has done well from grade four through to grade seven consistently getting As and Bs. Again, fine arts and music is an A-, it's the highest of the grades. Certainly not
getting a lot of As so I'd probably put him in the regular program. I might mention to his parents about the rapid advance program to discuss it but boys sometimes come alive at grade ten, so they teach us, so maybe if there was a way to make entry to a rapid advance, a child like that might [trails off], but sometimes their social, emotional skills, boys particularly might take longer than girls and so, starting in the regular grade eight program might be better.

Rachel opts to place both middle range Aboriginal student Thomas Mrtaleskel and middle range ESL student Abdul Farooq in the regular class while placing their female counterparts, Irene Battiste and Nisha Advani in the rapid advanced classroom. While Stephanie and Rachel were the only two teachers to openly refer to gender when deciding upon student placement, other teachers were not shy to discuss the differences they perceived between their female and male learners when questioned later during the interview about the role gender might play in a student's achievement.

4.9.3 Girls are aiming to please

Teachers overwhelmingly viewed their female learners "as trying to please" or "trying to impress," a trait most teachers felt made their female students more amendable to the classroom environment than their male peers who seem more concerned with "looking cool" or "being the class clown". Rebecca explains,

....there is still that whole idea that you know, girls are good at school and boys don't figure it out until later on. Um, you know, it's, girls are taught to please and they want to please their parents and they want to please their teachers and the way to do that generally is, 'if I do what I'm supposed to do and do it well', um, where as boys tend to be more, you know, 'if I'm good at sports or I'm funny or I'm cool or whatever,' that has a higher ranking in what they think is important.

Often female learners were observed as trying to please...anyone. Teachers, parents or the male learners in the class were all referred to as groups that female learners were trying to impress. Trying to impress their teachers or parents was often regarded by
teachers as a positive or anticipated trait of female learners and credited as contributing to their success in the school environment.

While "aiming to please" was often deemed to be a positive trait among teachers, some teachers were concerned by the reasons why they felt the girls in their classroom were trying to impress. For example, Steve is concerned because he believes that some of the girls in his class fall prey to the notion that it is "cooler" and more "socially acceptable" to "play dumb" than it is to act like intelligent young women.

Ah, well, I guess sociologically speaking, ah, if we consider all of the factors those students, all the things that students are exposed to through a mainstream media, music, television, and so on. Um, I see having taught grade seven for many years, I see grade seven girls who are bright and perfectly capable of achieving choose to not be good students because they're, they think that it's cooler or, or more socially acceptable to be less bright and not show their smarts.

Steve is concerned that some of his female learners succumb to pressures from the media to act in a way that demeans their intelligence and focuses their attention away from education. While Sarah admits that she has heard of this behaviour happening with female learners, she believes that female learners' sudden disinterest in school may be less of an attempt to "act cool" and more a reflection of their shifting priorities.

She remarks:

I mean you hear about girls who, um, try to perform lower to, for, for the boys or something like that, you know, that argument for, you know, all girls and all boys' schools but I've never experienced that. I've never met kids who really do that. Maybe some of the girls do right around grade seven when they start to get interested in boys, but I actually don't think it's them trying to impress the boys. I think they just lose interest. Like, they're more interested in boys. And television and hair and, you know, whatever.

Some teachers felt proud with the strides female learners had made in the classroom environment. For Vanessa, girls' ability to succeed in education and outshine
their male peers did not reflect their desire to accommodate but, rather, from a pride in academic success - something she felt was lacking in her own school experience.

Vanessa feels there has been a pendulum swing between male to female achievement in the classroom. She feels that while it is now more socially acceptable for girls to be high achievers, there is increasing pressure on boys to “act cool” and “fit in”, which usually equates to not being academically successful.

It’s been interesting to, to watch the shift, um, in expectations about gender and I’m thinking of when I was in high school the, how it wasn’t cool to be a smart girl and how a lot of girls learned to play dumb. And it seems that culturally now it seems very acceptable to be a smart girl and yet there’s a whole culture, boy culture based on being dumb and being cool and I think sometimes it’s hard for, for boys to figure out how they’re going to fit in, and, and truly work to their potential. I had a boy who went off to a challenge camp this week and when the other students in the class asked where he was I said he was at challenge camp and they said, ‘Oh, the nerd heard.’ [Laughs] Fortunately, he’s a very popular boy and so I made a joke about myself being definitely part of the nerd heard and they said, [mimics children’s voices], ‘No, you’re not! No, you’re not!’ And I said, ‘Oh, absolutely! You should have seen me in grade seven I would have been the cheerleader for the nerd heard.’ [Laughs] And, but I think it’s, it’s more acceptable for girls to, um, to take part in challenge activities than it is for the boys. We have a lot of high achieving boys in this school though and their expectations for themselves for the future are high and they’re, they’re pretty focused, [pause], but I don’t know if that’s true everywhere.

Stephanie agrees that there is now more of a tendency for female learners to excel in school, a fact she attributes to previous attempts to ensure girls succeed in areas where they were believed to be high achievers.

And there’s been so much of a push towards, let’s make sure girls achieve, let’s make sure girls do well in science and math and I think now it’s starting to back swing and ‘say hey, wait a minute, we’re leaving the boys behind.’ Something, something’s got to be done to help them. So I do think gender, ah, affects achievement to a certain extent just because of the physiological differences between boys and girls.

While Stephanie believes that there’s been a push to ensure females are more academically successful in particular topic areas in which they have been stereotypically
regarded as low achievers, she feels there has been less attention directed towards bringing boys up to the same level in subjects where they have had difficulties. Her surprise regarding Jamie Nelson's high achievement in the subject of language arts, a subject typically associated with females, highlights her point,

I would put him in the regular slope and probably send a note along to the high school teacher saying, you know, have a look at giving him some challenge in language arts, maybe, you know, ask him to participate in the school newspaper or something like that. This is a kid who seems to have a real strength there which is great because boys often don't.

4.9.4 Gender and subject matter

Several teachers agreed with Stephanie; they recognized gender divisions in subjects such as math and Language arts. While these teachers acknowledged that they were subscribing to stereotypical notions of achievement expectations, they felt there was some truth behind them. Peter explains,

Hmm, I would like to think that gender wouldn't affect student achievement. [Pause], and it certainly doesn't have to but at the same time I, I think that there, and it's a generalization but I do see that boys [pause], writing particularly or achievement in math, differing a little bit from girls. Um, so I, I don't know how much ah, ah, I don't know. I'd try to answer how much of that is based on gender but I do notice small differences. Those are generalizations but I notice them.

Nicole also acknowledges differences between the sexes in relation to particular subjects, however she speculates that this may have more to do with how the course is taught rather than the student's innate ability.

...teaching English I find sometimes with, I find the girls, on average, are more strongly drawn to English, um, and reading. They're more prone to it at this age. Um, the boys sometimes feel that reading isn't cool and they're fourteen and fifteen and there's just, um, they don't want to be seen reading, um, because it's considered maybe nerdy or something, whereas with girls it's not so, um, sometimes I do find that the girls are trying harder in classes like English but then again there's gender biases towards classes like math or science that boys might be better at it. I think, um, this generation is getting a lot stronger about just not
worrying about those gender identities so much. I think it's been bent a lot more, even since I was in high school which wasn't really, really long ago. And that, I don't, I don't mark students differently based on, like, you can't! [Laughs] You know, I don't assume that, um, one kid is going to do better, like a boy's going to do better at poetry writing than a girl or vice versa just because they're a boy or a girl.

In this case, Nicole's awareness that gender biases do exist across subject matter may make her less inclined to mark according to those biases.

Like Nicole, Olivia admits awareness of the stereotypical notions about the courses in which males and females are expected to excel. Olivia openly questions the bases of these stereotypes and feels that they do not reflect her experience in the classroom.

And I know that there are studies that say that boys tend to do slightly better at math and girls tend to do slightly better in language arts but frankly, you know, I mean I have students who are girl students who are brilliant in math and I have boy students who are good writers. So you know it doesn't make any difference. Every student is an individual if you get right down to it.

However despite these assertions, Olivia's opinion regarding male and female performance in the classroom still mirrored that of her fellow teachers. She, like other teachers, felt that boys' and girls' approaches to learning in the classroom were different and felt that boys could benefit from a more active learning environment.

Reflecting upon her experience in the classroom, Rebecca concludes that while gender performance stereotypes may apply for some subjects, they don't apply to all.

...some of them just, you know, the girls always seem to do, you know, stereotypically, but they do tend to do better, um, in the reading and writing. Um, I've never been a big believer in that boys are better in math but maybe that's just me cuz [sic] I loved math and in most of my classes there was, um, equal amounts of girls as boys, so I've never really considered that to be a boy thing. Um, but yeah, I do think gender and what the roles of society and the roles of parents and the roles of teachers sort of expect of you even if they're not saying it, or even if they don't know that they are pulling those ideas, um, I think that comes out, and you know, if the boys and their groups, if it's not cool to be smart,
well, being cool is a whole lot more important at this age than, um, you know, doing a good book report so, [Laughs], yeah, it obviously, as with everything, it's not across the board but I do think it [stereotypes] does have an influence.

Having never had difficulty with math as a girl (she later states that she excelled in math), Rebecca finds it hard to buy into the stereotype that “girls are bad at math” because her experience has proved this not to be the case.

While Rebecca still acknowledges the subconscious influence of stereotypical expectations of gender on a student’s achievement, she concludes that her male students’ poor performance in language arts has less to do with their innate ability (or lack of ability) in that subject and is more about succumbing to societal pressures to “be cool.”

4.9.5 Boys try to just be “cool”

The notion of outside factors such as the pressure for students to be “cool,” a trait associated with rejecting anything academically related, arose frequently in interviews with teachers and was even regarded as a potential explanation as to why boys may fall behind in the classroom. Olivia observes:

You know, they talk about the attention gap between boys and girls and I’m not really sure why that is happening except that I think there is a boy culture that says it’s not ‘cool’ to be smart. Or if you’re going to be smart, you have to be smart in sort of a gang banger kind of way and not in an academic kind of way.

Steve also feels that there can be a lot of societal or family pressure on boys to behave in a certain way that negates academic achievement.

I hate to make these generalizations but, sort of, the...the typical Westernized Canadian model of student that we might see, um, gender can really vary again with, with boys, ah, a boy who is a, an athletic type of jock can, can be a problem to focusing more on his, his athletics rather than focusing on academic achievement and that can really affect how he does in school even though he’s bright and perfectly capable of being a great reader and a great writer and a,
talented mathematician and a, a exceptional scientist and a critical thinker and all those things. He may choose to not do that thing because he is the male jock and may come from a father at home who just pushes him to, to continue to be that way and sports are, are what’s more important.

Some teachers, like Steve, Olivia and Rebecca, attributed the lower achievement rates of male learners to societal demands to be “cool” and “fit in”, while other teachers, like Rachel, Stephanie and Derek, felt the differences had more to do with the student’s social maturity. However, both groups of teachers acknowledged the powerful influence that socially accepted and academically strong male students could have upon the rest of the classroom. Derek recalls his experience with a core group of high achieving male learners several years before.

You know, there’s the odd class, I had a class a few years ago where it was, there was a group of, a group of boys [pause], which is quite odd, especially at grade six, there was a group of like, four boys who were like, excellent students and they just pushed each other and so they sort of dragged everybody else along with them. There were a couple, you know, outliers, shall we say, but for the most part those, those four boys just set the tone for the rest of the class.

Janet agrees that high achieving, socially accepted male role models have a profound influence over other boys in the classroom.

...what I have noticed is it depends who are your positive role models in a class. And I think if you have a smart, dynamic boy role model, all the boys will want to be like that. It’s all about class make up. Because if, if there’s not a cool boy whose smart, then I think boys don’t aspire to be as achievement driven. Girls always do. I think girls always want to do, well, yeah, I think girls are more, innately want to please the teacher and want to do well. Cuz [sic] they like doing stuff neatly and thoroughly. I think in the makeup of the classroom you must get a boy, a high achieving cool boy in every class. And I think it makes a difference.

Janet feels that the inclusion of a smart, dynamic, male role model in every classroom may be one way of resuscitating the academic drive of the male students who are falling behind or displaying a general disinterest in school. Like many teachers, she regards the behavioural traits she associates with boys, messiness, flailing puppy like behaviour
and a general ambivalence towards school as controllable (if undesirable) behaviour that is not reflective of their actual ability. She does not believe the problem to be innate (and thus uncontrollable) in boys, and so she seeks out other remedies to better accommodate the needs of her male learner (in this case, the inclusion of a strong, male role model).

The behavioural traits associated with females, such as the desire to please, tidiness and strong work ethic, were all deemed by teachers to be positive and desirable traits and therefore were not regarded as problematic. One teacher stated that these traits were “innate” to female learners. Teachers did not express any desire to change the behaviour of the girls. However, the fact that these traits could be considered innate (and therefore uncontrollable), meant some teachers may also regard any attempts to modify the girls' behaviour as wasted energy.

4.9.6 Learning approach: Neat and tidy girls

Teachers overwhelming seemed to feel that boys and girls had different approaches to learning and would talk about how they would try to accommodate these different approaches in their teaching practice. Vanessa remarks that, “girls seem to, to love sitting quietly and reading their books, and making their work neat and a lot of the boys find it very difficult.” Sarah also notes what she refers to as "stereotypical" behaviour between her male and female students. She observes that “you tend to have girls who feel quite comfortable to sit down and write and read for long periods of time. You have some boys who, who are happy to do that too, but you do get the stereotypes of boys who are much more happy [sic] to be doing experiments or special things.” Peter has no trouble acknowledging girls' organizational success in the classroom.
...with work, girls in general are, are stronger at a grade six and seven level. They, I have no trouble saying that having done this for a long time, um, girls seem a little bit more, these are huge generalizations but girls seem to be more interested in presentations and, ah, neatness in their work organization. Um, [pause], girls are a little bit more mature at the grade six and seven level than the boys. That’s fairly easily observable over a long period of time as well.

Stephanie also referred to the neatness of her female learners in comparison to their male peers.

One of the things boys really struggle with is printing neatly. They’re just, for the most part, they’re just not as neat and tidy as girls... they’re just not. It’s not as important to them... they’re hand eye coordination for small tasks like that is... just not as good.

Stephanie tells me that, since her school recently provided laptop programs for the grade seven students, she has seen a remarkable improvement in the boys’ work.

They turn it in and it looks like everybody else’s work because it’s got a title, it’s neatly set up, it’s not messy handwriting everywhere. Because of that they get a better mark right from the beginning because the teacher can read it [laughs], as opposed to trying to scroll through whatever they’ve written.

While Stephanie found that the use of computers at least partially explained a recent upgrade in the work of her male learners, other teachers found that it was a new approach to teaching that enhanced the academic performance of male students.

4.9.7 Learning approach: Boys on the move

Teachers agreed that the school environment is more suitable for their female learners than their male peers. Andrea explains:

Well, all the research is saying it is. That we are far more suitable the way we are, the way the system works, to the benefit of the girls and certainly the more I’m reading, I recognize that that’s, that’s really the case in primary classrooms. So this classroom in the way it operates with lots of movement and lots of interaction, lots of freedom, lots of student centered decision making about how they work, in what circumstances they work, I think works better for boys.
Teachers like Andrea believe that that while many of their female learners thrive in the current school environment, their male peers are falling further behind. In order to rectify this situation, teachers spoke about modifying their teaching practice in order to sustain the attention of the boys. Olivia explains:

Ah, gender influences learning in that the boys are harder to play to, you know what I mean? As far as a teacher, being a teacher goes. The girls are more likely, except now a day, they'll chitty-chat through work, but I think school is really built for girls. You know, people can sit quietly and absorb and that’s why you have to get them up out of their seats and move them around more. You know, I think you do have to teach to boys differently not because of the way the brain, well, sort of because of the way the brain functions, but not in terms of achievement but so much in terms of [pause], keeping their attention.

Veronique agrees. She feels that, while boys and girls have equal potential to do well in education, they respond differently to what is being taught. She believes that, for teachers to meet the needs of all their students, they must develop creative teaching practices. For Veronique, this means not sticking to the same routine. She explains,

I think it has to do with you, how you approach it and how you deliver it, that you’re suitable for both learning styles. You know, boys being a bit more kinaesthetic, they need to learn more. They retain more words if they can actually act it out and move around and do things that are highly manipulative. And girls are doing usually, like, a bit better with just, like, the language right? Like, hearing and boys are very visual and so I think if you’re actually delivering a program that like covers a wide range of learning styles again then you’re reaching more of them. Then they can achieve because you’re not favouring one over the other.

Both Sharon and Janet acknowledged having recently attended a course that dealt with how to better meet the needs of the male learners in the classroom. These courses emphasized a more on hands-on approaches to learning that advocated more activity in the classroom through experiments and physical activity. This is something that Janet clearly feels confident will appeal more to her male learners in the classroom.

And the [name of course] course is fantastic and it talks about that they [boys] have to move and that’s like project work and all that and so, if you don’t have
that, they’re not really achievement oriented because it goes against their, their grain to sit down and write the essay and make some nice little pictures and make a cartoon because they need to move.

Sharon voices opinions similar to those expressed by Janet. She notes that, while she doesn’t want to generalize, her experience has taught her that her male learners are more successful with learning approaches which she describes as “more tactile with more of a physical aspect to it.” Rachel also concurs. After having acquired a class of twenty-seven students, only nine of whom were girls, Rachel decided it was time to incorporate more movement in the classroom.

Generally speaking, boys in some subject areas learn slower than girls and in some subject areas, learn differently than girls. I have a classroom this year of twenty-seven students, nineteen of which are boys. I don’t even see my girls. And I’ve had to design my units this year with lots of activity because boys are very tactile and they learn very much hands-on and so I’m incorporating a lot of music in my lessons this year so that we’re learning and moving at the same time and they love it! But it takes a lot of, um, thought on my behalf and a lot of time planning so that, um, learning and the boys can happen differently. So girls generally speaking, um, listen better at a very young age and find it easier to stay still from a very young age. Boys on the other hand [laughs] innately, generally, um, don’t sit still for long, prolonged periods of time. And if it’s a teacher directed lesson for most of the day, you lose them. They’ll start fiddling with their hands, they’ll start winging things across the classroom, they’ll do whatever they can [laughs], but they stop listening so it’s really important when you’re teaching a classroom that has a lot of boys, that you go-stop all day. That you’re maybe teaching for twenty minutes, maybe a movement activity, refocusing them, teaching again. Whereas the girls can sit longer, but if you have a classroom like mine this year, you’re moving them a lot and you should be.

