(E)MERGING PEDAGOGIES:
EXPLORING THE INTEGRATION OF TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL AND
CONTEMPORARY EURO-CANADIAN TEACHING PRACTICES

by

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**Abstract**

It has been argued that contemporary Euro-Canadian teaching practices conflict with traditional Aboriginal teaching practices resulting in the current widespread lack of academic achievement for many Aboriginal students. Of particular concern is the area of print literacy, as achievement in this area has been linked to academic success. This is an area where Aboriginal students in British Columbia score well below their non-Aboriginal counterparts on tests such as the Foundation Skills Assessment. By reviewing traditional Aboriginal ways of transmitting knowledge, it is possible to understand the reason why contemporary Euro-Canadian teaching practices may be inappropriate for Aboriginal students.

Drawing on Delpit's 'codes of power' and educational interpretations of Bakhtin's literary theory, I explore the notion that it is possible for Aboriginal students to be academically successful within the Euro-Canadian system while retaining their traditional Aboriginal identity and ways of knowing. Findings from this exploratory case study, which occurred at a secondary school in a remote Aboriginal community in northern British Columbia, are shared. Interviews with six Aboriginal adolescent students and three non-Aboriginal teachers, as well as personal reflections are also considered.

By reexamining the assumptions and beliefs about contemporary Euro-Canadian teaching practices and seeking to learn more about traditional Aboriginal teaching practices, it is anticipated that educators can integrate the strengths of both approaches into their teaching. It is believed that this will enhance success for Aboriginal students in both Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian contexts.

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## Acknowledgements

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…daguu sǥanga waa who endlessly supported me, listened to every one of my ideas, and

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How'aa

**CHAPTER I   Introduction**

*My mother named me*
*Sara Florence Davidson*
*because she wanted me to have*
*a beautiful name.*

*Sara,*
*without an 'h'*
*to avoid any letters*
*that did not serve a purpose.*

*Florence,*
*after my father's naanii[1],*
*whom she wished to honour*
*and who told her*
*long before I was born*
*that I*
*would be a girl*
*and I would work*
*very hard.*

*Davidson,*
*because it is my father's name,*
*one which was given to his ancestors*
*by missionaries.*

*My naanii named me skil jadee*
*(spirit wealth woman)*
*and sgaan jaadgu saandlaans*
*(killer whale woman of the dawn).*

*Today, I would like to speak to you about education.*
*I am comfortable speaking to you*
*because I know that you understand*
*that when I share my words with you,*
*I am sharing my truth.*

*I know you understand*
*I am not speaking*
*for anyone else.*

*I also know*
*I have no control*
*over what you take from these words.*
*Your interpretation is your own.*

I do not know exactly when my journey toward this research began; I only know that my travels have been circular. The destination was never a place, rather a level of understanding; one that I now know can never truly be achieved. It is with this acceptance of the incomplete, that I am willing to share with you what I have learned so far on this research journey and my perspectives on my findings at this moment. I am qualifying my words with the recognition that they may only apply to the present moment because even as I write them, I am aware that my knowledge is continuing to expand, and my beliefs are continuing to transform.

I will begin my description of this particular journey with August 1999, when I returned to my father's home community to explore teaching as a profession because it will provide a bit of the background information to assist in the explanation of how I ended up here. I am somewhat ashamed to say that I chose my father's community, not out of a noble commitment to my people, but because the school district there was willing to hire substitute teachers with no formal teaching experience[2]. As I was very interested in becoming a teacher, I thought this would provide me with an excellent opportunity to explore the profession.

It was my first real experience with schooling in an Aboriginal community. As I had been raised in the Lower Mainland, there were very few Aboriginal students[3] in the schools I had attended as a child. I immediately detected differences, however I was unsure whether they could be attributed to the fact that schools had changed over the years since I had been a student, or whether schools in Aboriginal communities were actually different.

My first indication that there may be challenges for Aboriginal students within the mainstream school system was the division of students in the adapted/modified classes[4] and the non-adapted/modified classes. I noticed that the adapted/modified classes consisted almost entirely of Aboriginal students. At the time, I did not give this much thought, however I was aware of the differences between the classes.

Initially I had traveled to the community to be a substitute teacher, but because of the shortage of education professionals within the community, I was quickly hired to be a special education assistant. During this time, I was often placed in the adapted/modified classes to assist the teachers in various capacities. At this time I began to recognize that the needs of the students in these classes were very different from those in the non-adapted/modified classes.

I soon decided that I wanted to become a teacher, and so I left the community to return to university to acquire my teaching credentials. Because of my experiences in the community, I had very specific questions about how to better support students of Aboriginal ancestry. It was during this time that I became aware of the numerous statistics which indicated that Aboriginal students were not faring well in the mainstream education system. As the 2006/2007 British Columbia Foundation Skills Assessment for grade seven students indicated, only 52% of Aboriginal students met or exceeded expectations in reading and 79% met or exceeded expectations in writing compared to 73% and 91% of non-Aboriginal students respectively (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2007). Frequently these statistics were presented without context, so that educators unfamiliar with the challenges faced by Aboriginal students were left to assume that the problem was with the Aboriginal students.