When later questioned if they felt that their female learners could also benefit from a more hands-on approach to teaching, teachers had no problem anticipating that they would. Olivia responds emphatically,

Oh, absolutely! They need, I mean they don’t...girls don’t like to sit on their bottoms all day any more than boys do, you know? And I love to get them up out of their seats and get them moving plus we’ll have that extra fifteen minutes next year where they’re going to be having to, you know, keep active, whether it’s bounce at the bell yoga or whatever. Yeah, no, I think everyone benefits from
active and cooperative learning for sure. Ah, you know, the kinds of learning that they describe for boys [pause], I'm thinking now, you know, girls would like this too. Cuz [sic], you know I haven't had a class yet that isn't a very physical class, that isn't a very kinaesthetic class. You know, there's always individuals who would much rather not, who would rather sit all day with a nose in a book. I was one of those when I was a kid, but, ah, you know you gotta [sic] get them up and moving too!

Sharon agrees and she too responds enthusiastically to the notion,

Oh, definitely! Yeah, and I sometimes find that as teachers we have to be really careful to present in all different ways, um, as opposed to the way that we're most comfortable receiving information. I think they find it, teachers tend to be more visual, oral learners and, ah, that we make sure that we are presenting information in all ways as well, but, um, yeah. No, in terms of presenting material for boys and girls and to say that all girls learn best a certain way is [pause], categorizing too.

Teachers' interviews revealed that teachers categorized their male and female learners in distinct and obvious ways. Teachers overwhelmingly responded that the school environment was more advantageous to female learners and, perhaps because of this, were more inclined to first consider the need for alternative teaching methods for their male learners.

4.10 Study exposure

At the end of my interview, I revealed the purpose of my study to the teachers. I informed teachers that it was based on a similar study I had conducted with pre-service teachers where fifty pre-service teachers recommended twenty-four fictional students for remedial, average or advanced programs based upon program eligibility criteria (Riley, 2005; Riley & Ungerleider, 2008). I passed on the results of the earlier study which indicated that, of the fifty teachers interviewed, eleven consistently under-rated students whom they believed to be Aboriginal or ESL students regardless of the
students' prior academic record. I then asked teachers to consider why they thought some teachers might have under-rated those students. The following section discusses teachers' responses to that question.

4.10.1 Teachers talk about stereotypes and biases

Stereotypes and preconceived ideas were cited as being the primary reason why pre-service teachers may have been biased against Aboriginal and ESL students. While teachers remarked that they would like to believe discrimination and racism would not be a factor in the teaching profession, they admitted that they couldn't rule it out as a possibility. Some teachers, like Stephanie, acknowledged that she had witnessed what she felt were discriminatory remarks about Aboriginal people.

I mean teachers aren't perfect, teachers have cultural biases, and, and, um, you know, I mean, I don't know very many teachers that I would describe as racist but there are some out there and, you know, I've heard teachers make Aboriginal comments before. Not so much ESL in our district just because we have a huge ESL population, um, and we're kind of more used to that but I have heard teachers make, make comments. Um, so I think part of it might be just innate with that person's personality that, that's the way they were brought up, that's the way they see the world.

Andrea agrees and feels that some teachers may have based their decisions on the generalizations they associate with the Aboriginal or ESL label. She believes that teachers who have not been given the opportunity to get to know the students as individuals may be more prone to rely on stereotypes.

...I think even we live in a society that, that does not do well by Aboriginals, First Nations people in general. So there could be elements of racism, there could have been, there could be elements of often not realizing how diverse our ESL learners are, um, in their abilities, their talents, their drive, their...everything about who they are again as a whole person, as a whole human being who just happens to walk into a classroom.
The primary conclusion of the twenty-one teachers was that the biased decisions made by the eleven pre-service teachers against Aboriginal and ESL students was due to stereotypical ideas about Aboriginal and ESL learners in general. However, the twenty-one teachers did have different notions about how these stereotypes came into being. Teachers typically associated stereotypical attitudes towards Aboriginal and ESL students as stemming from one of three factors; media influence; previous experience with an Aboriginal or ESL learner; or lack of experience in the classroom.

4.10.2 Teachers talk about media influence

Vanessa states that she has noticed that there has been a great deal of coverage regarding the lower graduation rates of Aboriginal learners in schools. She believes that if teachers did not go beyond the sensational aspect of the story to understand the reasons why students are dropping out, those teachers would be more prone to attribute negative attrition rates to the students’ lack of ability rather than to external factors beyond the student’s control.

I think we do hear a lot in the media about Aboriginal students and I know that it, it is statistically a real problem that they're not achieving but I don't think that has to do with potential so much as, um, as the, the environment that they find themselves in. Nothing to do with innate potential [...]. And ESL students, um, there’s also a lot in the media about, um, ESL students in the classroom and the amount of time that they take up and impact on the on other students and...so I would guess that it was probably the media that would be impacting the pre-service teachers’ perceptions.

Peter agrees with the notion that stereotypes and biases perpetuated by the media could cause the discriminatory decisions made by pre-service teachers.

Ah, hmm. There’s institutionalized biases in our society hugely with, ah, the amount of media that people are inundated with; television, news, etcetera. The degree to which those people are, kind of, accumulate those biases is, ah, it
would be very hard to, to determine. I'm sure it happens. I don't know. It's hard to measure. But I'm, I'm sure that it does exist. Ah, [pause], people are influenced by, ah, by media and by stereotypes for sure. Absolutely they are. I mean it would be great to think that people aren't influenced to make decisions as conscious or sub-consciously, or unconsciously, but I'm sure they are.

Peter believes that the media must play a significant role in shaping people's perceptions of individuals from particular group memberships. However, he also acknowledges that it is difficult to measure. While he recognizes a decision could be biased by stereotypes, Peter also is cognisant of the difficulty in trying to prove stereotyping was the sole factor that determined that decision.

4.10.3 Teachers talk about previous experience with Aboriginal or ESL students

Three teachers believed that pre-service teachers' biased decisions may have stemmed from their prior negative working experiences with Aboriginal and ESL students. What is interesting about this notion is that it also highlights some of the assumptions these particular teachers had about working with Aboriginal or ESL learners. Stephanie explains:

...and it may also be experience, you know? If you've taught for fifteen years at a band school where the kids come in, haven't eaten and the parents are, are on drugs or drunk and, I'm just thinking of in particular a school up North, and then I saw, um, a report on CBC I think, where a lot of their kids were Aboriginal and a lot of the kids were coming from really difficult home lives and, and, um, I think if a child comes from, from a background like that, it's hard for them to just get to school on a lot of days and, and maybe they haven't eaten and, so, so they're not going to achieve as well. And if that's been your experience as a teacher and you've done a lot of teaching in areas like that, I, I would imagine that would colour your glasses. You would just see the world differently than somebody who hadn't had that experience.

While she speculates that a pre-service teacher's prior experience with Aboriginal learners may have factored into their biased decision making, Stephanie's own
reflections upon what teaching Aboriginal learners within certain communities might be like affected some of her assumptions.

Sarah, like Stephanie, acknowledges the powerful influence one’s previous teaching experience may have upon the way a teacher perceives students. Sarah recalls some of the difficulties she had while teaching Aboriginal learners in a community up North. While she does not condone the biased decisions made by the eleven pre-service teachers, she does not believe the decisions were made with the intent to discriminate. She responds to the question by relating it to her experience up North.

...well, hmm, well, I think [voice trails off]. Okay, well, with the Aboriginal kids, I think definitely the cultural stereotypes just play into it all automatically, um, for a lot of people, um, which is unfortunate. But at the same time, you have to be realistic about, sort of, statistics and, um, there are factors like how many books are in a house hold and what kinds of professions the parents have. Also how much time the parents have to spend with their children, right? So you can look at influences like that. Like, when I worked in the Arctic, nobody had books in their house, nobody, like, never! So those kids entered kindergarten and books were a new thing. Whereas kids in this area, for the most part, enter kindergarten with, they say, a thousand hours of reading time already. So they, so, um, there are factors like that, that you, that, that give some truth to the stereotypes. But you have to be careful because it’s, it’s easy to see a few evidences or a few kids like, like the stereotypes and then be like, ‘Oh yeah, the stereotypes are right!’ But, um, they’re not, obviously they’re not always. But yeah, there is sometimes some truth to them.

While her decisions regarding Aboriginal students in the study were not biased, Sarah understands how other teachers might unintentionally make biased decisions regarding Aboriginal students based on their experience. Sarah goes on to acknowledge how she herself has been influenced by stereotypes about a particular group either because statistics have reinforced certain claims made about a group or because her personal experience with group members adhered to the stereotypes she had heard. What
remains unclear however is whether Sarah's experience with the group confirms the stereotypes or if it was the stereotypes that influenced her perception.

Cathy's interview revealed that her decisions had favoured non-Aboriginal, non-ESL students over their Aboriginal and ESL peers. When asked to consider the possible reasons behind the eleven pre-service teachers' biased decisions against Aboriginal and E L students, Cathy used the opportunity to clarify her rationale behind the decisions she made.

I guess for myself if that happened, I would say I based it on, sort of, my knowledge of ESL students and their mastery of the language as we had that one student in grade four who didn't need the ESL support for the rest of the years versus the one that did. I guess if I saw that one student who did have four years of support [and] was still sort of that borderline average, versus another student who was a non-ESL who was [also] still borderline average, they'd both be candidates [for a regular classroom]. One might be more [voice trails off] so just knowing that ESL students have a more challenging time picking up the language...the English language is so confusing, and even depending on what country they're coming from, I mean, it can be quite an undertaking to try and learn it. And depending how old they are cuz [sic], I find that as kids get older it's more difficult to pick up a language than it is when they come to learn English when they're much younger. Um, so that might be a factor in it. Um, I don't, I would like to think it's nothing other than that [laughs]. I mean obviously there could be some, um, some prejudice involved in their...I would like to think that not as professionals in this profession [laughs], that we're not doing that. Um, so I would like to think that it's of a professional judgment and based on experiences working with students in specialty programs such as ESL or Special Ed. [sic] or Aboriginal education.

Cathy supposes that her decisions, and perhaps the decisions of the eleven pre-service teachers, were based upon previous experience working with students from those designated groups. Her decision to place ESL students in a lower placement category than their non-ESL equivalents was based upon her perception that ESL students had more difficulty in class because they were struggling to learn a new language. Cathy's intentions for the students appear to be well-meaning. Once again, it is difficult to determine if Cathy's perceptions regarding ESL students are based upon her previous
experience with the ESL students, or if her previous experience of ESL students as having difficulties in the classroom occurred as a result of her preconceptions of an ESL student’s potential to achieve in the classroom.

Teachers speculated that a teacher who has had a positive or negative experience with a student or students of a particular group membership may be more inclined to make similar assumptions about other students from the same group. Teachers also suggested that this might be particularly the case if the teacher’s experience with that student coincided with popular stereotypes or assumptions made about that group. Teachers concluded that these assumptions may influence the decisions made about that student. Some teachers also noted the difficulty to gauge whether a teacher’s perception of a student was based more upon the reinforcement of a stereotype or whether it was the stereotype itself that influenced the teachers’ perception of the student.

4.10.4 Teachers talk about lack of experience

Twelve teachers discussed how a teacher’s lack of experience with teaching ESL or Aboriginal students or, more simply, a lack of experience when it came to teaching in general, could account for discriminatory decisions regarding student placement. These teachers felt that teachers who had had little or no experience with students of a particular group membership may be more inclined to base placement decisions on popular assumptions or stereotypes rather than adhering strictly to grades alone.

When asked what she felt may have influenced the discriminatory decisions made by the eleven pre-service teachers, Miriam responds without hesitation, “Lack of experience!” She laughs and then continues:
Well, lack of, if they're pre-service teachers, I'm assuming then that that means that they haven't been teaching, right? They're in their practicum, um, and you read all sorts of things while you're going through your, um, you know, your practicum and your different courses to be certified as a teacher and you have life experiences, I think you’re more influenced by, um, outside cultural references and you don’t really see that so much of it depends on the individual student.

Teachers like Miriam felt that pre-service teachers who had not had the opportunity to interact extensively with all kinds of students may have been more dependent upon popular assumptions or stereotypes of groups of students that they had had less opportunity to work with such as Aboriginal or ESL learners. Miriam explains:

I think that society tells you that ESL students aren’t going to do as well in school in English, and society tells you that the Aboriginal students aren’t going to do as well because they’re Aboriginal and there’s stuff in the media and the newspapers all the time and I think you just lack the experience, you know?

Miriam feels that having grown up with Aboriginal people, she isn’t as influenced by what she sees are the often negative portrayals of Aboriginals in the media, particularly because her experience does not confirm these stereotypes. She notes that her prior experience with Aboriginal peoples may also make her better able than some of her colleagues to recognize her Aboriginal learners for who they are as individuals and not what they are in terms of group membership. Miriam also believes that having had some life experience before entering into the teaching practice may have also contributed towards her ability to recognize learners for their individual qualities as opposed to their ascribed status.

I came to teaching much later so I didn’t have a lot of those, you know, I was much older and I had already had my own kids so, I already sort of had a sense that, um, children were individual already and that there wasn’t that, that ‘normal’ child that they keep talking about in all the psychology text books. It doesn't really exist [Laughs]. It's an illusion! And you know you're not going to get them in your classroom.
Miriam and teachers like her claim that more classroom experience (and experiences outside of teaching as well) would deter biased decisions regarding student placement.

Sharon explains:

I think having been in the school system for a number of years, you, you hopefully break away from assumptions, particularly if you've worked with ESL students and Aboriginal students in the classroom and seeing what they are capable of doing as well as any other student in your class, that they are capable of doing. Um, the fact that they're teachers for pre-service may account for the fact that they just don't have experience in the system. But, um, I don't know. It's interesting. It a, [long pause], it doesn't surprise me, which is kind of, not that it doesn't surprise me, but, um, I think it's a societal thing in general that, um, sometimes almost an added thing to overcome for these kids. Um, but, hopefully within the school system we can, we can break down the assumptions.

Like Miriam, Sharon is confident that, as teachers have more experience in the classroom, they will be more likely to base their student assessments on individual ability rather than arbitrary factors and the various assumptions and stereotypes that may be associated with them. Judith also feels that teachers with limited experience in the classroom are more liable to give weight to the stereotypical notions held about groups different from their own.

...I think that it's probably media influences or, um, social expectations of people that we have. If, if pre-service teachers who haven't been in the system, they know what they know, they know what they hear about the system, right? And I guess that those judgments would be made on prior notions or stereotypes that those people have of First Nation learners or ESL learners.

Rebecca also believes pre-service or inexperienced teachers may be more likely to base their assessment of students on arbitrary factors rather than actual ability than their more experienced colleagues. She goes on to explain how she too has felt unjustly prosecuted by the misconceptions of pre-service teachers. She elaborates,

Um, I think if you're pre-service you have an awful lot of preconceptions about you know, a lot of things. Um, you know, things like classroom management, you
know? I had a student teacher come in and I had my class in rows and her first thought was, 'Oh, she's a real...' Well, one of them was twenty-two, twenty-three and her thought was 'Oh, she's a really strict teacher. That's not how I want to do it.' The other one who was thirty-five and had two kids came in and thought, 'Oh, this must be an interesting class.' Um, you know, number two was correct! I had twelve designated students, ten of them behaviours, and, you know, they kind of got a little off the rails, and, so, we'd gone there and she, you know, the young one, she's like, 'Oh, that's, that's bad. You know, you shouldn't do that.' Um, this preconceived idea that, you know that that's strict teachers and old fashioned teachers, they do this and that's not a good thing to do. Um, and I think they do the same thing with Aboriginal and ESL. They don't have the experience of, um, dealing with them and so they're going on the stereotype of, oh, you know, 'Aboriginals, they all struggle in schools' and whatever else, and if they're ESL they must have, have more difficulties. And they [pre-service teachers] have no life experience to tell them otherwise so they're going on the stereotypes that they've, they've heard or learned or, um, whatever but it's not necessarily based on anything that they've experienced and once they start experiencing, it's like, 'Oh look! You know, you're Aboriginal but you're a straight A student and, you know, that is possible!' So, it's just based on they don't have any point of reference for it.

Rebecca explains that she felt that some of her younger student teachers didn't consider the reasons why her class may have been structured a particular way or that she may have tried another structure only to discover it did not work for that particular classroom. She found this same tendency among less experienced student teachers toward ESL students. She noted that the younger student teachers were more likely to give her ESL students exceptionally high marks for mediocre work. Rebecca explained that when she confronted student teachers about the discrepancy between the quality or accuracy of work and the mark obtained the response was always, "Well, that's just ESL." Rebecca describes feeling frustrated as she felt this response under-valued the capability of her ESL students to achieve. Rebecca and other teachers like her, expressed hope that given more time and experience with students in the classroom, teachers would be less likely to evaluate their learners, either subconsciously or
otherwise, by arbitrary factors such as race or gender and more inclined to focus upon the individual ability of each student.

4.10.5 Teachers talk about lowered expectations

After having revealed to Michelle the details of my study with pre-service teachers, Michelle shakes her head and sighs heavily, “You know, I’m not surprised,” she reflects. She confides that, in her experience, most individuals who decide to become teachers have led fairly successful student lives and therefore have a generally positive attitude towards the educational system. The problem, she explains, is that this positive attitude may “colour their judgement,” making teachers less able to empathize with the experience of some of their learners or their families who may not have had the same kind of positive relationship with school. It may also make them more inclined to utilize teaching methods that had worked well for them as a student as opposed to experimenting with diverse methods that focus upon the varying needs of the students in the classroom. Thus, rather than reacting to the needs of the student teachers react in relation to their own experience. Michelle notes that this results in assertions like, “Oh yeah, I remember the ESL kids that, you know, they couldn’t, they couldn’t really speak English very well and, you know, they struggled and so they, they need, you know, they need to be, have extra time in learning assistance.” Thus teachers react to reminiscences of their experiences rather than focusing upon what their student is currently doing, needing or achieving. Like many other teachers interviewed, Michelle believes that First Nations children are particularly vulnerable to teachers’ misconceptions because society is so inundated with negative portrayals of Aboriginal peoples. Michelle is concerned that teachers who are not fully cognisant of how their
experiences shape their perceptions may be more at risk of making decisions based
upon their generalizations about particular groups of students rather than focusing on
the individual abilities of the child.

You have to...you have to look at children one by one, individually. And some of
your most needy children are Caucasian children from, you know, higher
economic backgrounds. They can be the most needy [sic] in terms of needing
your support. Um, whereas other children aren't and, you know, it's very
dangerous to do those kinds of things. Very dangerous to stream children like
that because what you're doing is, and what they [teachers] have to realize and
what I try to tell them is, everything, every decision you make on behalf of a child,
really is telling the child something. It's communicating something to the child.
That is, 'You, you're not as good as...'; 'You need more than...'; 'You can't keep
up with...'; 'You don't deserve to have, you know...art', you know, 'You need to
be in, in...'; and so that, that feeds in to a child's vision and view of themselves in
relations to school. And that is [pause] dangerous. That is dangerous.
Dangerous! I sure hope that the experienced teachers [laughs], are coming out in
a better, in a better way! I mean, maybe life and teaching helps this. I don't know
what the answer is exactly but I don't, I believe it is, part of a bigger, I really
believe that teachers are just doing things, young teachers, just do things without
thinking about them. Without any kind of reflection on their practice and on their
decision making, I think.