When I returned to the community to teach, I became determined to provide education for Aboriginal students which would allow them to compete in other larger communities, where Aboriginal students were a minority. I employed what could be considered Euro-Canadian teaching practices, in the hopes of changing the results of tests such as the Foundation Skills Assessment for my Aboriginal students.

For the most part, I remained unsuccessful, which led me to question what barriers existed for Aboriginal student success. I began to examine the role of literacy and quickly became convinced that success in literacy would translate as academic success for Aboriginal

students (never questioning whether this "solution" was perhaps overly simplistic). As a result, I began to focus my teaching on ways to enhance literacy learning for my students.

My interest in literacy led me to return to university to study literacy education as part of a diploma program. I wanted to learn how to support students to be successful literacy learners. At the time, my focus was upon all learners. I remember during one of my courses, an Aboriginal scholar came to speak about his work with Aboriginal people. He made the point that all Aboriginal university students inevitably ended up focusing their work upon Aboriginal people. I raised my hand to contradict his claim, stating that I was an exception. He smiled at me, and told me to wait and see.

I did not change my mind immediately; it wasn't until I saw the graduation rates for Aboriginal students. In 2006/2007 the Aboriginal six-year Dogwood completion rate was 49%, while the completion rate for their non-Aboriginal counterparts was 83% (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2007). I couldn't breathe. How did this happen? Perhaps more importantly, how could I continue to ignore the needs of Aboriginal students?

Because I still believed that literacy was only the answer, I enrolled in a Master's program with a focus upon literacy education. When it came time to conduct my research, I knew that I would be returning once again to the community. I wanted to investigate the role of literacy in a way that I did not have time for as a teacher. I had so many questions that I wanted to ask, but finally after much reading and thinking and talking with the school district, I narrowed them down to three:

- What level of importance do these students place upon being print literate?
- What are these students' perceptions of the relationship (and relative importance of) home print literacies and school print literacies?

- Which print literacy instructional practices do these students consider most effective and/or engaging?

I believed that the answers to these questions would help me to better understand how to support Aboriginal students and to improve their achievement (by my standards), but I found in the initial stages of the research, that my findings lacked meaning and depth. Perhaps because I was a former teacher asking students about their thoughts on reading and writing, the students' answers reflected what they thought *should* be true, rather than what was true for them. I ended up feeling that my research was scratching a superficial surface, but was leaving no mark.

I did notice, however, that there did not seem to be a distinction between literacy and schooling for these students. That the kind of literacy we were discussing only seemed to occur for Aboriginal students within the context of school; that is, the students seemed to believe that being successful with print literacy would predominantly benefit them by promoting further success in school. As a result, when we were discussing effective literacy education, we were really talking about effective schooling. This led me back to wondering why the school system continued to fail to meet the needs of this particular group of students.

In an attempt to determine an answer, I reviewed the literature on Aboriginal educational practices. Many of them argued for the inclusion of Aboriginal content and ways of knowing (e.g., Smith, 2000; Swanson, 2003), but I was not convinced this was the answer. What about the world that these students had to live in after school? Would we be able to transform that world in the same way that they wanted to transform the schools? Perhaps, in time. But what about the students who were in school right now? I believed that the answer lay in the ability of educators to integrate the strengths of Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian pedagogies to create a new kind of contemporary pedagogy. At the time, however, I had no idea how that might be achieved.

I returned once again to the literature, and I began to notice themes in the traditional Aboriginal educational practices. I began to cluster the ways of learning according to these themes. Learning is holistic. Learning is relationship-based. Learning is contextual. Learning is practical. Learning is continuous. I discussed them with my father, who was from the community and had studied early anthropological descriptions of the Haida, and he agreed that they were reasonable themes for traditional Aboriginal teaching practices. I began to consider how these themes were often violated by contemporary teaching practices and how they could be used as a framework for integrating traditional Aboriginal teaching practices with contemporary Euro-Canadian teaching practices. What was of particular interest to me was the fact that this framework did not rely on incorporating large amounts of Aboriginal content, that non-Aboriginal educators might be uncomfortable teaching, while still honouring Aboriginal ways of knowing.

The journey to identity was much longer and more complex. It began with the struggle to accept my own identity as a woman of mixed ancestry. In university, I took a class on the role of gender in education, and while I was writing a paper for the course, I realized that I was unable to separate my identity as a woman from my identity as being of mixed ancestry. My mixed Aboriginal identity dominated all of my other identities. I knew that I was not unique in my challenges as I had witnessed the role that the physical markers of identity and ancestry had played within this community.

During the initial conversations about this study, identity was always present, however it was somewhat elusive. I did not know how to go about studying identity or even what questions I could ask about identity that would be both meaningful and informative. Instead, it was decided that I would accept that identity would be present in the study regardless of how I proceeded, and I would address it as it emerged. This decision lead me to the work of Restoule (2000) and from

there, the work of Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) and Bakhtin were also recommended to me.