Michelle feels that, if left unchecked, teachers' misconceptions may lead to lowered
expectations of certain groups of students. This might not only negatively influence
academic decisions made regarding the student but may also affect the students' sense
of self worth as well.

So how deeply buried might these misconceptions be in our psyche and is it
even possible for us to identify the influence they have upon our own responses and
interaction with others? The assumptions we have regarding particular groups of people
are often multifaceted in nature. Violet's response to the question of why some pre-
serve teachers made discriminatory decisions regarding certain groups of students
illustrates some of these complexities.
I guess it's kind of pre-conceived ideas about the Aboriginal and ESL perhaps or, or, maybe they, they thought that the teachers were being kind to them in their marking. I don't know.

I asked Violet to clarify what she meant when she said, "teachers being kind to them in their marking."

Well, some, you know, in marking, certainly in marking in English its subjective isn't it? Totally subjective. And I think that at times you can be influenced by knowing that a child has really, really tried hard, to give them that edge of a mark where if you know that that child has not tried hard, you don't go as far, you know what I mean? [...] So that might be, that might have influenced, they [pre-service teachers] may feel that people are being kind to the Aboriginal and ESL, you know, and giving them maybe a slightly higher mark for effort rather than for their actual achievement. That could be it. I, I don't know.

In this case, Violet suggests that pre-service teachers may see the high-achieving marks of Aboriginal and ESL students and assume that these marks are based more upon the amount of the student's effort than on their actual achievement. Violet suggests that pre-service teachers, believing that the high-marks of Aboriginal of ESL students were based more upon effort than ability, decided to place those students in a lower classroom than their non-Aboriginal, non-ESL peers of the same ranking. Violet's response is interesting in that she, a) acknowledges that teachers' assessments can be informed by factors outside of a student's achievement such as a student's perceived effort in the classroom and, b) her explanation of the reasoning behind the biased decisions made by pre-service teachers is consistent with the surprise she herself had expressed in response to the high achievement of the Aboriginal and ESL students.

Violet supposes that pre-service teachers may have placed Aboriginal and ESL students at a lower achievement level than their non-Aboriginal peers as a way to "reinstate balance" and they may not have trusted that the grades on the record cards of Aboriginal and ESL students to accurately reflect the students' academic achievement.
Violet's response may reflect some of her own assumptions regarding the academic ability of Aboriginal and ESL learners.

4.10.6 Teachers talk about self-fulfilling prophecy

"That's really curious," Steve remarks having just been informed about the biased decisions made by eleven pre-service teachers.

...I wonder if, you know, going back to thinking about sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy, if, students can see themselves as being less intelligent, less smart and so on. I wonder if generally we as educators even sort of, [pause], do that to the students as well. And, and think that well, if you're an Aboriginal student therefore you must be a lower achiever, and then that [voice trails off]. Geez, I'm not sure! I can't, I can't really understand why somebody would, would do that. Tell you the truth [pause], I'm not sure.

From his own recognition Steve realizes that if a student believes himself to be less capable than his peers, regardless of what his actual academic ability, his negative self-perception may negatively affect his performance in school. While it may have been the first time Steve had considered the influence his perceptions of students might have upon both his evaluations of the students and students' evaluations of themselves, other teachers remarked that this was something about which they were already very much aware.

Andrea appears to be well attuned to how teachers' assumptions and biases regarding particular groups of students can shape both students' self-esteem and academic performance. Hearing about the biased decisions of some pre-service teachers, Andrea is not surprised. Reflecting upon her experience with pre-service teachers, she remarks,

...pre-service teachers, they haven't been put in the position of, um, facing someone and saying, 'You are this', and having students judge themselves
based on the marks that they've been received. It is a way of identifying and it becomes part of a self-identification...

Approaching the end of her teaching career, Andrea admits that, at this stage, one of the reasons she finds it so difficult to place students in folders based upon their grades alone is because she is aware of the powerful influence labels like “remedial” or “low achiever” can have upon a student.

Shane also acknowledges the strong influence placement assignment can have upon a student’s sense of self. When asked why he thinks some pre-service teachers may have evaluated Aboriginal and ESL students as lower than their non-Aboriginal, non ESL peers, he concludes:

I think it might be an indication of systemic, um, prejudice or pre-judging. Yeah. I would be very wary of doing that because I think kids, in my opinion, tend to rise quite a bit to their expectations, expectations placed on them. And if you, if you place lower expectations on kids because of their, ah, you know, racial or ethnic background, I think, I think you have to be very careful about, ah, pigeon-hole, pigeon-holing them and, and, um, possibly putting them into, ah, places where you, where you, where they, they don’t possibly achieve their best.

Shane believes that students are better able to realize their potential when they believe that their teacher also believes in their ability to succeed. Shane feels that if a student perceives that their teacher does not believe in their capability, that student is far more likely to disengage from classroom activities. I ask Shane if he believes “pigeon-holing” is something that happens a great deal within our educational system. He responds emphatically, “Oh, absolutely, without a doubt.” Curious, I ask Shane to describe any instances of this he may have had in his experience.

The last school I worked at, um, was quite proud of the fact that they had about a third of the school population on IEPs, individual education plans. And, I tried as best I could to get kids off the individual education plans, um, if I didn’t think they should be on them. And with some kids, they, they just seemed to try a lot harder
and, and felt much better about not going to the resource room and not being labelled as like 'a low student.' And, ah, with some of the kids that I'd just, I'd, I had taken off the IEPs, they, it seemed to make a huge difference with them just in terms of their confidence and how well they did. So the expectations were changed and they saw it as a very positive thing. They saw it; the kids saw it themselves, as not being labelled. And therefore it made a huge difference in terms of the, ah, the way they saw themselves and their confidence in terms of their education.

When reflecting upon this situation, Shane remarks,

Kids, kids know, um, I think a lot more than adults give them credit for, ah, how they're perceived by others and it, I think it affects their, the way they perceive themselves.

In this chapter I have presented the voices of the teachers as they struggled to reflect on their reasons for both their placement decisions and the decisions made by their colleagues. As can be seen from their words, placements were never taken lightly. While most teachers were willing to place students into programs which they felt best matched the student's ability, teachers still expressed the desire to have access to information outside of student's academic achievement. Teachers felt this information would better enable them to make informed decisions regarding their students' lives.

When specifically asked what additional factors teachers would ideally want to consider prior to deciding upon student placement, teachers listed family background, student behaviour, work ethic, social maturity and the anecdotal comments of previous teachers. These factors, all of which go beyond the scope of the student's actual achievement, may be subject to the varying values and norms held by the teachers themselves. Interviews demonstrated that lacking "outside information," relatively small cues were enough to provoke the various generalizations and assumptions teachers had regarding certain groups of students. These generalizations and assumptions could
be, at times, the factor determining whether students were afforded or denied opportunities.
5 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the following questions: a) what factors influenced the teachers assignment of pupils to different opportunities; b) how did teachers regard their Aboriginal students, and finally; and c) how did teachers justify the decisions they made? The findings revealed that teachers do think about how a student is being assessed, but the way they think about their students often appears confused and arbitrary. This leads at times to the denial of opportunity for some students. In this chapter, I provide a brief summary of the detailed decision making processes engaged in by the teachers, place their comments within the perspective of the literature and then finally discuss the consequences these ways of thinking might have upon the lives of the students.

5.1 Teachers’ resistance to grades and grading: Confusion and contradictions

While most teachers were willing to make decisions based solely upon the student record cards, all expressed discomfort in doing so. According to the teachers, lack of interaction with students hindered their capability to genuinely assess their ability to achieve in the classroom. Some teachers spoke of grades as too arbitrary or limited to accurately represent what was commonly referred to as the “whole child” and that determining student’s placement on grades alone was unfair or unjust. The concept of “the whole child” always consisted of (“external” and “internal”) factors beyond the student’s academic ability. Removed from the classroom context, considering many of these factors would raise more than a disapproving eyebrow should a selection committee be found to include them in its hiring process. External factors ranged from a
student's family background, socio-economic status, geographical location of the school
to even the number of books in a student's household while internal factors consisted of
a student's perceived work ethic and effort, social behaviour and maturity as displayed
in the classroom.

When interviewing teachers, I consistently received the response: "You want me
to base this decision from letter grades alone?" I felt myself empathizing with the
teachers. After all, as teachers is it not part of our role to consider all aspects that
influence the lives of our students? I could understand Stephanie's concern about
whether a student's family would offer support should she be placed into an academic
classroom. I understood the reasoning behind Sharon's desire to verify whether
teaching style or academic ability was the greater factor for a student's fluctuating
grades in science. And I could appreciate how Olivia's perception of an A+ language
arts student as an "aspiring writer" might make the difference between a regular or
advanced class. All of these things made sense. After all, I had asked teachers to
pretend they were considering actual students and not simply a piece of paper. Yet, I
also understood that it was precisely these external factors that were subject to
interpretation vis a vis the various values and judgements the teachers held. I
considered how I might feel as a parent knowing that my child received a lower grade
than that of peers because the teacher preferred typed over hand-written work; or if my
straight A child was denied the opportunity to participate in an advanced classroom
because her teacher felt she lacked leadership potential because she was shy. As I
interviewed teachers, it became clear that a student's academic ability was not the only
thing assessed. External factors such as where a student comes from, their social skills
and behaviour were all factors that could play a significant role in determining a
student’s future. The ways in which these external factors would be assessed revealed as much about the teachers as they did about the students.

5.1.1 Anecdotal responses and their value

Of the twenty-one teachers interviewed, eleven teachers either explicitly stated that grades alone were not enough to determine accurate student placement or had noted that anecdotal comments made by previous teachers would be more useful for decision making. When asked why anecdotal comments made by previous teachers were important, teachers gave two responses. The first was that anecdotal responses would provide greater insight into the students’ behaviour. Anecdotal comments that revealed the behavioural traits of students were regarded as useful for determining not only how well a student behaved in class, but also the maturity level of a student; the ability of the student to interact with their peers; whether the student attended in class; and, finally, what the previous teacher thought about the student’s potential to achieve.

Teachers who thought grades provided limited information felt this way because they believed grades were not able to effectively describe why a student achieved a particular level. Teachers indicated that some awareness of a students’ potential to achieve might even make the difference in a student’s classroom placement. A positive remark by a student’s former teacher regarding the student’s academic capability in class might trigger what is commonly referred to as the “halo effect” where a person is “influenced by the value of an already known, but objectively irrelevant attribute” (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, p.9). In this case, a student whose grades seem to make him well suited for “regular classroom” placement may be moved to an advanced class if anecdotal comments by the previous teacher said the student had the “potential” to
achieve at a higher level. However, negative anecdotal comments such as a statement indicating a student was “having difficulties” could also work against that student if the new teacher placed a high value on a former teacher’s judgements. Such a scenario triggered Merton’s (1948) speculation that if enough teachers expressed lowered expectations of certain groups of students, these perceptions could eventually contribute to rising inequalities in education. In the present study, teachers were more inclined to talk about the usefulness of anecdotal comments to assess the performance of ESL students and would provide insight as to ESL competency. Teachers were also more likely to place ESL students into a class upon the condition that the teacher of that class “monitored” the student’s progress. These reactions illustrated the lower expectations that some teachers had of ESL students. Some teachers appeared sceptical of an ESL student’s ability to achieve in a language arts class. Comments suggesting student be “monitored,” or progress reports detailing ESL student’s English speaking ability, could potentially be given more weight than the student’s actual achievement grades. This could result in more ESL students being placed in remedial classes and fulfilling Merton’s prophecy.

Anecdotal comments were also regarded by some teachers as useful for determining whether a previous teacher’s assessment had been based more upon a perception of student’s effort or his/her actual achievement in the classroom. Some teachers spoke of grades as having “alternative meanings.” These teachers felt that while grades may represent a student’s actual achievement, they could also be indicative of external factors such as the effort made by the student in class, how well the student interacted with their peers or the student’s ability to follow classroom instructions. How much weight these external factors would have upon a student’s
actual grade was dependent upon the teacher making the assessment. In light of this, grades were seen by some teachers as potentially "punitive" in nature since grades could be used as reward or punishment for a student's behaviour. Anecdotal comments were thus seen as being a more useful alternative to provide insight into both the student as well as into the character of the teacher who had assigned the grade. It was also felt that written assessments as opposed to letter grades would give teachers a more accurate impression of what the student was being assessed upon and therefore would be more transparent. Curiously however, when asked what student placement should be based upon if not letter grades, some of these teachers responses included the very same behavioural traits letter grades were earlier criticized for either rewarding or punishing. So while it may be feasible that the grades displayed on the student record cards reflect factors other than a student's actual achievement, the same could be said of anecdotal comments. Teachers who declared that assessment based on grades alone was limiting because grades did not include aspects such as a student's work ethic or leadership potential, were often the same teachers who argued that grades were limiting precisely because of their potential to be based upon factors outside of a students' academic ability. These teachers were simultaneously critical of grades for both considering and not considering factors outside the realm of academic ability.

Interviews also revealed that teachers at times questioned the legitimacy of the grades being given. Once again this speculation was usually focussed on the grades of ESL students, although it was once also made in reference to Aboriginal students. Some teachers felt that other teachers had the tendency to be "overly generous" when it came to evaluating ESL/Aboriginal students. These teachers felt that some teachers
based their assessment of ESL/Aboriginal students on their lowered expectations of what they felt an ESL/Aboriginal student was capable of achieving. For these teachers, speaking to the student’s previous teacher or having access to their anecdotal comments may have been regarded as useful because it would give the new teacher an insight into the former teacher’s assessment criteria. Indications that a student’s high grade had been based more upon the student’s perceived effort in class or upon the student’s ESL or Aboriginal status than their achievement, might make a teacher less inclined to place the student in an advance class.

While some teachers were critical of basing student placement on grades alone out of concern that grades were based more upon factors such as behaviour and effort, other teachers were concerned precisely because they felt the grades represented on student record cards may not have taken factors outside of achievement into account. These teachers felt that, while grades might represent a student’s academic aptitude, they often did not illustrate other factors considered important such as a student’s social skills or ability to co-operate with their peers. These teachers were apprehensive when it came to making decisions regarding student placement without having had more insight into a previous teacher’s grading criteria. When asked to consider the grades on a student record card, one teacher remarked, “Is one teacher looking at effort and the other one only looking at a finished product?” Teachers such as this may be more influenced by how well the values reflected in anecdotal comments made by the previous teacher match up with their own.
5.1.2 Hierarchy of subject matter

It soon became apparent that all teachers felt there was a hierarchy of subject matter regardless of whether the teacher actually subscribed to that hierarchy or not. All teachers interviewed had the perception that language arts and math were regarded as top tier courses whereas a student's performance in courses such as art and music were regarded as being less crucial when it came to placement decisions. Sixteen of the twenty-one teachers interviewed indicated that how well a student performed in "core subject matter" such as math and language arts would largely determine where that student would eventually be placed. The teachers felt that math and language arts were foundational courses and an exceptionally high or low mark in either language arts or math would often receive more attention from teachers than grades in other subjects.

A student's performance in those classes was an indication of a student's potential to achieve in what was referred to by some teachers as more "secondary courses." For example, Jamie's high mark in language arts seemed to act as an indication to some teachers that Jamie may have been under challenged in other courses. The teachers that opted to place Jamie in an advanced classroom did so because of their belief that this would give him the extra stimulus he needed to excel.

The importance that teachers' placed on language arts based courses is particularly significant if one considers the results of a study by Hauser-cram, Selchuk, and Stipek (2003). They found that "literacy is an academic domain where teachers' perspectives of factors other than children's actual skills have greater influence on their ratings of children's competence" (p.818). Outside factors such as how often a child is read to at home or how many books a student's family owned were factors considered by teachers to contribute to a student's success. Teachers who consciously or
subconsciously adjust their expectations towards a student’s ability to achieve in
language based courses because of access to books or reading at home, may also be
biasing their expectations towards particular groups of students over others. For
example, students from ESL families presumed not to have access to English language
books at home, lower-socio-economic class families presumed not to afford or be
interested in books, or students from families whose values on books and reading are
known not to coincide with the teacher’s may all be subjected to a teacher’s lower
expectations and misattributions.

Just as an exceptionally high grade in a core subject could prompt additional
attention, so too could a lower grade in language arts or math. Lower grades achieved
in these subjects were more likely to lead teachers to consider a remedial class
placement of a student whereas lower grades in other subjects such as science and
history and, particularly, art and music did not tend to evoke as much concern. The
exception to this rule appeared to be in the case of Kyun-Yin (Stanley) Poon who had
received a C in science. While science was not regarded as a “core subject”, the fact
that Kyun-Yin had only earned a C in the course combined with his ESL student status
elicited more concern from teachers. It seemed that some teachers made assumptions
regarding the ability of students of an ascribed group to achieve in certain subject areas.
These assumptions occasionally played a role in the placement decisions.

5.1.3 Denial of opportunity

Four of the twenty-one teachers opted not to place any students, regardless of their
ability, in either remedial or advanced classes. All twenty-one teachers had been
informed in writing prior to the study that they had the option of placing the student
record card in the folder labelled supplementary learning class if they believed the student’s prior academic performance indicates that they would benefit from such assistance. Like many of the other teachers interviewed, three of these four teachers felt a C grade simply was not low enough to warrant supplementary learning assistance. However, one of the four teachers announced prior to viewing the cards that she probably would not place students in supplementary learning assistance because she felt there tended to be “very few cases” where learning assistance was required.