Initially the thought of reading primary sources of Bakhtin overwhelmed me, so I began with Shields' (2007) primer, which specifically examined the relationships between Bakhtin's theories and education. From there I was better able to think about my own study within the context of Bakhtin's literary theories and the potential to use Bakhtin's work in an Aboriginal educational context.

Near the end of my research, I realized that the questions I found meaningful were very different from those with which I began. They focused more upon education than on literacy specifically. They sprung from the realization that print literacy was the same as school literacy for the Aboriginal students in this study. As such, print literacy could not really be examined outside of the context of school.

- Because of the tremendous impact that my Aboriginal ancestry had upon my life, as both a student and a teacher, I wanted to know how ancestry could influence the experiences of non-Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal students in the context of education and schooling.

- Because of my desire to understand the role of traditional Aboriginal teaching practices in contemporary schooling, I wanted to know how understandings of traditional Aboriginal teaching practices could assist in the critique of contemporary educational practices.

- Because of my experiences of existing between two distinct ways of being, that of the Aboriginal and that of the Euro-Canadian, I wanted to know how traditional Aboriginal teaching practices could be integrated with contemporary teaching practices to better meet the educational needs of non-Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal students and how these strategies could be applied to improve print literacy instructional practices.

Although these questions did not guide my research from the beginning, they have guided my theoretical thinking about this study, my reflections on my role as a researcher, and the choices I have had to make in writing about this experience.

*I often struggled with how to tell the truth, but also provide enough of a context that readers would not assume the obvious; rather they would consider the potential role of the context. One of my critiques of some research is that Aboriginal achievement data are presented alongside non-Aboriginal achievement data, and the reader can be left to wrongly assume that a deficit occurs on the part of the Aboriginal students. I do not want my writing to be used as a weapon, and so I struggled to find the words and the context, so that they can potentially be used as a tool.*

In writing this thesis, I attempted to recreate my research journey, while also remaining within the confines of a traditional thesis (Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2007). In Chapter II: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Education and Schooling, I shared my findings from the readings on traditional Aboriginal teaching practices and contrasted these with the practices used at the residential school as well as those used in mainstream schools today. In Chapter III: Methodology, I outlined the research methods I used to gather the data for this study. In Chapter IV: Perspectives on Identity, I discussed some of the research that I used to think about identity and the role that it played in this study. I also shared the findings surrounding identity, specifically ancestry, that I believed were relevant to my thinking about identity. In Chapter V: Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives with Contemporary Educational Practices, I explored the possibilities for integrating the two educational practices to meet the needs of Aboriginal students. In addition, I shared my thoughts on how this could be achieved with literacy instruction. I also included findings from the study throughout the chapters to support the ideas being discussed.

I wish to recognize that although this community is predominantly Aboriginal, there are many non-Aboriginal students who also reside here. I believe that they too will benefit from what has emerged from this study. I have chosen to focus upon Aboriginal students because, right now, they are the ones whose needs are not being met by contemporary educational practices.

The term Aboriginal is broad and general, and every human is unique, and I recognize that my words will not be true for every Aboriginal student. I also recognize that my words may be true for those who are not Aboriginal.

*I am offering these ideas as a place to start,*
*for if we all remained silent,*
*everything would remain the same.*

*I always believed*
*my shame*
*about being Aboriginal*
*arose from the fact*

*that my entire life*
*has been spent*
*bombarded*
*with the negative stereotypes*

*I always believed*
*if I could hide my Aboriginal ancestry*

*I would be more successful in my life*

*I always believed*
*that I could use my education*
*to make people forget*

*I am Aboriginal.*

*Now I wonder,*
*if it was my education*
*that taught me to despise*
*that part of myself.*

**CHAPTER II   Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Education and Schooling**

*Traditional Educational Practices*

Education did not commence at contact. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, Aboriginal people in Canada had their own ways of passing on knowledge from one generation to the next (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003). Practices such as oral story-telling, apprenticeships, and ceremonies were used to help to prepare the future generations to survive and to know their history (Haig-Brown, 1988; Hampton, 1995).

There are clear distinctions between these traditional[5] Aboriginal teaching practices and those used at residential schools and today in mainstream schools. Traditionally, Aboriginal teaching "was based on experiential, informal learning that was integrated with life and was not based on notions of competition for marks or grades or on attaining specified levels of achievement" (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 39). Specifically, traditional Aboriginal educational practices relied upon learning that was holistic, relationship-based and collaborative, contextualized, practical, and continuous.