Teachers were also informed that students placed in the folder labelled rapid advanced class would be able to complete five years of secondary school in four years by replacing some elective courses with more advanced academic work. While never stated in either the interview or on the record cards, elective courses were often assumed by teachers to be art and music. None of the twenty-one teachers interviewed asked for clarification on this point. All four teachers who had opted not to place any students in the rapid advanced class felt that all students, regardless of ability, could benefit from a combination of academic and elective courses. These teachers made a conscious choice not to place students outside “regular” classes on principle because they rejected what one teacher claimed was the “hierarchy of value” placed upon different subject matter with elective courses often on the bottom rung. For these teachers the concern was that students who excelled in subjects perceived as “lower tier” would be made to feel that their strengths were less valuable than those of students who excelled in subjects perceived to be “top tier.” While one way to counter the perceived hierarchy of courses would be for teachers to select high-achieving students in subjects such as art and music and place them in advanced classes with students who excelled in language arts and math, the preference for these four teachers was to
place all students into the regular classroom. It is conceivable that advanced class placement was never considered due to opinion that art and music were the elective courses that were more likely to be omitted from the advanced class. However, it appeared that teachers had opted not to choose placement in rapid advanced classes as a way to assert their belief that all courses had equal merit. Elective courses were regarded by these teachers as valuable because they promoted behavioural skills such as cooperation and sharing in a way that courses perceived as being more academic did not. Elective courses were also seen as providing a space for non-academic students to shine. Placing students of varying ability levels in the same classroom was also regarded as valuable by these four teachers because they believed that all students, regardless of their ability level, had something to offer and learn from their peers. These teachers believed that providing students with the opportunity to work alongside of peers with varying ability levels strengthens their social and leadership skills and better prepares them for life beyond the classroom because, as one teacher reminds us, “it’s very rare that anyone is just working in a vacuum on their own.”

The four teachers who placed all student record cards into the regular classroom expressed similar sentiments and believed they were doing what was best for all of their students. Placing students together in the same classroom was regarded as a way to “level the playing field.” None of these teachers believed they were doing their students a disservice. And yet, by placing all students in regular classrooms, high-achieving students were possibly being denied opportunities after graduation. Research indicates that students placed in classes with advanced standing are more likely to be admitted into higher-tier universities, will receive greater scholarships and funding opportunities, and finally, will have more access to higher paying occupations as well as a wider
selection of those occupations to choose from than that of their regular or remedial class attending peers (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 2003; Dauber, Alexander, Entwisle, 1996; Phelps, Dowdell, Rizzo, Ehrlich & Wilezenski, 1992). Finally, a more immediate concern is that high-achieving students who are not challenged may become detached and withdraw from classroom activities which could influence their achievement.

Lower-achievers may also fail to benefit from such an arrangement. Research has shown that a student's behaviour changes according to the expectations of their peers. Lloyd and Cohen (as cited in Good & Nichols, 2001, p. 116) found that "when teachers put students into heterogeneous ability groups, students' expectations for one another's performance mediates lower-achieving students' willingness to participate on small group tasks. In classrooms where students vary widely in status differentiation, students are more inclined to "monitor their participation" and less inclined to take part in structured group tasks, whereas when status differentiation is not as apparent, the "participation by low-achieving students increases" (Good & Nichols, 2001, p. 116). This indicates both the powerful role expectations have upon teacher-student relationships and the subtle ways in which classroom placement can either increase or deny opportunity.

Conceivably, the teachers who choose regular classroom placement might argue that what they are offering students goes beyond material gains. These teachers could contend that by offering all students the opportunity to fine tune their skills in communication and leadership while providing them the opportunity to collaborate with peers of varying achievement levels, they are creating more well-rounded individuals who are better prepared to meet the needs of a diverse society. While these skills are,
without question, important, this reasoning does not consider that the decisions these teachers are making affect their students' lives and futures and are based more upon the teachers' values than on the abilities of the students.

5.2 Teacher expectations: Self-fulfilling prophecy?

5.2.1 Aboriginal students

Grades that were contrary to a teacher's expectations of a student were also more likely to elicit a response. High marks achieved by Aboriginal students in any subject were more likely to receive positive reactions than the high-achieving marks of other students. What is important to understand is that while these cases elicited a "positive" response from teachers, the fact remains that this response suggests a negative expectation. High achieving Aboriginal students received extra attention in this study precisely because they exceeded expectations.

When teachers were asked why the high marks of Aboriginal students were surprising, teachers generally attributed their reaction to the fact that they perceived Aboriginal students as having more adverse life circumstances than their peers. While most teachers expressed the belief that Aboriginal students had the ability to do well, they presumed that these "negative life circumstances" inhibited their potential to succeed. This is an example of what Reyna (2000) describes as being external/stable/uncontrollable stereotype. Lack of achievement is not ascribed as being a fault of the learner, but rather is attributed to stable factors outside of the learner's control. The fact that some teachers do not hold Aboriginal students as responsible for their lower graduation rates may be perceived as positive in that the Aboriginal learner's
perception of self-ability is less likely to be negatively influenced. However, these perceptions can still be detrimental to the success of Aboriginal students. For example, many of the teachers indicated that they would be less willing to place a student in an advanced classroom if they believed the student lacked family support or had to deal with negative life circumstances. Thus if teachers subscribe to negative stereotypes regarding the life and family circumstances of their Aboriginal students, they may be less apt to recommend high achieving Aboriginal students for advanced classes.

For many of the teachers in this study, enabling an Aboriginal student to showcase their success may have a benefit that goes beyond the student’s personal gains. The successful Aboriginal student is celebrated not only for her achievements but also for her potential as role model for her Aboriginal peers (or to challenge misperceptions that Aboriginal students are not capable). For these teachers a student’s Aboriginal status is weighted with multiple meanings and in each case the ascribed meaning can benefit or harm the child in complex and intertwined ways. For example, Olivia’s perception that Aboriginal students had to tackle more adversity was occasionally reflected in some of her placement decisions however her reaction was to place some Aboriginals students in higher level folders than their non-Aboriginal, non-ESL counterparts. While Olivia freely acknowledged her decisions were biased, she believed it was warranted because it counter-balanced what she felt were “extenuating circumstances in [Aboriginal students] life history.”

Reyna (2000) suggests that people holding external/stable/uncontrollable stereotypes are more apt to offer their stereotyped targets (in this case, Aboriginal students) assistance through means such as “affirmative action, social programs, or even individualized assistance” (p.102). While increasing opportunities for Aboriginal
students in education is a worthy endeavour, this too can also backfire. For example, overzealous teachers, in their attempts to create some "equilibrium within the educational system" or in effort to appear "unbiased" or "not racist" may be more apt to place lower achieving students at a level for which they may be unprepared, which can also be detrimental to that student’s success. A student placed at a higher level than they are capable of achieving may be more liable to feel discouraged in the classroom. If they find they are unable to keep up with their peers, they may disengage from the classroom.

One must also pay heed to Reyna’s (2000) caution that “the buffering effects of external attributions can also backfire when it comes to making attributions for positive outcomes.” If high-achieving Aboriginal students feel their success is only acknowledged because of who they are (in association to their ascribed stigmatized status) and not because of what they have achieved, they may be less inclined to believe in their ability to succeed. Aboriginal students may question whether their placement was dependent upon external factors such as the evaluator’s altruistic desire to reinstate equilibrium in the educational system or the more ego-driven desire to avoid prejudice - both factors unrelated to the student’s actual performance (internal attribution). A student (with or without Aboriginal status) will only truly benefit from positive evaluations if they feel their achievement is worthy of recognition and not as serving an alternative agenda, however admirable the intention.

In addition, the same “extenuating circumstances” that may seemingly benefit one Aboriginal student, may be detrimental to another. For example, while Olivia opts to place mid-ranging Aboriginal student Irene Battiste in an advanced classroom because of her perception that the student has achieved despite perceived adverse
circumstances, Olivia later opts to switch Minnie Skwistwugh (a low range Aboriginal student) from a regular class to a supplementary learning assistance class because of the same "extenuating circumstances." It could be that low-achieving Aboriginal students are at a double disadvantage if teachers perceive these students as needing not only to boost their achievement but also needing to overcome adverse life circumstances in order to do so.

5.2.2 ESL Students

Like high-achieving Aboriginal students who were perceived by teachers as being exceptional because it was assumed Aboriginal students were subject to more adverse life circumstances, mid-to high achieving ESL students were sometimes considered more impressive than non-ESL peers because of their ability to achieve high marks despite perceived difficulties with language. When an ESL student did achieve high marks in language arts courses, some teachers' would then credit those students with more potential to advance than non-ESL students who had achieved the same marks. This perception would lead towards the ESL students either being placed in a higher-level classroom than their non-ESL peers or placed in the same class with non-ESL peers with the recommendation that their progress be monitored for achievement potential.

While some teachers felt that high-achieving marks signified an ESL student's greater potential to achieve over non-ESL peers, other teachers were more sceptical of high marks achieved by ESL students because of the perception that those students had to struggle with language. These teachers speculated that high grades attained by ESL students were more likely due to grade inflation because of the student's ESL
status. Whatever their perspective, interviews revealed that teachers of either camp were inclined to pay more heed to the grades achieved by ESL students in language-based courses over those of their non-ESL peers. Because of presumed language barriers, the student record cards of ESL students were subject to greater examination and received more commentary than the record cards of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, non-ESL students. Thus it appeared that ESL students were more likely than their non-ESL peers to be subjected to the various stereotypes and value judgements held by teachers.

While high marks in language arts could occasionally work in an ESL student’s favour, the perception that ESL students struggled in language based courses meant that lower marks achieved by ESL students in those courses were more likely to result in lower class placements than those of their non-ESL peers. For example, while the lower grades achieved by non-ESL student, Brooks Grayson, were assumed to be related to difficulties with the course itself, teachers attributed Kyun-Yin’s lower grade in science to an overall struggle with language. The danger with these kinds of assumptions is that teachers may falsely assume an ESL student is struggling with

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6 A similar sentiment was expressed by one teacher with regards to the high marks achieved by Aboriginal students. When asked why she thought pre-service teachers may have under-rated Aboriginal students in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts, she suggested that pre-service teachers may have been more inclined to underrate Aboriginal students because of their perception that the high marks achieved by Aboriginal students were based more upon effort than ability. Refer back to p. 158 and 167 of this thesis for details.
language and place the student in a remedial or language support classroom when what the student actually needs is additional assistance in a particular subject area.

Just as there was the assumption that ESL students had the tendency to struggle in language arts, some teachers also described ESL students (particularly Asian students) as excelling in math. Some teachers described ESL students' ability in math related areas as inherent although some did relate it to the fact the math was not a language based course. In her article, "Lazy, dumb, or industrious: When Stereotypes convey attribution information in the classroom", Reyna (2000) noted that positive stereotypes that certain groups excel in one domain (such as math) will increase that groups perception of themselves as having a high ability in that area (a positive, internal attribution). This may increase the motivation and self-esteem of students identified with this group in areas related to that domain (p.101). Reyna suggests that groups perceived as being extremely capable in one area may begin to place a higher value in that area. They may also devalue or retreat from areas where they are not known to excel. Thus, if ESL students begin to perceive, like their teachers, that they excel or should excel in subjects such as math, they may be more inclined to place concerted effort towards that subject. Likewise, if ESL students believe (or are made to feel) that they are less inclined to be successful in language based subjects, they may feel effort applied to language based subjects are futile and choose to disengage from those subject areas. In addition, if teachers come to assume that high achievement in math related areas is something inherent to ESL students; teachers may become complacent about a student's success in those areas. Teachers may be less inclined to praise a student's exceptional achievement and more inclined to overlook the considerable effort an ESL student may have put into that domain. In addition, ESL students who are not
as successful at math may be more likely to be perceived by teachers as “less capable” to achieve in all areas since they are regarded as being unsuccessful in an area where it has been expected or assumed they would achieve. This double bind may further decrease the student’s self-esteem which may lead to the student withdrawing from classroom related activities altogether.

5.2.3 Non-Aboriginal, non-ESL students

Findings of teachers’ interviewed for this study revealed that the record cards of non-Aboriginal, non-ESL students did not tend to elicit as much commentary as the record cards of Aboriginal or ESL students. On the rare occasion teachers did refer to non-Aboriginal and non-ESL students, adjectives such as “normal”, “regular” or “average” were used to describe the students.

Various studies (Casteel, 1998; Chang & Sue, 2003; Farkas, 2003; Ferguson, 2003; Figlio, 2005; New & Sleeter, 1993, Rubovits & Maehr, 1973; Schick, 2000a; 2000b) have revealed that teachers’ normative values may affect the way they perceive minority students. In an educational system where the majority of teachers are white and middle class despite an increasingly diverse student body (Casteel, 2001; Schick, 2000a), white, middle-class students may be at an advantage since they are more likely to be, a) perceived by their teachers as “normal” / the “norm” and, b) familiar with the normative behaviours and values both perpetuated by schools and expected by many of their teachers. The fact that non-Aboriginal, non-ESL students were more likely to be perceived and described by teachers as “normal” in comparison to their Aboriginal and ESL peers who were often recognized specifically for their Aboriginal and ESL status may place minority students at a disadvantage as they may be more subjected to the
stereotypes and biases of their teachers.

Students who teachers perceive as mirroring their behavioural norms and values may be more likely to be rewarded in the classroom. A study by Casteel (1998) regarding the treatment of African American students and Caucasian American students by Caucasian American female teachers indicated that that “Caucasian American students received a greater portion of positive interactions such as being praised more often, receiving more positive feedback, and being given more clues by their teachers than African American students” (119). Casteel attributes the differential preference of these teachers for Caucasian students to “prejudice, conscious or unconscious, or from a perception that African Americans have different needs and abilities” (p.119) than that of their own. Another study by Economic professor David Figlio (2005) revealed that even a cue as small as a student’s name could negatively influence a student’s score on standardized tests. The findings of his study revealed that students perceived as having “unique” or “unusual” names, names frequently associated with non-white or lower-socio-economic families, were more likely to receive lower test scores than those with anglicized names perceived by teachers as “typical.”

Echoing the findings of the Figlio experiment, this study revealed that while the anglicized names on the student record cards elicited no comments from all of the twenty-one teachers interviewed, Aboriginal and ESL names consistently provoked commentary. Teachers’ interviews revealed that when teachers looked upon the names of Aboriginal or ESL students, teachers were more likely to seek assistance in pronouncing names, comment upon the uniqueness or difference of names or speculate upon the origin of the child. Teachers’ statements also revealed how small cues, such
as a student’s name or group designation, could occasionally result in bias placement decisions.

5.3 Mistaken attributions and associations leading to stereotypes

Family background, socio-economic status, maturity, behaviour, work ethic, leadership skills, assertiveness and neatness were all identified by teachers as additional factors beyond a student’s academic ability that could influence student achievement and/or placement. Students perceived as “lacking” with regards to any of these qualities were deemed as having less potential to succeed in school.

5.3.1 External/stable/uncontrollable: Family and socio-economic status

Teachers listed family as being one of the biggest factors influencing a student’s achievement in the classroom. The perception of some teachers was if students had a stable family background, students would be better equipped to handle the requirements of an advanced classroom. Features of families described as “stable” or “supportive” were families that had parents who had received higher education, had more access to books, had more time to read to children, were more inclined to be involved in the classroom and asked more questions regarding their child’s education. Families, who did not have books, did not read to children, did not attend or participate in classroom interviews, had received lower education or worked lower paying jobs or single-parent families were all factors ascribed by some teachers to families deemed less stable. In addition, students from more affluent neighbourhoods were sometimes perceived by teachers as having fewer problems than students coming from lower socio-economic neighbourhoods.
While teachers may be more inclined to feel sympathy towards students perceived as having difficulties at home or from a lower economic class standing, research demonstrates that external factors such as family and socio-economic factors have also been associated with a student’s ability to achieve (Feiler & Webster, 1999; Georgiou, 2008; Dunne & Gazely, 2008). The stigma directed towards families of lower economic status and separated, divorced and/or single parent families may also be projected onto students belonging to those families. In a study of teachers’ predictions of young children’s literacy success or failure, Feiler and Webster (1999) observed that teachers were more likely to base decisions around students on limited social and behavioural cues such as who the student’s parents were or the socio-economic status of the family rather than on a rational, systematic basis. These findings suggest that teachers’ who presume students from less affluent neighbourhoods lead more difficult lives or assume a student’s home life must be unbearable, may be more inclined to make placement and assessment decisions based on misattributions and associations rather than the student’s actual ability. While some teachers may be more willing to offer assistance to students they perceive as victims of adverse life circumstances, the same students may also be subject to a bevy of stereotypical associations that leave the teacher either consciously or subconsciously questioning that student’s potential to achieve in the classroom.

In addition, the assumption that students who live in affluent neighbourhoods or with two-parent families lead less problematic lives may overshadow the various problems that could be experienced by the same students such as neglect, abuse, illness and instability. This may mean that these students are less likely to be offered assistance or counselling for their needs. Poor performance of these students that may
have resulted from their unacknowledged negative experiences may be misattributed to internal factors like ability. A teacher who misattributes a student's poor performance to internal, uncontrollable factors such as low-ability may be less inclined to offer assistance and more inclined to recommend a student for remedial placement. A teacher who misattributes a drop in performance to lack of effort or laziness may be become frustrated or angry with the student or simply ignore the student altogether.

A teacher's values and beliefs may also influence the way they interact with a student's parent/s. Research by Lasky (2000) found that teachers were more apt to feel comfortable around parents whose values coincided with their own and more likely to misunderstand or be disappointed with a parent or parents whose values differ. Researchers have also speculated that the perceptions teachers have of the parents may be transferred on to the student (Delpit, 1995; Hauser-Cram, Sirin, & Stipek, 2003; Ogbu, 1993). Interviews in this study revealed that some teachers placed a high value on parents they felt shared their belief in the importance of education. These teachers felt that parents who placed a greater value on education were more inclined to be supportive of teachers and more actively involved in their child's learning. The difficulty with such generalizations is that they don't always account for the realities of today's families. While many parents may value their child's education, not all families will be able to demonstrate their support through active classroom involvement. Families who work long or irregular hours or single parent families may not have the time or resources to meet with teachers on a regular basis (or even at all). Some families might not have access to transport making attending parent/teacher interviews a challenge particularly if scheduled in the evenings when public transport may be unreliable or even dangerous. Low-income families may not be able to afford a caretaker and may be
limited in the number of meetings they are able to attend. Finally, ESL families may feel anxious meeting a teacher if they feel their English speaking skills are inadequate or they may believe that the teacher will have no meaningful way of communicating with them.

Parents and teachers views regarding effective teaching practices, student discipline strategies and parent involvement in education may also vary depending upon social class (Hauser-Cram, Sirin, & Stipek, 2003; Lareau, 1987) and ethnic identity (Ogbu, 1993). While some families may advocate a hands-on approach to their child’s learning, other families may believe that it is the teacher’s responsibility to ensure their child’s educational needs are being met. Families may fear interfering with their child’s education will be regarded as disrespectful to the teacher and/or will hinder their child’s educational opportunities. Finally, a parent or parents who have had negative experiences with educational institutions may not feel safe in a school setting for a number of reasons. While parents from these families may actively encourage their children to go to school, they may still be in the process of negotiating their own complicated relationship with the educational system. Classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse and so teachers “need to become familiar with a range of cultural scripts and underlying belief systems” (Hauser-Cram, Sirin, & Stipek, 2003, p.814). Teachers who fail to recognize the value of belief systems and strategies unfamiliar to their own may, either intentionally or unintentionally, allow their perceptions of a student’s parents to jeopardize their expectations of the student.

Good and Nichols (2001) noted that “parents, especially those from low income homes, are also vulnerable to teacher beliefs about their children’s academic performance” (p.122). This means that a teacher’s low or high expectations of a student
may potentially be passed on to that student’s parents. These researchers note that parents who have had little exposure to the educational system, who have not previously enrolled children into academically focussed preschools or daycare or who are new to the Canadian educational system altogether, may be particularly vulnerable to the influence of teachers’ perceptions over their children. Thus, the feedback a parent receives from a teacher regarding their child’s performance may potentially influence the parent’s perceptions of their child’s academic ability. Having two influential adults project the same or similar expectations of the learner’s potential to achieve in the classroom may increase the likelihood of self-fulfilling prophecies to occur since the learner is more likely to be susceptible to parents’ and teachers’ combined expectations (Good & Nichols, 2001). These researchers acknowledge that parents do have the ability to mediate the influence of teachers’ perceptions over their children, however they stress that parents need to have both; a) a belief in their child’s ability to achieve, and b) the opportunity to effectively communicate their beliefs to the teacher. The concept of “teachers as expert” may leave some parents apprehensive about confronting a teacher regarding decisions made about their child. In addition, parents may not always understand that “the assignment of a student into the second or third reading group guarantees that the child will receive a lower grade-no matter how well they do-than any child placed in the high group” (Good & Nichols, 2001, p.122). Even if parents do realize the influence teacher’s decisions may have upon their child, their ability to do anything about it may be limited because of the teacher’s perceptions of the student’s parent/s. A parent who is perceived as involved, educated or influential may be in a better position to question or challenge a teacher’s decision than a parent who is perceived by the teacher as uninvolved, uneducated or lacking influence.
5.3.2 Internal/stable/controllable factors: Behaviour and work ethic

Some forms of behaviour such as a student misbehaving in class, refusing to participate in class, or not completing assigned tasks were perceived by teachers as indications that the student simply did not care or was not trying hard enough. Teachers' statements revealed that students exhibiting this kind of behaviour could be considered for lower class placement than their peers who did not. Researchers (Butler, 1994; Graham, 1984) have found that teachers who perceive students as lacking in effort may be more inclined to exhibit anger or frustration towards the student. Georiou et al. (2002) found that, “when a teacher believes that he or she has some control over students’ learning, the teacher is more responsible to make sure that student learns” (p.584). A teacher who perceives a student lacks in achievement ability (an uncontrollable attribute) may be less inclined to feel responsible for a student’s behaviour, whereas a student perceived as lacking in effort (a controllable attribute) may be perceived by the teacher as undermining their capability to teach affectively. The teacher’s frustration with their inability to work successfully with a student presumed to have the capability to succeed may be projected upon the student.

Likewise, teachers may be more apt to take pride in a student’s success if success is attributed to effort because the teacher may feel more personally responsible for the student’s achievement. Teachers may reward these students by offering them more responsibility in the classroom and/or giving them greater access to classroom resources (Georgiou et al.2002; Reyna, 2000). However, a teacher who consistently attributes a student’s success in class to effort over ability may also risk undermining
the student's perception of self as the student may begin to believe their success was only due to their hard work and/or the assistance of others.

5.3.3 Internal/stable/uncontrollable: Maturity, ability and leadership skills

Other forms of behaviour in the classroom such as maturity, leadership or assertiveness were all representative of behavioural traits that were assumed by teachers to be innate or inherent qualities of the student. While research indicates that teachers who perceive a student’s lack of ability as innate may be more inclined to offer that student assistance research also suggests that their initial assistance may be short-lived if the student is believed to be lacking in potential (Georgiou et al. 2002; Graham, 1984; Reyna, 2000).

In addition, a teacher who perceives a student as being inherently shy may be less likely to encourage a student to participate in class. This may cause the student to withdraw from classroom participation, thus instigating self-fulfilling prophecy. Likewise, students assumed by teachers to be “natural born leaders” may be given more opportunities to showcase their ability in areas that involve leadership and communication. Having increased opportunities in those areas may better enable students to hone in on their skills reinforcing teachers’ initial beliefs.

5.4 Stereotypes according to group associations

Certain aforementioned traits or factors were sometimes associated by teachers with a student’s ascribed group status. Interviews revealed that teachers who associated students of an ascribed group status with negative factors may be more inclined to consider placing those students in a lower class standing than their equivalent grade level peers. Teachers may also be more inclined to express surprise or disbelief with
the success of those students. Interviews with teachers who associated students of an ascribed group status with positive factors revealed that teachers may be more inclined to reward those students for their efforts or achievements but they also may be more likely to ignore or take those student's efforts for granted. In addition, teachers may also express frustration, confusion or anger with a student whose behaviour contradicts teachers' expectations. The following section explores the various attributions and assumptions that some teachers made regarding certain groups of students.

5.4.1 Aboriginal students

Some teachers interviewed perceived Aboriginal students as having to cope with more adverse life circumstances than their non-Aboriginal peers. This perception was enough to have some teachers questioning both how an Aboriginal student might behave in class and/or their potential to achieve academically. Teachers who assumed Aboriginal students came from more adverse life circumstances than their non-Aboriginal peers were also more inclined to inquire about the family background of Aboriginal students. Since some teachers assumed that students coming from a stable family background would be more supportive of their child's learning, teachers who assume Aboriginal students have less family support may be less inclined to recommend high achieving Aboriginal students to advanced classrooms. They also may be more inclined to recommend lower achieving Aboriginal students to remedial classes if they believe the support from the student's family may be inadequate.

Some teachers also described the parents of their Aboriginal students as being less interested in education. Since teachers are likely to place a high value on education, teachers who presume that parents of Aboriginal students are less inclined
to value education for various reasons may be more inclined to lower their expectations of their Aboriginal students ability to achieve. Considering the legacy of residential schooling in Canada, some Aboriginal families may have complex and constrained relationships with the educational system. While affected families may still place high value upon their children's education, this may not necessarily be reflected in their behaviour and attitude towards both the school and the teacher. In addition, what could be interpreted by some teachers as a parent's disinterest in education may actually be more of a reflection of alternative viewpoints on best educational practices.

While all teachers articulated a clear opposition to the negative stereotyping of Aboriginal peoples, their comments occasionally revealed the same stereotypes they wished to undermine. For example, while Janet, a) suggests the poor performance of Aboriginal students is due to negative external factors beyond the students actual control ("they're just so stereotyped"/ "there a lot of bad stuff happening in the Aboriginal communities") and, b) expresses her belief in Aboriginal students' capability to achieve, her assertions such as; "If more Aboriginals..."/"Aboriginals can help themselves too..." and, "if I was in the Aboriginal community, I would..." suggest an underlying perception that Aboriginal peoples could be extending more effort towards making positive change. In addition, while emphasizing her belief in the capacity Aboriginal people have for success, she remarks; "I also happen to know some really intelligent Aboriginal lawyers and things like that so I have maybe a different, [voice trails off]. I know smart Aboriginal people." This assertion, while intended to be positive, implies an exception. Finally, Janet speaks of her admiration for an Aboriginal business man because he encourages Aboriginal bands to "not take handouts." She also speculates that if Aboriginal youth, "just see their drunk [sic] people all over the place, you [Aboriginal youth] start thinking,
'that's what we are. We're just drunk people.' Janet's statements illustrate particular assumptions and stereotypes she has regarding Aboriginal peoples and what Aboriginal youth are exposed to. While Janet's intentions appear to be well-meaning, the underlying assumptions behind her statements may be hurtful (and potentially harmful) as they perpetuate the same stereotypes she condemns. Teachers' biases can be communicated through grades, assessments and placement decisions but may also be indirectly implied through more subtle forms of language and behavioural cues directed towards that student (Brophy, 1983; Brophy & Good, 1974; Good & Nichols, 2001; Reyna, 2000; Weiner, 1995). This in turn may influence the student's perception of self as well as their performance in the classroom.

5.4.2 ESL students

ESL students, particularly ESL students of Asian descent were more likely to be seen as being less interpersonally effective than their non-ESL, non-Asian peers. Interviews in this study revealed that other teachers were also concerned over ESL students' potential to acclimatise socially to higher-level classrooms, a concern that may influence a teacher's placement decision. Research has revealed that teachers are more apt to perceive Asian students (regardless of ESL status) as being more unassertive, quieter and less socially adept than their Caucasian peers (Bannai & Cohen, 1985; Kim, 1983; Sung, 1987). Chang & Sue (2003) claim that the stereotype that Asian students are more reserved, "may explain why teachers have been found to call on Asian American students less often than on Caucasian students and to expect less classroom involvement from them" (p.235).

Believing certain stereotypes to be true, some teachers may believe that by
anticipating particular behaviour from certain groups of students, they are better able to accommodate their needs. Rather than focusing on the student’s actual achievement, the teacher responds to the assumptions they have about a collective group despite the fact that these assumptions may have very little to do with the student. This reaction is not uncommon and is sometimes promoted as good teaching practice. In his article, “Non-Native teachers teaching in Native communities,” Taylor (1995) informs non-Indigenous teachers how to teach Indigenous students more effectively, however in doing so he appeals to popular assumptions and stereotypes such as the notion that Indigenous culture is a high context, low verbal culture and Euro-Canadian culture is a low-context, highly verbal one (p.233). The drawback with utilizing teaching methods sensitive to “cultural difference” such as this, is that certain behaviours and values become identified with specific group membership so that students belonging to those groups are no longer recognized for their individual abilities but are instead “type-cast” into roles that may have denied or disadvantaged the group in the past and could potentially do so again (Sleeter, 1993).

For example, if a teacher believes the stereotype that “Asian or ESL students are shy and withdrawn”, teachers may deny Asian or ESL students the opportunity to participate in leadership roles out of a perception that these students would rather not. Students could then interpret their exclusion from such roles as a teacher’s lowered expectation of their capability to achieve in these domains. This could incite ESL/Asian students to disengage from activities that require participation and leadership skills and induce a self-fulfilling prophecy. In addition, collective group members who do want to take on more leadership roles and are consistently denied the opportunity to do so, may become discouraged, frustrated and/or angry which could lead the student to
disassociate or withdraw from school altogether. Thus, the teacher's attempt to be “culturally sensitive” has gotten in the way of good instruction (Good & Nichols, 2001) and may deny opportunities from students belonging to certain collective groups.

Rather than attempting to be culturally sensitive by attributing certain kinds of behaviour to collective group members which may only serve to reinforce stereotypes, teachers could pay more attention to how the value they place on certain skills and behaviours may influence their perceptions and evaluations of all students. For example, a teacher who does not recognize the high value they place on leadership skills as defined by “oral participation in class” may be more likely to consider students they perceive as excelling in this area into advanced classrooms regardless of ability. However, a teacher who recognizes the high value they place on leadership skills or oral participation may be more likely to try and reconsider how this personal value may influence their student evaluations and more willing to readjust their evaluation rubric so as to ensure equal weight is given towards oral participation and written participation in class. Now all students, regardless of group membership, are expected and encouraged to excel in both areas and students who may excel in one area over another are not penalized if it is not the area most valued by their teacher.

Interviews revealed that another stereotype that was more commonly associated with ESL students, particularly ESL students of Asian descent, was the perception that such students were hard working (an internal, stable and controllable attribute). The concept of Asian people as “model minority” is not unfamiliar (Allis, 1991; Chang & Sue, 2003; Reyna, 2000). The term “model minority” is used to describe individuals from a particular minority ethnic, racial or religious group who are perceived as being higher achievers or harder workers than non-group members. The popular stereotype that
"Asians are hard workers" is often referred to as a "positive stereotype" because it is seen to benefit group members ascribed to that label. Students who come from groups associated with positive stereotypes may be more likely to be automatically perceived and rewarded by their teachers as diligent workers. Chang and Sue (2003) note that while empirical evidence does sometimes support the perceived notion of Asians as being higher achievers (Hsia & Peng, 1998), they caution that any over-generalization of such findings can have unexpected drawbacks that may negatively affect the perceived group member. For example, they found that teachers who believed the notion that Asian students were more inclined to be hard workers, well-behaved and more reserved (over-controlled behavioural traits) were less likely to be identified for behavioural problems than their non-Asian peers. While under-controlled behavioural traits such as hyperactivity, attention deficit, disobedience and general disruptive behaviour are often regarded by teachers as undesirable traits in students, over-controlled behaviour like "hard working, well-behaved, tidy and quiet" are generally highly valued by teachers and thus students displaying those traits are less likely to be regarded as problematic. Because these traits are valued, problems associated with over-controlled behaviour such as anxiety, social withdrawal and depression are less likely to be identified by teachers. While students belonging to groups associated with positive stereotypes may be unduly rewarded, they also may be neglected or ignored meaning that over-controlled behavioural disorders could remain undetected and untreated for years (Chang & Sue, 2003, p.240).

Asian/ESL students who “act up” in class may be more noticeable to teachers because their over-controlled behaviour is contrary to teachers’ expectations. In addition, teachers who generalize that all ESL/Asian students are “hard-workers” or
"high-achievers" may be more inclined to feel frustrated or angry with an ESL/Asian student who doesn't understand or is having difficulty in an area where it has been anticipated that they will achieve. A teacher may also feel more responsible for the student's lack of success in a domain where the student was expected to excel (Georiou et al., 2002). Brophy & Good (1974) suggest that on some occasions a perceiver may explain away certain evidence contrary to their initial expectations because the act of changing their expectations may cause them to experience "symptoms of psychological disorder such as anxiety or depression" (p.34). Not wanting to assume complete responsibility for a student's lack of success, the teacher may attribute failure to lack of effort. Since "effort" is associated with "control", teachers may be more inclined to punish the student or deny them assistance or resources.

Interviews revealed that when students belonging to groups associated with high achievement or hard work behaved contrary to a teacher's expectations, the parents of those students could also be perceived as being at fault. Some teachers interviewed believed that parents of ESL students, particularly ESL students of Asian descent, were more likely to cultivate strong study habits in their children. While these parents were occasionally praised for providing their children with strong study skills and a solid work ethic, teachers would also sometimes criticize these parents for being "too strict" or for placing too much emphasis on scholastic achievement. Interviews revealed that this was particularly the case if the student was perceived as doing poorly or displaying behavioural problems in class. Again, teachers may feel more personally responsible for unexpected negative behaviour among students generally expected to behave. Perhaps believing their teaching capabilities to be in question, a teacher may use external factors to explain unanticipated results and to relinquish any personal
responsibility or guilt about a student's lack of success. Attributing blame to the "over-controlled nature" of the parents may seem logical because it; a) reaffirms the stereotype that "Asians are hard working/over-achievers", b) shifts responsibility for the student's unexpected failure/misbehaviour away from the teacher and, c) maintains the student's perceived reputation as a potential hard worker and high achiever.

5.5 Gender and stereotypes
While the topic of "difference" regarding race and ethnicity seemed to elicit some discomfort among teachers, teachers had little trouble speaking openly about the differences they viewed between their male and female students. This may be due, in part, because there is more available research relating gender to educational performance. Teachers may be less apprehensive about making overt observations on perceived gender differences in educational performance since doing so is relatively common practice in Western society. Conversely, openly discussing differences across race and ethnicity lines is still regarded as largely taboo and teachers may be less inclined to associate race and ethnicity with academic performance out of fear of being labelled as "racist" or "discriminatory" since such claims could be damaging to both their reputation and career.

Although gender generally seemed to play a minimal role in teachers' decisions regarding student placement, it directly informed the placement decisions of two teachers who cited "maturity" as being a key factor as to why they decided to place a female learner at a higher level than a male learner. In one case, the male learner was of grade equivalent. While teachers who made generalizations regarding male and female students often acknowledged that their observations vindicated popular
stereotypes, they did not seem to be overly concerned or distressed about doing so, but rather seemed to take on a "that's just the way it is" approach to the situation.

5.5.1 Gender and internal uncontrollable factors: Ability

Li's (1999) extensive literature review related to gender issues and teachers' beliefs regarding mathematics in education, uncovered that teachers "tend to stereotype mathematics as a male domain" (p.63) despite no conclusive evidence suggesting that the stereotype is accurate. In the twenty-one interviews conducted for this dissertation, it was revealed that while most teachers were aware of stereotypes pertaining to gender difference and subject matter, few acknowledged any substantial evidence in their classrooms to legitimize these claims and were less likely to give them credibility. However, five teachers did acknowledge some gender differences in core subjects on par with popular social stereotypes such as: "girls excel in language arts and reading" and "boys are more adept in mathematics and experiments." However, unlike the teachers described in Li's literature review who ascribed "males' success in mathematics in terms of ability more often than they did for females, whose success was described more often in terms of effort" (p.70), these teachers attributed external factors such as teacher bias or classroom dynamics as the root cause of gender differences within subject matter performance. One possible reason for this discrepancy is that while it may be socially acceptable to blame external factors like "society" for perceived gender differences in subject matter, it may be socially taboo to specifically relate it to traits such as ability that are beyond a learner's control, particularly if you are a classroom teacher.
One of the five teachers explained that while she noted that girls in her class performed better in areas such as reading and language arts, she could not subscribe to the stereotype of boys doing better in math since she had always been successful in math herself. Kolb & Jussim (1994) noted that even mildly disconfirming evidence may lead people to readjust their initial expectations of a person. If a student's behaviour or performance confirms a teacher's existing stereotypes, the teacher may be more likely to give the stereotype credence; however, if a teacher's personal experience is contrary to the stereotype, the teacher may be more open to adjusting expectations according to the individual.

5.5.2 Gender and internal, controllable factors: Behaviour and effort

Teachers often perceived female learners as more mature, well-mannered and well-behaved in comparison to their male peers who were often described as puppies. Because the behavioural traits ascribed to girls were often those deemed most valuable by teachers, teachers were less inclined to foresee female students as potential troublemakers. Instead, female learners were often described by teachers as “pleasers” who excelled at playing the school game. Teachers used, “playing the school game” to describe students who may not necessarily excel in academics but were familiar enough with school codes and values such that it gave them an advantage. While perhaps not the intention, this statement may downplay the academic capability of female learners as it suggests that girls do well at school more because they comply with school codes and not necessarily because they are capable of achieving success on their own merit. Female learners who grow up believing their high grades and
educational success are due to good behaviour and strong work ethic may begin to question their own academic potential and the validity of their achievements.