### *Learning is Holistic.*

Traditionally, spirituality permeated every aspect of Aboriginal life (Nichol and Robinson, 2000). That is to say, there was a spiritual component to every daily activity; for example, part of learning how to fish was to learn all of the spiritual protocols associated with harvesting, eating, and disposing of the fish. Furthermore, learning could occur in any environment, with everything having the capacity to be a teacher. As Twyla Hurd Nitsch, a Seneca Elder explained,

> everything we look at is teaching a lesson; a tree is teaching a lesson; grass is teaching a lesson, everything is teaching a lesson. We need to recognize that we are able to grasp that lesson if it is brought to us in an interesting way. When we can feel comfort we are part of its whole. (Kulchyski, McCaskill, and Newhouse, 1999, p.87)

One framework that has been used as a tool to describe the Aboriginal concept of holistic learning is the Medicine Wheel, which encompasses mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual knowing. Although it was introduced by the Aboriginal people of the Plains (Paulsen, 2003), it has become familiar to many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as a way to ensure that there is balance in every task that is done. Traditionally, there were these additional levels to all tasks, so that when learning occurred, more than simply the actions were passed on.

*When my father teaches me a traditional Haida song, he ensures that he teaches me about who composed the song, why it was composed, what the protocol is for singing it in public, and the occasions when it would be appropriate to sing the song. These teachings are all as important as my knowledge of how to sing the song; they encompass many ways of knowing, and transcend my knowledge of the melody and lyrics.*

### *Learning is Relationship-Based and Collaborative.*
The passing of knowledge from one generation to the next involved the relationship between the people. As Albert Ward, a Micmac Elder described, they would

> sit around maybe outside with the fire and the Elders and Elder women they sit around and tell stories. All kinds of different stories, and they make children laugh and all kinds of different things like that. They go on for hours and hours just to learn their kids. (Kulchyski, McCaskill, and Newhouse, 1999, pp. 58-59)

The content of the lesson and the relationship were interconnected, so the lesson became significant because of the relationship and perhaps even the relationship became more significant because of the lesson.

*When my father was learning to carve, he would show his work to his grandfather. His grandfather would never tell him how to improve his work; rather, he would take the piece and make the necessary changes. My father could see the improvements and learned from watching how the changes were made.*

Because the changes were made by someone my father respected and had a relationship with, they were not seen as intrusive. Traditionally children learned what they needed to know from people who were close to them. This meant that prior to engaging in learning, they had a relationship with the person teaching them. With that relationship came respect based upon the role that the adult played in the child's life.

It can be hypothesized that one of the reasons for the significance of the relationship in learning is that historically, "lineages owned, among other properties, fishing streams, stretches of shoreline, stands of cedar trees, a corpus of hereditary names or titles, and 'crests'" (Blackman, 1982, p.24). Furthermore, the lineages had "exclusive rights to the use of emblems acquired by the group, to personal, house and canoe names, to myths explaining their origin, and to certain songs and dances (Boelscher, 1989, p.35). Because lineages were associated with specific kinship relationships, it stands to reason young people would have specific relationships with the adults transmitting particular kinds of information that required access to locations and traditions that were based on lineage. For example, among the Haida a boy would receive "formal instruction in ceremonial roles and [would assist] his uncle in various economic activities" (Blackman, 1982, p.27). Because the Haida are a matrilineal society, the father and son would not be from the same clan; however, the boy and the matrilineal uncle would be, meaning that information specifically relating to the clan could be passed on from the uncle to the nephew.

Traditional Aboriginal learning was also considered collaborative, not only because people often worked together to achieve a unified goal, but because the goal usually served the needs of the community rather than merely the needs of the individual. In addition, even when a community member was working individually, the task was usually toward a common goal for the community, such as harvesting food, which would benefit many people.

***Learning is Contextualized.***

Traditionally, learning occurred within "the specific context to which the learning [was] relate[d]" (Nicholson and Robinson, 2000, p.497). Children would learn how to hunt while hunting; fish while fishing; and dance during ceremonies.

*When I was a child my father used to take us back to his home community and there, we would take walks on the beach. On one of these walks, we came across my Uncle Sam. He had just returned from halibut fishing and was cleaning the fish. Leaning up against the boat was a gaff. I had never seen one before and did not know what it was used for, so I asked my Uncle Sam about it. He did not respond. Rather he picked it up and pretended to club the fish with it.*

Because he demonstrated what the gaff was used for, in the environment that it was used, and because he had the gaff and the halibut in his hands, the significance was immediately clear. This example could also be considered within the context of *Isumaqsayuq* which is a "way of passing along knowledge through the observation and imitation embedded in the daily family and community activities, integration into the immediate shared social structure being the principal goal" (Stairs, 1995, p.140). As this example and concept allude, observation was another critical component of what can be described as the largely informal teaching style (Nichol and Robinson, 2000) of Aboriginal people which relates to the importance of context. As Rachael Uyarasuk, an Inuit Elder further explained,

> I do not remember anyone being taught formally. By following and copying the tasks of the mother, we would be learning. This is how we learned what has to be done with the dwelling, clothing, and seal-oil lamp. We would watch how our mother did things and learn from this. Boys too, would go out hunting with their fathers and by observing they would be learning. Although we were not learning with a teacher, like today's schools, we were able to learn. (Kulchyski, McCaskill, and Newhouse, 1999, p. 270)

Hampton (1995) also emphasized the importance of observation in his support for the importance of adults as role models, who "exemplified the knowledge, skills, and values being taught" (p.8).