Girls were equally described as "pleasers" or "aiming to please", a behavioural trait that can suggest neediness or state of dependence. Since the target for girls "aiming to please" was often the teachers themselves, teachers were more inclined to view this as a positive trait for their female learners. While this could act towards the immediate benefit of female learners, unquestioned, the long-term influence of this behavioural trait on girls' achievement is suspect. Teachers who never explore the reasons that a student feels the need to please or be accepted or who never encourages a student to think, act or speak for themselves may be less apt to recognize or even realize the possible difficulties that could stem from an excessive need to accommodate. For girls, this could result in; a) an inability to express opinions, b) taking on more than required share of workload, c) difficulty asserting self in the classroom, d) refusal to request additional assistance. While all factors could be associated with an excessive desire to please, none of these issues were raised with respect to female learners. Instead, female learners' ability to accommodate was taken as a given, neither overly praised nor cause for alarm. While two teachers did express concern with regards to female learners' tendency to please, their concern was not how the act of over-pleasing itself might hinder the student's ability to succeed, but rather that the target of girls' desire to impress had shifted from the teacher and moved towards boys, popular peers or society itself.

Boys were generally described as immature, messy and more disruptive than their female peers. Such behavioural traits were not considered positive by teachers since they often spelled classroom management problems. Despite this, teachers
seemed to take the perceived misbehaviour of boys in stride. Three teachers referred to their males' students fondly as "puppies." Teachers interviewed were more inclined to be sympathetic towards boys' unruly behavioural traits. This may be because teachers regard boys' disruptive behaviour as being "innate" (an internal, stable, uncontrollable trait). Internal, stable, uncontrollable traits usually tend to invoke sympathy or pity in the perceiver since the perceived is not believed to have any control over their actions, however, they may also result in lowered expectations and long term denial of scarce resources (Reyna, 2000). Yet boys "puppy-like" behaviour was attributed by teachers to a "lack of maturity." Since a person's maturity is believed to change over time, teachers may regard this as "just a stage" boys must go through. Thus a boy's misbehaviour in class may not have as detrimental influence upon a teacher's impression of a male learners' capacity to achieve educational success although it could have a negative result over a teacher's immediate evaluations which could affect placement decisions.

Several teachers noted that as males matured, they would "catch up" to their female learners in secondary school. It may be that many of the behavioural traits that once condemned boys in elementary school are later coveted in secondary schools and beyond in settings where creative and independent thought is encouraged. Meanwhile, the traits for which girls are praised for in elementary school may inhibit their performance in higher levels of education.

The comments made in interviews about male and female learners revealed that a large part of what was assessed was behavioural traits over academic ability. While female learners were regarded as being "better students" because of their behaviour, it did not mean that teachers assumed that females were more academically competent. However, the stereotype that "girls mature faster than boys" could and once did lead to
a female learner being placed in a higher academic class than her male counterpart of equivalent grade level. Interviews also revealed that behavioural traits valued by teachers and associated with female learners such as neatness and obedience could lead to higher marks on classroom assignments. However, it is equally important to note that while behavioural traits associated with female learners such as “quiet”, “obedient”, and “aiming to please” were more likely to be valued and thus rewarded by teachers in elementary schools, these same traits could later be detrimental to female learners. Teachers may also be more likely to ignore female learners if they assume that because they do not act out in class they do not need assistance. As one teacher noted, “I don’t even see my girls.” If a girl’s “good” behaviour renders her invisible in the classroom, her strengths and abilities may be overlooked. Good and Nichols (2001) wisely note that when it comes to assessing students, “teachers need to understand that students’ maturity and general conduct must be kept separate from academic performance” (p.123).

5.5.3 Gender and external factors: School environment

The perceived differences in boys’ and girls’ behaviour described above caused some teachers to suggest that the current education system was not conducive to “male styles of learning.” It appeared that boys’ disruptive behaviour in class had encouraged teachers to reassess their current teaching methods in order to accommodate the perceived needs of their male learners. Several teachers spoke of being inspired to take additional classes in order to better understand how to make their classroom male audience friendly. Teachers excitedly relayed how they had redesigned lesson plans to stimulate the interest of boys who were perceived as being “active” and “curious
learners" who had potential but were "falling behind" and needed additional stimulation. Lesson plans were adapted to take a more creative approach to learning which involved hands-on activities and games. And yet, these changes may not have occurred without the boys' misbehaviours in class. When questioned whether girls could also benefit from a more hands-on approach to learning, teachers enthusiastically agreed but interviews revealed that lesson plans were not adapted specifically for the female learners, perhaps because the female learners had already adapted to the lesson plan.

Once again, the danger in adapting a class for some groups and not others is not only that it may reinforce certain stereotypes, but also that individuals within either group may miss something valuable. For example, the female learner whose creativity is triggered by a more hands on approach to learning may be denied this opportunity if it is assumed her performance is already adequate. A male learner, who consistently feels pressured to participate in class activities when he would prefer to sit quietly and read his book, may disengage from the classroom. By identifying the needs of students according to their ascribed group status rather than by their individual ability and skill, teachers do students a disservice. By assuming that because students share group membership, they also share the same opinion, benefit from the same teaching methods and excel or not excel in the same fields, teachers risk overlooking the individual needs of the student which could result in the denial of opportunity. This is not to discourage teachers from trying new approaches to teaching or modifying their lesson plans. Teachers need to consistently change to remain fresh and aware; however, these new approaches should be directed towards the benefits of all learners rather than to groups. It will take more effort on the part of the teacher but the end result will be a more engaged, higher performing classroom.
5.6 Are stereotypes legitimate if they conform to personal experience?

When making placement decisions regarding ESL students, Cathy placed ESL students in a lower class standing than their non-ESL peers despite the fact that their record cards were the same. Cathy later acknowledged reflecting upon her prior experience teaching ESL students to help inform her placement making decisions. What Cathy hadn't immediately recognized was that by doing this she had undermined the capability of the ESL students represented on the record cards because her decisions were based *more upon her previous experience* with other ESL students than on *the actual ability of the individual student* as indicated by the student record card.

It is important for teachers to keep in mind that although prior experience with a student belonging to a specific collective group may confirm particular assumptions the teacher has made about the group’s capability, applying that generalization later to another individual belonging to the same group is still incorrect. By doing this, the teacher is not evaluating the student for *individual performance* but rather is evaluating according to the assumptions or expectations they have made regarding group capability. When the generalization about a group is applied to an individual, assumptions about that person are made without any evidential basis. The generalization and the action resulting from it are thus unfair and harmful to the individual to whom the stereotype is applied. Furthermore, if stereotypical assumptions are consistently applied when making decisions regarding individuals of a particular ascribed group, then the entire group will feel the residual effects of the stereotype.
5.7 Student response to stereotypes

The discussion to this point has focussed on how the stereotypes a teacher might have may influence both their perceptions of students and then how those perceptions may influence the assessments and placement decisions made. Yet, even if a teacher’s behaviour and assessment decisions regarding the student are not influenced by stereotypes, the mere reference to or indication of a stereotype regarding a specific group may be all that is needed to trigger the negative effects of “stereotype threat.”

“Stereotype threat theory” refers to the invocation of failure on academic tests or assignments by stereotyped groups in certain situations where their behaviour or performance might confirm or reinforce a negative perception that their group is somehow lacking with regards to a valued ability (Aronson, Lustina, Good, Keough, Steele, & Brown, 1999; Aronson, Quinn & Spencer, 1998; Good, Aronson & Inzlicht, 2003; Steele, 1997). Research has demonstrated that if a group is made aware of their stigmatized status prior to participating in a test or project in a subject where their group is deemed incapable, they will not do as well as they would have had it not been mentioned (Salinas & Aronson, 1997; Spencer & Steele, 1995; Steele & Aronson, 1995). In addition, a study by Aronson et al. (1999) discovered that even groups that are not stigmatized can be affected by stereotype threat “if they were exposed to a stereotype that predicted underperformance for their group” (p.30). Their study, consisting of two research groups of White males with high abilities in mathematics, found that White male subjects confronted with the stereotype that “Asian students outperform Caucasians in math” were consistently outperformed by White male subjects who were not reminded of the stereotype prior to taking the test. The significance of this
study is that it demonstrates that even individuals who have not endured a lifetime of stigmatization can still be negatively affected by stereotype threat.

Individuals belonging to stigmatized groups are more likely to be reminded of the negative stereotypes associated with their group than their non-stigmatized peers. This means that members of stigmatized or negatively stereotyped groups may have a heightened sense of awareness of the stigma or negative stereotypes associated with their group and so may be more susceptible to the influence of "stereotype threat." In addition, the sense of group loyalty that can arise from having to consistently vindicate each other's sense of self worth may leave individuals of stigmatized groups more apprehensive about representing their group in situations where negative group stereotypes could be administered (Aronson et al., 1998, p.41).

Studies indicate that the strength of influence "stereotype effect" has upon student performance is dependent upon the degree to which the student identifies with the particular subject domain (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Another study by Aronson, Quinn & Spencer (1998), demonstrated that White males whose math results were most negatively influenced by stereotype threat were those most invested in the subject matter. Thus, students who are more invested in certain courses or subject matter may experience more negative feelings at the suggestion that they may somehow be deficient. The findings of this study may help explain why individuals from some stigmatized groups may be more inclined to disengage from certain subjects, or even from school itself, as an act of self-preservation.

Other studies have indicated that stereotype threat may also have a more significant influence over individuals who highly identify with their group membership
(Wout, Danso, Jackson, & Spencer, 2008). These individuals may be more inclined to identify with the known struggles of a same group member in a particular subject area. The individual’s awareness of the struggle could incite their own self-doubt and lowered test performance in that area (Cohen & Garcia, 2005). Because of this, a student might “opt out” of an educational program so as not to risk potentially disappointing or “letting down” other group members.

Research has indicated that students only suffer from the performance hindering effects of “stereotype threat” when students “perceived that it was both possible and probable that they would be negatively stereotyped” (Wout, Jackson, Sellers & Shih, 2009). Thus, if teachers can reduce the risk of students feeling that they are likely to be stereotyped or pigeon-holed in the classroom, students may be less likely to face the performance hindering effects of stereotype threat and may be more likely to succeed academically.

5.8 Attribution, expectations & stereotyping theory: Useful for classroom practice

The findings of this study demonstrate that although a teacher may not intend to make discriminatory decisions based on their students’ ascribed characteristics, it does not make the teacher automatically incapable of biased decisions. These biased decisions then sometimes lead to denied opportunities for students. Gillborn (2006) suggests that our approaches regarding instances of discrimination in the classroom need to move “away from endless debates about intent by insisting upon a focus on the outcomes of actions and processes” (p.8). For teachers, this may mean allocating more time for reflection and reasoning regarding the decisions made about elevation and assessments of their students. In this study, I have argued that an awareness of how
combined theories of stereotyping and attribution operate is crucial for teachers as this understanding empowers teachers themselves to consider precisely on what basis the decisions regarding their students are made and whether it is appropriate. In addition, teachers who are aware of the existence of “stereotype threat” may be more likely to attend to the language they use around students and the attributions they place on students’ successes or failures. Teachers familiar with theories of stereotyping and attribution may also be more aware of how students attribute their successes and failures and thus, may be more likely to step in if they notice a student on a downward spiral.

Similarly, students familiar with theories of attribution and stereotyping may reflect upon both how they perceive themselves in different environments and how they feel they are perceived, which may be empowering. In addition, this awareness may better enable students to challenge negative perceptions of themselves and the decisions made regarding their lives. It must be remembered however that the inherent power structures within educational institutions and society may make it difficult for students to speak out, suggesting that while students should have a voice in the construction of educational policies affecting their lives, they should not be held accountable for decisions made by educational administrators and teachers regarding their future.

Teachers familiar with the combined theories of stereotyping and attribution will; a) be equipped with tools to investigate their daily interactions and practices which may make the task of identifying bias decisions appear less daunting, b) understand the various ways discrimination may manifest in the classroom; c) be cognizant of the way
decisions may lead to the denial of student opportunity and therefore be less likely to unintentionally discriminate; d) be empowered as individuals with the ability to recognize and challenge stereotypical perceptions (within themselves or others).

5.9 Brief synopsis of the work in light of discrimination and racism

Among the assertions made about the gap between the performance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is that the former have been discriminated against because of the attributed racial identities (Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004; Farkas, 2003; St. Denis, 2004; St. Denis & Hampton, 2002). My master's thesis was the first empirical demonstration that some pre-service teachers (11 out of 50) discriminated against students whom they thought were Aboriginal because there was a designation on the students' record cards that the school board had received additional money because the student was identified as Aboriginal (a policy of the British Columbia Ministry of Education.) The present study sought to understand how teachers think when they make recommendations about students based upon the students' record cards.

Interviews revealed that twenty of the twenty-one teachers interviewed did not make recommendations in accordance with the instructions to attend only to the grades indicated on the cards. Instead, teachers made decisions that based upon their personal values or that referenced students' attributed characteristics such as their status as Aboriginals, students for whom English was a second language, and as males or females. Because the records of students about whom such judgments were made were identical to the records of students whom the same teachers had placed in conformity with the instructions, I inferred that they had discriminated against these
students. Where such judgments made reference to a students' attributed identity (Aboriginal or ESL student), I inferred that this was evidence of racism in accordance with Wellman's (1977) definition of racism as "a system of advantage based on race" (Tatum, 1999, p.7) where some individuals may profit at the expense of others. Rather than focusing primarily on the intent of the individual, this definition acknowledges racism as something that is "widespread and ingrained in society, rather than manifested only in the actions of a few 'irrational', hate-fueled individuals "(Marx, p.5).

Teachers interviewed in this study appeared to have the best of intentions for their students in that they wanted them to do well. The teachers interviewed seemed to believe they were making decisions that would best fulfill their students' educational needs, and yet, by basing decisions upon arbitrary factors such as a student's group membership, teachers were effectively denying specific groups of students an opportunity they were entitled to receive regardless of the initial intention behind the decision. Educational theorist, Sherry Marx describes this as "passive racism". While "active racism" infers ill-intent and is therefore regarded as harmful and hateful, "passive racism" is often under-challenged due in part to its pervasiveness within society and because the perpetrator may often be unaware of the implications of their actions (Marx, p.11). What sometimes gets overlooked is that while there may be no ill-intention behind the action towards the individual, the outcome has the same negative impact on the individual. While some teachers interviewed in this study may have believed they were doing the best for their students by denying certain groups of students the same opportunities that were provided to students of the same achievement level as indicated by the grades achieved on their record card, they were nevertheless discriminating.
against them. Regardless of the intent behind the decision, the negative impact was to deny students opportunities unfairly.

5.10 Research limitations and next steps

One lesson learned from this study is the risk involved with any overarching generalizations. This too can be said about making any generalizations from this study. First, this study consisted of in-service teachers from in and around Vancouver. More research will need to be conducted throughout various regions across Canada to determine if similar studies would garnish the same kinds of results. Alternative recruitment strategies along side of call-out letters and snow-ball sampling could be utilized to ensure a wider cross section of teacher participants in each area.

Other limitations to this study involved the scope of information included within both the student record cards and the data collected. For example, other status variables such as a student’s income or geographical location of student were not included in the study but may have influenced decisions teachers made. Future studies could investigate the relationship between these factors and teachers’ judgment. In addition, some teachers revealed that they did not consider a C grade low enough to warrant consideration for a remedial classroom. While this made it interesting to see precisely in which instances teachers would consider remedial classes as an option for students at a C level, future studies might also try to ensure that student record cards presented to teachers are more representative of the full spectrum of grades they are accustomed to receiving from students. Other potential additions to student record cards might be the inclusion of fictitious comments that teachers have made about students represented on cards so as to determine if this would incite different kinds of responses. It would also
be interesting to see how a forth folder representing an alternative school arts program might influence teacher decision making.

Finally, the purpose of the study was to determine how teachers, irrespective of their background, justified the decisions they made regarding students of different race, gender and ethnicity. Out of consideration for participant confidentiality, identifying features like the participants' racial or ethnic background was not specifically stated nor requested. However, future studies may consider whether the decisions teachers make about their students varies according to the race, ethnicity or gender of the teacher. Future research might also consider whether variance exists across Canada between the following groups: teachers with experience working on reserve schools and those who do not; teachers with ESL teaching experience and teachers without; teachers from inner-city schools, private schools, segregated schools and their counterparts.

5.11 Are stereotypes inevitable?

When discussing the way in which people utilize categorical representations (e.g. stereotypes) in their daily lives, Allport (1954) remarked,

> We like to solve problems easily. We can do so best if we can fit them rapidly into a satisfactory category and use this category as a means of prejudging the solution...so long as we can get away with course overgeneralizations we tend to do so. Why? Well, it takes less effort, and effort, except in the area of our most intense interests, is disagreeable (pp.20-21).

When specifically asked to evaluate the grades of fictional student record cards before placing them into the designated folder, teachers did just that for the most part. However, for many of the teachers interviewed, a trigger as small as a name or group designation could elicit generalizations about a student's group membership and, in
some cases, could make a difference in a student's placement. Kurtz, Schneider, Carr, Borkowski & Rellingner (1990) once noted that, “teachers influence cognitive development and school achievement not only through explicit strategy instruction, but also through overt and subtle messages about their perceptions of children's abilities, and their attributional theories about other factors that influence achievement” (p.269). The results obtained from this study suggest the validity of that statement.

The notion that social categories are inevitably activated the moment a triggering stimulus is presented has been around for some time (Allport, 1954; Brewer, 1988; Devine, 1989; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Gilbert & Hixon, 1991). Allport relayed that “the human mind must think with the aid of categories...we cannot possibly avoid this process. Orderly living depends on it” (p.20). Rather than viewing the process of stereotyping as a negative issue, Allport argued that the categories and labels we assign to people not only are unavoidable but may actually assist in our daily interactions. While this may be true, stereotypes can also limit the way in which we choose to interact with others. Over-generalizations can lead to unfair assumptions about the lives of the individuals we meet and may inhibit the quality of daily interactions. At its extreme, social categories can transform into social problems like prejudice, discrimination and racism against individuals perceived as being “other” which could lead to negative social and economic impact, detachment and unequal treatment in schools, workplace and the community at large.

Since Allport, numerous researchers have debated the precise nature and function of categorical representations in today’s society and under what conditions they are activated. In her seminal study, Devine (1989) examined the automatic and controlled components of stereotypes and prejudice in order to determine whether racial
stereotypes were automatically activated upon the detection of an individual’s group membership. Study findings emphasized the strong influence of “automatic (unconscious) processes in stereotyping and prejudice” (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, p.15) by demonstrating that when participants were barred from controlling their responses, both high and low-prejudice individuals were equally susceptible to producing stereotype-congruent or prejudice-like responses.

Despite a seemingly pessimistic finding, Devine clarified that these results are not indicative that all people are prejudiced but rather that automatically accessed stereotypes “may have effects that are inaccessible to the subject” (Devine, 1989), meaning that, for even those who self-identify as non-prejudiced, the “activation of stereotypes can have automatic effects that if not consciously monitored produce effects that resemble prejudiced responses” (Devine, 1989, p.12). Thus, it was reasoned that a significant attribute that may separate low-prejudice people from their high prejudiced peer is the effort they will put into suppressing that stereotype. Devine tested this hypothesis in the final stage of her study by asking both low and high-prejudiced individuals to anonymously relay their thoughts on the racial group of Black Americans. The findings indicated that when given the opportunity to reflect upon their responses, low prejudiced individuals replaced stereotype-congruent thoughts with their own non-prejudiced personal belief system.

Subsequent studies have indicated that stereotypes can be automatically triggered from relatively small cues. For example, when looking at the influence of the “halo effect” Peters and Ceci (1982) submitted articles to the same journals where they had previously been published but switched the original name and school affiliation for fictitious names and an unimpressive fictitious school. Most manuscripts were returned
rejected and while there were other possibilities for the rejections, the most probable theory was the institutional cue. This indicates the significant influence a seemingly small trigger (like a name) can have upon a final outcome. Such studies demonstrate that relatively small cues can elicit a categorical response and I argue that this was the case in the present study.

So is stereotyping inevitable? Well, maybe yes and maybe no. In their review of the literature on categorical person perception, Macrae and Bodenhausen (2001) found that “the commonplace assumption that category activation is an unconditionally automatic mental process is a less than satisfactory answer to this important theoretical question” (p.251). Like Devine, they found that while category activation is strong, “the process appears to be controllable under certain conditions.” They claim that if every stimulus a person encountered incited a categorical response, the individual would be overwhelmed with irrelevant information which would hinder rather than facilitate a person’s daily interactions. Blair (2002) also suggested that, while automatic stereotypes and prejudices are strong and unpredictable, they may be malleable, although the degree to which their malleability exists is dependent upon “the perceiver’s motives and strategies, and to variations in the situation” (p.257). While these recent findings are encouraging, researchers acknowledge that it is difficult to determine precisely under what conditions we can “shut off” cognitive responses.

The aforementioned information suggests that while automatic stereotype activation may be unpredictable, it is also malleable and controllable in certain situations. However, until we can identify those situations we must first acknowledge the existence of our stereotypes and then determine how to limit their effects.
5.12 Strategies to avoid discrimination in the classroom

"Be at least as interested in your reactions as in the situation or person that causes you to react" (Eckhart Tolle, 1997, p.46)

In his book, “In the realm of hungry ghosts: Close encounters with addiction”, (2007), physician Gabor Mate, M.D. describes an encounter with a client at his office in the Portland Hotel, a residence and harm reduction facility in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. It is also an area widely referred to in Canadian newspapers as “Canada’s poorest postal code.” The client, who Mate refers to as “Cindy” (not her real name) is a young, Aboriginal woman of HIV positive status who had just arrived for an office visit. After their visit, Mate calls loudly across the room for the nurse to take a blood sample for Cindy’s HIV indices. Several clients were in the office at the time. Visibly distraught by this sudden public announcement of her HIV status, Cindy quickly reproached Mate quietly saying, “You shouldn’t say that so loud.” Mate, upon realizing what he had just done, apologized in shame. He writes,

Back in the “respectable” family practice I ran for twenty years before coming to work in the Downtown Eastside, it would have been unthinkable for me to commit such a callous breach of confidentiality, to injure someone’s dignity so brazenly. I closed the door and offered my regrets. “I was loud,” I agreed. “Very stupid of me” (p.49).

Mate is acutely aware of his mistake. He also acknowledges that it was an error of judgement that probably would not have occurred at his former, more “respectable,” family practice. As a member of the medical profession working with clients from one of the most stigmatized neighbourhoods in the country, Mate is familiar with how power imbalances work within society and realizes that while his physician status may generate respect, it can also provoke fear and mistrust, particularly with clients who
have been previously abused by people in positions of power. Realizing this, he is
aware that he needs to be conscious of how his feelings, assumptions, intentions and
biases might affect the lives of his patients. He recalls this experience in his book as a
reminder to both himself and others of how our perceptions and judgements can
influence upon people's lives in unforeseen ways.

Teachers, like doctors, have tremendous influence over the lives of those they
teach. While this may be overlooked, it is a privilege students do not have. The power
imbalance between teacher and student is invoked each time a teacher asks a
question, grades a paper, recommends an award or makes a placement decision.
Research has demonstrated that the decisions teachers make regarding the lives of
their students can influence them long after they walk out the classroom door (Smith,
Jussim & Eccles, 1999). Considering this, it is only fair that, as teachers, we do
whatever we can to help ensure that the decisions we make have been made with the
integrity they deserve. So precisely how is that integrity achieved in relation to teacher
decision making? Is it even possible to avoid unintended discrimination in the decisions
we make about students? I believe the answer is yes. To do that, a certain level of
awareness needs to be achieved and that requires both the willingness and effort of the
individual to make that change happen.

Greenwald and Banaji (1995) observe that in the past three decades, attempts to
eradicate discrimination in education, employment and various other institutions in the
public sector fall into one of three categories: blinding, affirmative action and
consciousness raising. The following is a summary of these three initiatives. Blinding
refers to the process in which the decision maker is literally denied access to any cues
that may potentially bias the decision being made. Blinding with reference to this study
would mean teachers would not have access to the names, or ESL/Aboriginal status of the students on the record cards as the assumption would be that these cues could potentially sway the judgement of the perceiver. The success of this method has been verified by researchers who found that by removing potentially stigmatizing attributes, they were able to effectively eliminate bias (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). Greenwald & Banaji (1995) observe that the difficulty with this method is that in most "real life" circumstances socially stigmatizing attributes tend to be correlated to other attributes that may not be so easily removed. Thus, while blinding may divert attention from more obvious stigmatizing features that could incite biased decisions, it will not be able to hide the advantages or disadvantages a person has accumulated over time. In relation to the classroom, it would be impossible to rely on the "blindness" method one hundred percent of the time simply because students are physically present, conveying information that, to the teacher, is potentially stigmatizing. While it may be relatively straightforward to cover students' names in the evaluations of papers and tests, sitting in the classroom the potentially stigmatizing attributes of students would be difficult hide.

The second strategy, affirmative action, refers to the process where a positive selection is, in part, based upon the attribute that would usually incite a discriminatory decision. Critics of affirmative action initiatives have sometimes dismissed this process as "reverse discrimination" since the decision is partly based on an aspect unrelated to what is being evaluated. However, since research on social cognition suggests that "unintended discrimination can be avoided only by deliberately applying compensatory strategies" (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, p.19), affirmative action strategies may be the most effective method to compensate for past, present and future discrimination (either overt or implicit) and thus should be viewed not as "reverse discrimination" but rather a
"reversal of discrimination" (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, p.19). Affirmative action in terms of education has had some success in ensuring that students who may not have had access to the same advantages as others are still provided with equal opportunities to attain awards and scholarships, participate in school events and activities and to gain acceptance into colleges and universities through "equal access" enrolment strategies. Despite this, teachers should be wary that they don't over-extend this kind of logic in terms of their placement decisions, as a student who is not academically suitable for an enriched classroom but is placed in one to serve an alternative agenda serves neither the student nor the agenda. Affirmative action when used correctly is a powerful and useful restorative measure that can assist in creating some semblance of balance in a society which tends to privilege certain individuals, values and belief systems over others. However, educators also need pre-emptive measures to combat racism and discrimination which, if employed correctly and overtime, may help to ensure that one day restorative measures are no longer necessary.

The final strategy, a process called "consciousness-raising," is the notion that "when a decision maker is aware of the source and nature of a bias in judgement, that bias may effectively be anticipated and avoided" (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, p.19). Devine (1989) suggests that the inhibition of stereotype-congruent or prejudice-like responses towards the decisions we make— is akin to breaking a bad habit. Referring to Ronis, Yates, and Kirscht’s (1989) "the dissociation model" on how to break bad habits, Devine suggests that in order to eliminate the habitual response of stereotypes, The individual must; (a) initially decide to stop the old behaviour, (b) remember the resolution, and (c) try repeatedly and decide repeatedly to eliminate the habit before the habit can be eliminated. In addition, the individual must develop a new cognitive
(attitudinal and belief) structure that is consistent with the newly determined pattern or responses (p.15). Thus, when confronted with stereotype trigger, the memory of stereotype or bias will not be erased nor will the decision-maker have very much (if any) control over their initial reaction. It may be however that their awareness of their biases or stereotypes combined with their desire to create a non-prejudiced response will enable them to think reflectively and make the conscious decision to avoid the stereotype and replace it with a new belief system. Devine (1989) points out that while adhering to this won’t rid the perceiver of either the stereotypes or their automatic reaction to them, they may equip the perceiver with the equivalent of an “on-site action team” ready to step in and eliminate the detrimental effects that stereotypes, when acted upon, can have. The mind still retains the memory of the stereotypes and biases, however the perceiver’s beliefs regarding the stereotyped group members have changed so that whenever the perceiver is confronted with a stereotype trigger, the perceiver is able to recognize it for what it is and then replace it with a new belief. This creates “activation by association” meaning that “each time the stereotype is activated the person must activate and think about his or her own personal beliefs” (p.16). Devine acknowledges that this is a change process that takes time, attention and effort. It also needs two other crucial ingredients; a) an awareness of the existence of a problem and b) a desire to do something about it.

5.13 Teachers: Internal personal growth and conflicting beliefs

All of the teachers I met had a desire to do well for their students. Even teachers who made overtly biased decisions about students did so with the best of intentions. But good intentions will not grant access into university (Pidgeon, M., 2008), whereas un-
biased decision-making may at least put them on the right track. Research has indicated that teachers will be unlikely to change their behaviour unless they recognize there is a certain need for behavioural change to be made (Moodley, 1999; Cabello & Burstein, 1995). The teachers in this study who later spoke about the importance of consciousness-raising played in informing their own practice were the same teachers who identified a pivotal moment(s) in their teaching career where they realized that "something was not working." Once alerted to the fact that something wasn’t working these teachers were more inclined to re-examine their belief systems and values. They were also more inclined to adapt different styles of teaching and experiment with how that might influence the dynamics of the classroom.

The subject of discrimination and racism in education is a sensitive one as the responses to my interview questions demonstrated. Many teachers who enter into the profession may do so because they envision themselves as being open minded individuals with a desire to educate youth. When these teachers’ sensibilities and beliefs are "challenged", as they may feel in some anti-racist and social justice programs, they may be inclined to retreat from or reject the ideas of the class altogether (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). One of the teachers interviewed, discussed a social justice class she attended. She personally felt she learned a great deal from the course however she also observed that it was like “preaching to the choir” because the teachers that seemed to gain the most from the class were the ones already open to the ideas promoted within it. Olivia recalls,

We had some very religious, wonderful, wonderful girls [in my cohort], and I’m sure they’re great teachers, but they were very religious. And the whole idea of dealing with, you know, heterosexism, homophobia, ah, gender issues, whatever, I think that made them uneasy and I don’t think they would have ever brought it up. So, you know what I mean? Even I remember when we talked about it, it was
kind of, "Um, when are we going to get out of here?" But that's good, you know, cuz that means that they're being exposed to things that they obviously have very strong ideas about, you know?

In their article, *Examining teachers' beliefs about teaching in culturally diverse classrooms*, Cabello and Burstein (1995) observed that teachers were likely to reject new information or training if it conflicted with their conceptual framework. The authors found that while many teachers' programs (and classrooms) often focus on trying to alter teachers' and students' belief systems, beliefs were more likely to change as a result of their personal experience. They found that teachers were more apt to change their attitudes and behavior if they had been given the opportunity to implement a procedure that they later found useful (p.286). The observations of Cabello and Burstein highlight the importance of experiential knowledge when addressing difference in the classroom. They state that "practical or clinical experience should be an integral part of each course to enable teachers to integrate knowledge and experience and reflect upon these experiences. Without this experience, students have little to reflect upon" (Cabello & Burstein, 1995, p.286). With experience, teachers are able to put their newly acquired knowledge into practice and see how it takes form. If a teacher can see through practice what techniques work with students, they will be more likely to modify their behavior in a manner that is most effective for their students.

This is not to say that social justice classes are not valuable. Social justice classes are valuable precisely because they provide teachers with an understanding and awareness of issues that potentially influence the lives and behavior of their students. This awareness may better enable teachers to both comprehend how varied their values and belief systems might be when compared to those held by their
students. They may also assist teachers in understanding the reasons for this variation. Finally, courses on social justice work towards demystifying the illusion that the school has ever been a neutral environment. They challenge teachers to become critical thinkers so that they can later challenge their students to do the same. And yet, if teachers are not taught to recognize how all of these things may directly influence their behavior and actions towards their students, social justice courses alone may not work.

Teachers who, for whatever reason, fundamentally do not believe there is a necessity for change may be unwilling to put this newly acquired knowledge into practice. Their discomfort with the information and ideas raised in classes dedicated to social justice ideals, may leave some teachers muttering, “When are we going to get out of here?” unless it can be demonstrated that the need for change is real. Studies such as this one provide teachers with direct insight into precisely how the stereotypes and biases we all hold directly influence both the way we interact and, possibly, the way in which we evaluate our students. Educators teaching social justice classes may wish to use studies such as this one to provide pre-service teachers with an example of how their values and belief systems may directly influence their students’ achievement in the classroom. Having this information may provide teachers with a greater incentive to want to learn more about their stereotypes and biases. In addition, Devine (1989) suggests that, in order to inhibit stereotype-congruent responses, perceivers “must not only inhibit automatically activated information but also intentionally replace such activation with non-prejudiced ideas and responses” (p.16). Recognizing this, teachers may be more inclined to realize the value of the information presented in classes related to social justice because they now understand the direct impact it will have on their practice.
While some teachers may not be immediately convinced of the value social justice courses may have upon one's teaching, more studies like this one may convince teachers of the practical benefit these courses and the theories behind them have particularly when applied to evaluations and assessment practices. Teachers who consistently apply both the macro-theories of critical race and whiteness with the micro-theories of attribution, stigma and stereotyping to their classroom practice and see for themselves the positive effect these theories can have over their student placement decisions, may be more convinced of the intrinsic value the combined theories have to offer since, as Kolb & Jussim (1994) remind us, even mildly disconfirming evidence may lead people to readjust their initial expectations.

5.14 D.A.R.E to respond: How teacher consciousness-raising is achieved

So what happens once a teacher is made aware of the influence their biases and stereotypes have upon the decisions and assessments they make of their students. Will this sudden realization create an automatic change in a teacher’s perceptions and behaviour? Not likely. Consciousness-raising does not occur just because one wills it. It’s a process that involves repeated time and effort. Even once teachers have acknowledged that they (like everyone in society) are susceptible to the influences of stereotypes and biases and that those stereotypes and biases could influence the judgements they make of their students, change will likely take time. As Devine (1989) reminds us, eliminating stereotype-congruent or prejudice-like responses is akin to breaking a bad habit. A four-step process which I have labelled D.A.R.E. (Develop awareness, Ask questions, access practice, Reflect and repeat and Expect and encourage) may serve as a reminder to both instructors of teacher educator programs,
and for the teachers themselves of the various steps they need to take in order to effectively eliminate the attitude and belief process that may negatively impede upon the success of certain students.

5.14.1 Step 1: Developing awareness

In step 1 you become aware of your belief systems and value judgments. You recognize your stereotypes for what they are. You understand that your values are exactly that...*your* values. They need not be fundamental to anyone else. Psychologist and memory research Daniel Schacter (1996) claims that “if we are unaware that something is influencing our behaviour there is little we can do to understand or counteract it” (p.190). If teachers remain unaware of how their values, biases and past experiences inform and influence their decisions and behaviour towards their students, they may be more likely to discriminate against them regardless of their intention. Good and Nichols (2001) assert that “all teachers should be provided with a solid background in expectancy theory so that they realize that expectancies can be too high or too low and become aware of the many ways that teachers can provide positive or negative feedback” (p.122). Teachers need to be acutely aware of the influence low expectations can have upon a student. They also need to be informed about how these low expectations may be subconsciously communicated to the student through their behaviour. Teachers (both practicing and pre-service) should have access to reading materials on the subject of expectations, stereotypes and attribution as well as up to date reports informing them recent findings in these areas. The results of these findings may help encourage teachers to appreciate the need for change and the desire to take action towards it. Following this, teachers must be given the opportunity to identify their
values, biases and past experiences and assess the role they play in their perceptions of and behaviour towards their students. Veronique, the one teacher who accurately placed all 24 student record cards acknowledges how a program designed to encourage students to critically self-reflect informed her thinking about both her values and biases and the ways in which they might manifest in her own teaching practise. She remarks:

It's interesting because in that program what we did was really mainly focus on doing introspection and really going to the core of our beliefs and seeing how, you know, obviously we all have like, judgments and, like, stereotypes and, were never neutral even though we like to say that we are, right? I think it's the worst thing you can do is say you're neutral. Well, you're not! [Laughs] [...] You have all these values and you have to be aware of them so that you can understand better. So, I think what they [the instructors for the course] did was really focus on making us, like, find out our values, find out our beliefs, why we have them, where do they come from, and then challenge these and open them up and put us into situations where we were confronted with, um, different, like, conflicts between just cultural miscommunication, put us like a lot into, ah, into that place and read a lot of case studies of kids that could just be high achievers but were doing lower because of their cultural background and how it was not addressed in the class and about being consistent. So, I think that made a really big difference.

It's important to recognize that while this process was a positive one for Veronique, not all teachers will feel the same way which is why instructors of teacher education programs also need to be mindful of how they approach their teachers in the classroom. Since teachers may be predisposed to regard students through their cultural or racial lens, teacher education programs must give teachers the opportunity to recognize their cultural or racialized status and the ways in which this too might influence their expectations of students (Cabello & Burstein, 1995). This demanding process calls teachers to re-examine their notion of self and the various personas the self has constructed in order to validate their position as teacher. For some teachers attempting to disrupt values and beliefs held for a lifetime may be difficult. Many teachers will be
unfamiliar with discourses surrounding ideas of racialization and power relations and so their initial response towards such concepts may be resistance, surprise or an unwillingness to recognize there may be a problem. Schick (2000a, 2000b) found that some White teachers put up strong resistance when they had to reconsider the influence of their racialized status upon students. Lipsitz (1995) describes this resistance as the "possessive investment in whiteness," a resistance made possible by a sense of entitlement that is reaffirmed daily by the norms of a dominant society. Some White teachers may also be afraid to let go of pre-conceived notions of what being a teacher means. Schick & St. Denis (2005) explain that national discourses have long promoted and congratulated White teachers as the "helper to the less fortunate" without considering the role white privilege plays in the construction of this identity (p.312). Because of this, some White teachers may not always "be comfortable with the transition from their dominant status" (Banks, 1996, p.323), nor may they feel comfortable with the guilt or frustration that comes with the awareness that their perceptions and behaviour could be partly responsible for inhibiting the success of some of their students.