My great-grandmother (Blackman, 1982) described her own experiences as a child, "When I was young I wove one little basket with a cover for my cousin Josie to keep hairpins in; that was the first one. I learned by watching my mother weave" (p.128).

The notion of contextualized learning is vital when considering the importance of observation as part of the learning process. Children can easily understand the meaning, relevance, importance of an activity when it is demonstrated in the context in which it occurs. Furthermore, observation can be readily accomplished when the child is able to observe an adult role model conducting the task to be learned, in an authentic environment.

### Learning is Practical.
Learning experiences in the traditional Aboriginal context were practical in that the needs of the community determined what education would need to be provided (Nichol and Robinson, 2000). For example, if the community was preparing for a feast, they would use the opportunity to teach the children the various aspects of preparing for a feast. Because the needs were immediate and obvious, the relevance of the education remained unquestioned.

### Learning is Continuous.
*At the age of 69, my Auntie Clara decided that she wanted to learn to weave cedar bark. She would tell me about her progress on the phone when we spoke. When my family hosted a feast to honour the weavers, the invitation stated that guests were to wear "something woven". My auntie wore the third cedar bark hat that she had ever woven. To honour the weavers, we sang a song, and all of the weavers danced around the hall. My auntie, now 70, was among them, proudly wearing her woven hat.*

From the traditional Aboriginal perspective, "learning is never finished; it is a treasured part of everyday living and a lifelong process" (Paulsen, 2003, p.26). Although certain teachings

were associated with particular stages of development (Blackman, 1982), and "definite stages of wisdom were acknowledged according to age, and status in the community" (Nichol and Robinson, 2000, p.497), there was no point at which an Aboriginal person was considered to have completed their learning. According to White-Kaulaity (2007), "time to develop a skill is not connected to a certain date or a child's age. Adults are patient with children who need extra time to develop their skills and abilities, and children are expected to find out about their own abilities (p.139)" (p.567). As Mary Anne Mason, a Shayshas Elder further explained, "you need to know a little bit more than what you know today. You need to know tomorrow and the day after that. That means you have to continually learn as you grow older" (Kulchyski, McCaskill, and Newhouse, 1999, p.439).

Traditional Aboriginal educational practices were holistic, relationship-based and collaborative, contextualized, practical, and continuous. Although these practices may not continue to occur today to the extent that they did in the past, they are a part of the culture and history of many Aboriginal nations across Canada. As such, many of these practices or remnants of them have been passed on to the Aboriginal students of today. Educational practices which violate these principles, as they did for example in the residential schools, will likely remain unsuccessful ways to educate many students of Aboriginal ancestry.

### *Residential School Educational Practices*

The experience of Aboriginal students at residential schools[6] is a devastating example of how education can violate the traditional teaching practices of Aboriginal people. Much has been written on the experiences of Aboriginal children at residential schools (e.g., Haig-Brown, 1988; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) and the purpose here is not to reexamine the experiences, rather to outline the practices used by the residential schools to transmit knowledge.

The residential school system attempted to assimilate Canadian First Nations children into a Euro-Canadian culture and economic system, ironically through the practice of isolating them for gradual integration at a later phase of development. In this quest, what it meant to be of First Nations ancestry was obliterated and replaced with a rigid code of temporal, linguistic, and religious/moral conduct that fed the political and economic needs of an expanding, colonizing economic Goliath. (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003, pp.35-36)

Because the purpose of the residential schools was to assimilate Aboriginal children into the Euro-Canadian ways, part of the education process was to eliminate their Aboriginal ways of knowing and to replace these ways with those of the Euro-Canadians. These attempts to assimilate Aboriginal people resulted in the removal of Aboriginal children from their homes and their families and their placement in residential schools where they were often abused and violated (Haig-Brown, 1988).

It can be argued that residential schools were unsuccessful at educating, however in an attempt to achieve the educational and assimilation goals, behaviour modification such as "coercion, physical or emotional discipline" (Wotherspoon and Schissel, 2003, p.40) were used. For children who were used to the traditional Aboriginal educational practices described previously, these new regimented routines were extremely destructive on social and emotional levels (Wotherspoon and Schissel, 2003, p.40). Education at the residential school relied upon rigid schedules, indoor classrooms, and structured lessons which violated their traditional ways of knowing. The curriculum, based upon Euro-Canadian theoretical content was foreign to the students and the purpose was not immediately apparent, as it had been when they were educated traditionally. Clearly, the educational practices violated the Aboriginal students' traditional ways of learning on every level. Teaching practices used at the residential schools in fact, were directly opposed to the traditional Aboriginal teaching practices.

Furthermore, those in charge at the residential schools did not understand the cultural differences between themselves and the Aboriginal children, so even when they were attempting

to be helpful, they were inadvertently causing emotional harm and humiliation to the children in their care. Haig-Brown (1988) described this, in her example of a nun at a school who directed a younger student to help an older student.

> Although intended to be helpful, the [nun's] action violated a social rule. To be helped by someone obviously smaller and younger in front of other people was a public humiliation. To this day, losing face publicly is seen by many Shuswap people as a terrible insult; to that child on that day so long ago, the action was devastating. (p.54)

Because children were removed from their homes to attend residential schools, the family roles were disrupted. Children were attending school for most of the year, leaving parents without the responsibilities of parenting. (Haig-Brown, 1988). Because children learn to parent from their parents, they did not have the opportunity to learn how to be parents, this has had an impact on generations of children who did not even attend residential schools.

Overall, it is impossible to know the tremendous impact that residential school had on Aboriginal people. For their part, Aboriginal people did what they could to resist the agenda of the Euro-Canadians and maintain their distinct languages, cultures, and ways of knowing (Haig-Brown, 1988). For the purpose of this paper, however, it is important to recognize that the educational ways of the Euro-Canadians were tremendously destructive and were in direct conflict to the traditional models of knowledge transmission that were familiar to the Aboriginal children.

Following this brief review of the traditional teaching practices of Aboriginal people and those implemented at the residential schools, it is obvious why the residential schools were unable to teach Aboriginal children to be academically successful in the Euro-Canadian context. However, it is also possible to draw upon this understanding in an attempt to understand why current contemporary educational practices are experiencing similar challenges.

*Contemporary Educational Practices*

As Aboriginal theorists and educators point out, the perception of many is that the purpose of contemporary education remains the assimilation of Aboriginal students into Euro-Canadian society (e.g., Battiste, 2000; Hampton, 1995; Silver, Mallett, Greene, and Simard, 2002). The belief is that for this to occur Aboriginal people must abandon their traditions and replace them with Euro-Canadian values (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003). As Battiste argued, "no force has been more effective at oppressing First Nations cultures than the education system" (as cited in Silver, Mallett, Greene, and Simard, 2002, p.30). The research of Oleska and Dauenhauer also indicated that schools designed for the purpose of assimilation have been characterized by "high failure rates in literacy and educational attainment, having assimilation rather than self-determination as goals, poor school-community relations, negative attitudes towards Native cutures, and prohibition or non-use of Native languages" (as cited in Hampton, 1995, p.9). Perhaps in their view, it is not a coincidence that many contemporary Euro-Canadian schools continue to be plagued with these very challenges.

Euro-Canadian education models are based upon the knowledge and values of Euro-Canadians, and as such, they value the cultural capital of Euro-Canadians. Bourdieu argued that "even though each social class has a distinct cultural capital, schools as a social institution place greater value on the cultural capital of the dominant classes" (as cited in Obidah and Marsh, 2006). As a result, minority and economically disadvantaged students whose cultural capital is usually ignored by the education system – frequently experience many challenges with the curriculum. However, "students whose cultures mirror the cultural capital endorsed by the schooling system are overly advantaged in the race for academic merits (grades, diplomas, and degrees)" (Obidah and Marsh, 2006, pp.109-110).

Because of the clear distinctions between the Euro-Canadian and the traditional Aboriginal educational practices, students wishing to succeed within the former model must let go of many aspects of the latter. In addition many aspects of these models are mutually exclusive, leaving the student to choose between the two. A specific example of this can be provided by my father's experience in school.

*When my father went to school, he brought with him his traditional understanding of appropriate behaviour. When the teacher would ask a question, he would not raise his hand to respond even when he knew the answer, as it would have been rude to do so.*

The challenge for my father was that in order for him to be successful within the Euro-Canadian context, he needed to reject his traditional education – likely transmitted to him by respected Elders in his life. To violate these teachings would have meant showing disrespect to his teachers and to himself. As Dunn (2001) further elaborated, different communication styles exist between those who were historically oral societies and those who were not. "A good example of differences in communication styles is the fact that some groups of Aboriginal people consider it rude to ask direct questions" (Dunn, 2001, p.681).

The challenge for Aboriginal students is to determine ways to be successful within the Euro-Canadian education system without losing their traditional ways of being in the world. As Elizabeth Penashue, an Innu Elder explained,

> education is good as long as you do not lose your culture. It is very important that your culture is not lost. Because the young people were born from their mother and their mother is linked to that culture, therefore that child should not lose that culture. A person can live in today's world and still have their culture. But sometimes there is too much White influence. There is too much technology. When small children watch TV, they grow up thinking like what they see, my grandson sees wrestling, kung fu, and guns and that is what he imitates. (Kulchyski, McCaskill, and Newhouse, 1999, p.213)

Another difficulty for these students is the conflict between their own ways of being which focus upon the advancement of the community and the Euro-Canadian way which focuses upon individual achievement.

For many Aboriginal students, learning within the contemporary Euro-Canadian context is compartmentalized, independent, decontextualized, and theoretical. Furthermore, it has an endpoint and the curriculum is standardized and Eurocentric. All of these factors mean that it is in direct and immediate conflict with the traditional ways of transmitting knowledge which were outlined previously.