Racialized teachers are also not immune to the various difficulties that may stem from the growing sense of awareness of one's stereotypes and biases. Racialized teachers could experience shock, guilt or disappointment that comes out of the discovery that the very same stereotypes and biases which has suppressed their own or other minority groups has managed to "infiltrate" their implicit consciousness (Delpit, 1995). The process of self-awareness may also be made increasingly difficult for racialized teachers, if while trying to come to terms with the awareness and understanding of their stereotypes and biases, are simultaneously called upon as
"native informants" to help educate and assist with the self-realization process of their White peers (hooks, 1994, p.43). What teacher education instructors and teachers themselves need to understand is that the process of awareness, while important, needs to go beyond the recognition and understanding of one’s stereotypes and biases and must also include the recognition of the various pressure and barriers faced by both students and colleagues.

The call for self-awareness and a reconsideration of a role that some teachers may have previously taken for granted may not be as straight-forward as it seems. While some teachers may embrace the challenges that arise with increased self-awareness, others will remain resistant. Motivations behind this resistance will be varied and while it may be possible to attribute some of those responses to shared group experience, ultimately teacher’s resistance will stem from reasons as complicated and complex as the individual themselves. Studies such as this are useful in that they provide all teachers with evidence of how their subconscious biases may influence the decisions and assessments they make of their students. If teachers can; a) see that there is a problem and, b) be convinced that they can actively do something about the problem, they may be less inclined to feel targeted or victimized by such courses and more inclined to regard them as yet another useful tool to enhance their educational practice.

5.14.2 Step 2: Ask questions, access practice

In step 2, you might question your resistance to such awareness. You question how your values may influence your practice and you encourage others to do the same. Schick and St. Denis (2005) suggest that one constructive way White teachers might be
better able to come to terms with personal resistance against a greater self awareness is to ask themselves the question, "What am I afraid to know?" (p.31). I would argue that such a question is useful for all teachers, regardless of background, to employ as a method since it enables both reflection and response to the various reasons behind their resistance, allowing realization to come about gradually and through their volition. Instructors of teacher education programs can encourage pre-service teachers to question themselves and each other about what kinds of values they hold and how this might influence their behaviour in the classroom. Practising teachers can reflect upon their past experiences and try to identify specific moments in the classroom where their values and stereotypes may have negatively affected their classroom practice.

Teachers should also be encouraged to extend their questions outwards on to others including colleagues, parents of students and even the students themselves. For example, teachers learn from experience but they can also learn through the experience of others. By providing forums, workshops and community websites made specifically by and for teachers, teachers and pre-service teachers will have the opportunity to share and discuss what methods have worked (and not worked) in the classroom and why. Personal experience, new found studies and informative workshops that discuss the influence teachers' expectations have upon student achievement can be relayed and debated in a safe space where teachers can speak openly about their questions and concerns on the topic. Good & Nichols (2001) note that after having attended the first graduation class of the "Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement program" in Los Angeles, teachers reported that what they had found most useful about the program was having the opportunity "to see other teachers teaching 'low-achieving' students" (p.123). Teachers reported that having the opportunity to review teachers
obtaining higher-quality responses from students originally perceived as low-achievers reaffirmed their commitment. Because of this response, Goods and Nichols suggest that "any intervention program should include many videotapes of successful performance in many classrooms as well as the chance for teachers to visit and be visited by other teachers" (p.123). Encouraging teachers to ask each other questions about what has worked and has not worked in the classroom enables teachers to reconsider their practice and respond to how well they are achieving their objectives since asking questions demands and inspires consistent re-evaluation. The feedback provided to teachers by other educators and colleagues combined with personal reflections on daily routines discourage teachers from becoming too dependent upon old techniques or biases. This evaluation process also gives teachers the freedom to voice concerns regarding pedagogical work by enabling them to articulate to other teachers what they feels works well and what could be improved upon. By making teachers more active participants in the process of identifying solutions to address problems within the school, teachers are more apt to take an interest in the various policies and procedures introduced into the educational system and are less likely to view new strategies as a challenge to their competence as teachers (Bagley, 1992).

Teachers should also be encouraged to ask questions of others (and to encourage others to ask questions themselves). Good and Nichols (2001) suggest that "parents should receive training about the communication of low expectations as early as the spring before their child enters first grade" (p.124). These researchers also suggest that "parents should be encouraged to ask teachers about academic performance and conduct and they should have regular meetings with the teacher and stay abreast of work that is assigned in school" (p.124). While this may work in theory,
for reasons previously touched upon in this chapter, it may not necessarily work in practise. Despite this, teachers do not need to be inhibited from trying to extend and encourage communication from the parents of all of their students. Since letters to parents should ideally be written in the language most accessible to the parent, school administrators might consider investing in the employment of accredited translators. Alternatively, teachers or employees on staff capable of speaking multiple languages and who are willing to translate could receive extra incentive for their efforts in terms of income and/or time so as to ensure they are not overextended in terms of workload. Online forums for parent/teacher discussion could be set up. Forums could provide parents with access to reading material on the subject of expectations.

Teachers could also use such forums to articulate the expectations they have of students in the classroom. These outlines could consist of both academic expectations as well as social expectations for classroom behaviour. This way both parents and teachers are aware of what is being assessed and why. It may also give parents and teachers the opportunity to iron out any inconsistencies. Teachers may also consider asking parents specifically about the expectations they have for their children as well as enabling parents to voice their expectations for the teacher. Teachers should still keep in mind that even with comprehensive measures such as these, parents may still be unable to get fully involved or they may simply choose not to. Either way, teachers will need to respect parents’ decisions and ensure that their involvement (or lack of involvement) does not impede upon the performance of the student.

While teachers should be encouraged to ask questions, it should not be the sole responsibility of the teacher to ensure all things happen. Community leaders and policy makers should work together with teachers to find out what strategies will work best in
what classrooms at what schools. Teachers should also be provided with the time and opportunity necessary to access and re-access their practice. Expectations for academic success and resources dedicated towards achieving it should be clearly laid out. Finally, teachers should feel secure that they have adequate access to the skills and resources needed to fulfill those expectations.

5.14.3 Step 3: Remember, reflect and repeat (and repeat and repeat)

Step 3 is a three step process where you remember your stereotypes and values and label them for what they are as they occur. You reflect upon them and recognize the change you wish to take place and then act upon that change. You go through this process again, and again, and again. Devine (1989) observes that in order to ensure that change concerning one's beliefs or behaviour towards stereotyped group members is successful, “each time the stereotype structure is activated the person must activate and think about his or her personal beliefs.” As a teacher works towards changing their actions and behaviour towards stereotyped students “the new pattern of ideas and behaviours must be consciously activated as the basis for responses or the individual is likely to fall into old habits” (p.16). Each time teachers ask themselves questions like; a) “What do I associate with this particular group of students and why?”; b) “How do my values affect the perceptions I have of this student’s behaviour”and, c) “How is the behaviour I exhibit towards this student reflective of my perceptions?” The teacher becomes cognisant of how their belief systems may affect the assessments they make of their students.

Devine (1989) explains that this repetitive process of reflecting upon one’s beliefs is pivotal “to the extent that the personal belief structure becomes increasingly
accessible, it will better provide a rival response to the responses that would likely follow from automatic stereotype activation" (Devine, 1989, p.16). Teachers need to not only remember their resolve to decrease stereotype-congruent responses but teachers also must do so over and over again in practice.

While a teacher's initial stereotyped belief regarding the student may not change automatically as a result of step 3, their behaviour towards the student will. Students who were previously assessed negatively due to teacher's misperceptions will now be assessed accurately according to ability. Students who responded towards the lowered expectations of the teacher or to "stereotype threat" will begin to thrive as they respond to the teacher's positive behaviour towards them. Teachers who may not initially be convinced that their stereotype-congruent perceptions or behaviour towards students had any influence over student's behaviour or test results, may be surprised over how the simple act of reflection and repetitive response may be enough to facilitate increasingly successful students. If teachers begin to see the influence this small change has over the performance of their students, the teacher may be more inclined to change their initial stereotype-congruent belief about them.

5.14.4 Step 4: Encourage, expect and engage

In step 4 educators encourage students to excel, expect them to achieve and engage all learners through a willingness to experiment with various teaching methods and techniques. Steps 3 and 4 can be applied congruently.

Some researchers have claimed that teacher efficacy can also have an influence upon the way teachers behave towards students (Bandura, 1982; Chester & Beaudin, 1996; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Phillips, 1994). Teachers described as having a high level of
efficacy are teachers who believe they have some control or influence over the success of their students. These teachers are also described as having a more internally located "locus of control" meaning they tend to be more willing than their lower-efficacy colleagues to attribute the success or failure of their students towards their teaching performance (Ross, Cousins, & Gadella, 1996). Teachers who take more personal responsibility for the success or failure of their students may be more inclined to make greater effort to ensure the success of students than teachers who tend to attribute it to the ability or effort of students alone. This could explain why some studies have found that high-efficacy teachers express more confidence in their ability to teach unmotivated students because these teachers believe they have more control in determining that success (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

In a study examining teacher attributions of student failure, Georgiou, Christou, Strvrindes and Panaoura (2002) found no significant relation between efficacy and attribution factors, however their findings did reveal that "high level of teacher efficacy are positively associated with acceptance towards the child and perseverance in their efforts to help the student improve" (p.593). These researchers also found that "high levels of efficacy are negatively related to the exhibition of anger" (p.593). The findings of this study suggest that high-efficacy teachers who are more willing to take responsibility for a student’s success or failure in the classroom and more likely to regard a student’s low achievement as a challenge rather than a disappointment may be more inclined to place higher expectations on their students. Since high expectancy for students is often equated with high performance outcomes (Brophy & Good, 1974; Clifton et al., 1986; Jussim, 1989; Rosenthal, 1968), teachers with a higher-efficacy level may be more likely than their lower-efficacy colleagues to inspire high performance.
from students.

A teacher may be more inclined to have “higher-efficacy” if the teacher believes they actually have the ability to inspire students to perform. A teacher who does not believe any amount of effort made towards a student will influence that student to achieve is unlikely to place a great amount of effort towards that student’s learning process. However, if teachers can be convinced through studies such as this that they do have the ability to incite higher performance levels in students they may be more likely to work towards doing so. If a teacher can be convinced of the workability of the former three steps when applied to their practise, a teacher may be more encouraged to encourage students to achieve and expect high results in return.

Teachers also need to be aware of how their values and belief systems shape their teaching methods and styles. Teachers then need to reflect upon whether these methods best suit the varied needs of the students in the classroom or are more reflective of their personal beliefs and ways of knowing. Teachers should be encouraged to vary their methods of teaching not just specifically for one particular group of students, but rather to engage in a variety of approaches to learning that will speak to the varying needs of all students.

5.15 Conclusion

The reform of Canadian education to better suit the needs of Aboriginal students, and indeed all students regardless of background, requires all of us as educators to be willing to explore how our values and biases may influence decisions that will ultimately affect the lives of the students we teach. As educators we are called to strip away our armour in order to make ourselves vulnerable to the various challenges that may come
with this process. We will require the compilation of strength and humility to comprehend what we may wish to know (and not know) about ourselves and the way this may influence the interactions we have with our learners. It will also mean a commitment to practice which involves opening up to the possibility of failure, yet having the courage to try again... *and again and again*... until perhaps this time, we get it right.

The future of *all* our students depends on it.
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Appendix A: Call for participation

Call for Participation of Pre-Service Teachers in a “Teacher Decision-making Study”

Investigator:
Tasha Riley, PhD Candidate
Educational Studies: Sociology of Education
The University of British Columbia

The following research is for the completion of the candidate’s graduate degree and will be included as part of her thesis. The thesis will be a public document.

Dear Teacher,

My name is Tasha Riley and I am a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia in the Department of Educational Studies. This letter is an invitation to grades six to eight teachers currently employed at public schools in the Vancouver school district. I am asking in-service teachers to participate in a study to understand the decisions teachers make about the assignment of educational opportunities to students.

Your participation in this project will provide information that is of both practical and theoretical significance. The input you provide will be invaluable towards the improvement of existing educational programs and workshops designed for both pre-service and in-service teachers.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be invited to take part in a one hour interview process at a time of your convenience. You will be asked to (a) review permanent student records, (b) consider the criteria for program options, and (c) recommend the program you believe is best suited to the student whose record you have reviewed on the basis of the criteria set out for each program. During the process you will be encouraged to discuss your personal rational behind the decisions you make for each student. You will also be invited to provide some information regarding your teaching experience and your opinions on various educational issues.

Your recommendations about each student will be recorded for later analysis. Please note that your name, address and the school of which you work will remain strictly confidential and will not be included in the study. This procedure guarantees the confidentiality of your identity. A thesis summarizing the findings will be presented to the BC Teachers Foundation and the results will be presented in a manner that will prevent the identification of individual participants. If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Sincerely,

Tasha Riley
Department of Educational Studies
University of British Columbia
Appendix B: Teacher decision-making study consent form

Teacher Decision-Making
Study Consent Form

Purpose: The following questions are part of a research project on teacher decision making in Vancouver, British Columbia. The results of the interview will be published in academic journals and as a doctoral thesis. Tick here if you would like to receive copies of these publications.

Study Purpose: The purpose of this study is to understand the decisions teachers make about the assignment of educational opportunities to students.

Study Procedures:
If you volunteer to participate in the study, you will be asked to (a) review permanent student records, (b) consider the criteria for program options, and (c) recommend the program you believe is best suited to the student whose record you have reviewed on the basis of the criteria provided for each program. (d) Respond to questions regarding teaching decision making issues and your own teaching experience. The process should take less than 2 hours. Your recommendations about each student will be recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Instructions: Confidentiality:
All documents and data files regarding this interview will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. No personal identification will be linked to your recommendations or observations.

Renumeration/Compensation:
Those who volunteer are eligible for a gift certificate in the amount of $20.00 for teacher supplies which you will receive prior to the commencement of the interview.

Contact for Information about the study:
If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Tasha Riley at xxx-xxx-xxxx or at the above e-mail address.

Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:
If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598.

Consent:
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.
Appendix C: Interview procedures

Follow up questions:

Note: All questions were asked upon completion of the task. The following script acted as a general guideline and may not have been repeated verbatim at the time of the interview.

1. Do you think that achievement expectations should be modified if a student is Aboriginal? Why or why not?

2. Do you think that achievement expectations should be modified if a student is ESL? Why or why not?

3. To what extent might background factors influence achievement or do they influence them at all? If you think background factors do influence achievement, please describe what these background factors are?

4. To what extent might gender influence achievement? Why or why not?

5. Reveal the following to the teacher:

This study is based off of a previous study I conducted regarding teacher decision-making and teachers' expectations regarding Aboriginal students. In that study I found that 11 out of 50 pre-service teachers rated students they were led to believe were Aboriginal or ESL students as lower than their non-Aboriginal counterparts regardless of the students' prior academic record. In your opinion, why do you think this might be?

In this study, I am looking into the reasons teachers give for their student placement decisions regarding certain groups of students. Do you have any comments or reflections about your own student placement decisions?

Note: If decision reflects obvious bias might want to add, “I noticed when making decisions you placed this student in this folder. What was your reasoning behind this?”

6. Do you have any further questions or comments that you would like to add?

Thank you for your participation. Your time is greatly appreciated.
I will be sending you a transcript to review and keep for your records shortly.
Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you have any further, questions, comments or concerns.
Appendix D: Study instructions for teachers

TEACHER DECISION-MAKING STUDY

The purpose of the study is to understand the kinds of decisions that teachers make about the programs to which students should be assigned when they make the transition from elementary to secondary (high) school. Each of the following 24 cards contains the record of a student who has completed grade seven.

Please review each student’s record carefully. When you have reviewed the records, you will be asked to make a recommendation to the secondary school that the student will attend. You can make one of three recommendations:

You can recommend that students whose prior academic performance is very strong be considered for the Rapid Advance program, a program that enables the student to complete five years of secondary school in four years by replacing some elective courses with more advanced academic work.

You can recommend that students receive Supplementary Learning Assistance, if in your view their prior academic performance indicates that they would benefit from such assistance. Normally, Supplementary Learning Assistance is offered in place of a grade eight elective for those students who are likely to benefit from the study skills help and learning assistance.

After reviewing the student’s record you may recommend that he or she be registered in the Regular Grade Eight Program of study. The Regular Grade Eight Program of study is very similar to the program offered in the majority of BC’s secondary schools. It includes English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Physical Education, Explorations (10 weeks each of Music, Art, Technology Studies, and Home Economics).

After reviewing the records, you will be asked some information regarding yourself and your views regarding teacher-decision making issues.

When you are ready, please inform the interviewer. Thank you for your participation in this study.
**Appendix E: Student record card: Female, Aboriginal (Low-range)**

![Permanent Record - Intermediate Grades](image)

- **Student Name:** Skwistwugh (Family Name) Minnie (Given Name) (Middle Name)
- **Date of Birth (mm/dd/yyyy):** 11/04/1990
- **Gender:** Female

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<td><strong>Language Arts</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mathematics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Science</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Studies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Music</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Art</strong></td>
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Intermediate achievement:
A = Excellent; B = Above Average; C = Average; D = Below Average; U = Unsatisfactory

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 bs55
Appendix F: Student record: Female, ESL (Low range)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Permanent Record – Intermediate Grades</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Name:</strong> Aziz Sharmeen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date of Birth:</strong> 11/28/1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female:</strong> X</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Funding Year</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
<th>Grade 6</th>
<th>Grade 7</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English as Second Language</td>
<td>2001 2002 2003 2004</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
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<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Record</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
<th>Grade 6</th>
<th>Grade 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>B-</td>
<td>B+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
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<td>C+</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>C+</td>
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<td>Science</td>
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<td>C+</td>
<td>C+</td>
<td>B-</td>
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<td>B-</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>B-</td>
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<td>Music</td>
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<td>B+</td>
<td>B+</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B+</td>
<td>B+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intermediate achievement:
A = Excellent; B = Above Average; C = Average; D = Below Average; U = Unsatisfactory
Appendix G: Student record card: Female, non-Aboriginal, non-ESL (Low range)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Permanent Record - Intermediate Grades</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Name:</strong> Spencer Tracey Elizabeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Family Name) (Given Name) (Middle Name)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date of Birth (mm/dd/yyyy):</strong> 02/28/1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male:</strong> Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Funding Year</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English as Second Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Record</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Intermediate achievement:**
A = Excellent; B = Above Average; C = Average; D = Below Average; U = Unsatisfactory