### *Learning is Compartmentalized.*

Learning at the secondary school level in the Euro-Canadian system is divided into separate subject areas. At this level, the subjects are further fragmented by the fact that they are taught by separate teachers, in separate classrooms. Students learn about subjects separately and because teachers are usually experts in limited fields, they are unwilling or perhaps unable to facilitate learning experiences outside their areas of expertise. Integration of additional curricular areas is rare, at this level, where it would require planning and coordinating with other teachers.

The holistic approach, which means that every aspect of a task is taught regardless of which curricular area it might fall into, does not usually occur within this type of educational model. Spirituality, in particular, which is a part of daily life for many Aboriginal people, is not integrated into this fragmented system. Because of the many denominations of students, teachers are reluctant to integrate any aspects of spirituality into the curriculum. However,

> …spirituality and learning in education refers to the connections between the intellectual and moral qualities of a student that must not be neglected, but rather accepted, respected, and celebrated by teachers. [Also], the celebration of a student's spirituality has nothing to do with the imposition of religious practices in the school (Curwen Doige, 2003, p.148).

Students who are accustomed to this added dimension of the incorporation of spirituality in their education may miss its presence.

Because traditional Aboriginal learning relies upon a spiritual component, when this is absent the Aboriginal way of knowing is undermined, and learning may lack the richness and depth to which some Aboriginal students are accustomed. It is not enough to inject ceremony and spirituality in at events, such as

> Native Awareness Days, which feature speakers in traditional dress, traditional foods, and displays of Aboriginal artifacts. Such initiatives are designed carefully and executed by concerned teachers and parents whose goal is to increase students' appreciation of aspects of Aboriginal culture and make students aware of existing stereotypes. However, the methods have served ultimately to emphasize differences to such an extent and in such a way that the gap between people of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures is widened, not bridged. (Curwen Doige, 2003, p.150)

Furthermore, "traditions are only one aspect of the ever-changing dynamic within a culture. So to focus on traditional dress, food, music, ceremonies, and artifacts freezes a culture in time and perpetuates stereotypes" (Curwen Doige, 2003, p.150).

*My first memory of racism occurred at school when I was in grade four. Because the grade four curriculum included Haida content, my father was invited to my class. I do not remember his presentation, although I suspect that it would have included some songs and a display of his traditional regalia. I know that the teacher believed she was bringing in an authentic experience for the class to share and had no way to understand the impact that her choice would have upon me. After that day, children who didn't acknowledge me previously, even my own friends teased and taunted me about being an Indian.*

### *Learning is Independent.*
Another critique of the Euro-Canadian education system from the traditional Aboriginal perspective is the focus upon independence and competition. Aboriginal students who may be accustomed to working together or independently for the purpose of contributing to a collective

goal may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with this focus upon individual achievement. Hampton

(1995) further explained that,

> education is to serve the people. Its purpose is not individual advancement or status. As Levine and White point out, Western society and education too often promote social connections that make achievement meaningful. There is an inevitable conflict between Western education and Indian education on this point. The competitive success of the individual is an implicit value of Western schools and, as such, is in direct conflict with the Indian value of group success through individual achievement. (p.21)

In addition, Aboriginal students being educated within the Euro-Canadian context learn

the material from a designated teacher with whom they may have no significant connection. This

individual is often an outsider who is unfamiliar with the culture and traditions of the community.

They have been hired to teach, and although they have chosen the profession of teaching, their

expertise may not be immediately apparent to Aboriginal students. Furthermore, it is expected

that based upon their position as a teacher, they will unquestioningly and immediately be treated

with respect by students who have been taught that respect is earned by the individual not the

position (Dunn, 2001).

### *Learning is Decontextualized and Theoretical.*
The Euro-Canadian education system provides education which is decontextualized.

Students learn material in a classroom away from the content of the lesson and the skills are

learned separately from the tasks to which they relate. As a result, students sometimes struggle

with how the material is relevant to them. Because much of the material is theoretical rather than

practical in nature, Aboriginal students may reflect Euro-Canadian values when discussing what

is important about school.

Within this study, when students were asked what they thought was important about

school, their responses were divided. Two students referenced learning, one student said

listening, one student stated being able to get a good job, and one female student questioned why they needed to learn so many things when they only wanted to become one thing.

Researcher: So what do you think is the most important thing about school?

Student: I don't know if I really like…sometimes I don't really get why we are here learning all of this stuff, if you just want to do one thing?

The responses of the students seemed to indicate that they did not truly understand the relevance of what they were learning. This can be particularly challenging for Aboriginal students who may not be familiar with people for whom Euro-Canadian education has been equated with improved social and economic conditions.

> …Children who grow up around adults for whom schools have served as an avenue for upward social and economic mobility – as is the case for many mainstream students – tend to put up with a curriculum they find meaningless because they trust that doing well in school will benefit them in the long run, just as it benefited others they know. (Villegas and Lucas, 2002, p.71)

### *Learning has an Endpoint.*
Because the traditional Aboriginal perspective is that learning is ongoing, it is difficult to conceive that by a certain age a student has learned enough information that no further learning is required. The somewhat arbitrary decision that a student has completed their education at the age of eighteen or upon the completion of a degree conflicts with the Aboriginal perspective that learning is ongoing, or that learning a particular skill is not complete until it has been mastered. Within the contemporary Euro-Canadian context, teachers are viewed as experts and held up as examples of those who have reached the endpoint in their education, and as such are able to guide students to achieve their own endpoint.

### *Learning is Standardized and Eurocentric.*
Curriculum in the school system is standardized and based upon years of Euro-Canadian tradition. As Shields (2007) pointed out,

a central authority may tell teachers to use a specific approach… to teach all children; we assign every child in a class the same homework with the same number of problems, regardless of their level of understanding and competence; we insist on 'mainstreaming' all children to prevent elitism, without thinking about the real differentiated learning needs of different students. (p.156)

The curriculum is based upon Euro-Canadian values, and it privileges the cultural capital and interests of this group. "Poor and racial/ethnic minority students, whose cultural capital is largely ignored by schools, frequently encounter difficulties mastering the content of the traditional school curriculum" (Villegas and Lucas, 2002, p.71). In addition, the "life experiences and the values of Aboriginal students and their families, differ significantly from what they experience in the schools, which are run largely by white middle class people for the purpose of advancing the values of the dominant culture" (Silver, Mallett, Greene, and Simard, 2002, p. 29). Although this may assist Aboriginal students to be successful within the Euro-Canadian context, it will likely leave them unable to be successful within the Aboriginal context. Furthermore, the curriculum found in the Euro-Canadian school system is based upon standardized learning outcomes as opposed to what might be important for students to learn to make a meaningful contribution to their own community.

Due to the focus upon Euro-Canadian beliefs and values, the Aboriginal perspective is frequently missing from the curriculum, which leaves the Aboriginal students with the belief that their history and culture is unimportant. Furthermore, even if the culture is present, "it is presented from a Eurocentric perspective. Often, this presentation is inaccurate and not very nourishing" (Battiste and Henderson, 2000, p.88).

*Failure as Resistance*
One explanation for the apparent lack of academic success of Aboriginal students is that they are intentionally failing in an attempt to resist colonialism. Hampton (1995) further

suggested that "the failure of non-Native education of Natives can be read as the success of

Native resistance to cultural, spiritual, and psychological genocide" (p.7).

As will be elaborated later, some minority students experience negative consequences as

a result of academic success in school. For example, some African American students who are

successful in school "are accused by their peers of 'acting white', and are ostracized for it"

(Silver, et al., 2002, p.28). Furthermore, in their study, when Silver, et al. (2002)

> asked students the following question: 'Have you ever heard of Aboriginal students who do well in school being teased or rejected by other Aboriginal students?' Just over 4 in 10 (41.3%) said yes, and one-third (33.3%) of the school leavers not now in school said yes to the same question. (p.28)

Respondents in their study reflected that "within the community [there is] lots of joking if

somebody's trying to better themselves….they're trying to be white, that's a real common thing

that I hear" (p.28) And another stated that "Many Aboriginal youth think it's a 'white' thing to

get an education.' Many Aboriginal students feel they have to pull away from their communities

and give up something of themselves in order to succeed in school, and doing so is painful"

(Silver, et al., 2002, p. 28).

In this study, one of the students indicated that this does occur, but it had never occurred

to her.

> *Researcher:* So, would you say that if your friends didn't want you to do well at school, and I am talking about grades, would that influence you?
>
> *Student:* Ummm…
>
> *Researcher:* Like if they called you a loser for doing well…
>
> *Student:* That happens, but it's never really happened to me. I can tell that they get competitive with me though, over grades, but it doesn't bother me. I don't care.

Although, this student did not go into much detail about the pressure to resist academic success,

my experience has been that this problem is much more prevalent than she indicated. It would be

difficult to prove that students make a conscious choice to avoid academic success as a form of resistance to colonialism. Rather, it might be easier to subscribe to the notion that as Silver et al (2002) indicated the social price of academic success may be too great for Aboriginal students, which results in a subconscious effort to avoid academic success.

### *Euro-Canadian Education is Not Impartial*

A common misconception is that the Euro-Canadian curriculum is impartial. By adopting this perspective, it is easy to conclude that those students unable to master it, are inferior and the knowledge and the skills that they bring to school are inferior. As such, an individual's ability to succeed becomes dependent on their ability to assimilate to the Euro-Canadian culture (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003). In addition, educators who believe that the Euro-Canadian education system is impartial are often "oblivious to the power relations implicit in [it], oblivious to changing conditions, oblivious to the need for change" (Shields, 2007, p.19). These educators base their beliefs on the argument of tradition – this is the way that things have always been done. Because of the assumption that Euro-Canadian education is largely impartial, it is easy for educators to assume that mastering this Euro-Canadian curriculum is relatively inconsequential. In addition, the perspective is that those students unable to master the curriculum are the problem. Both of these perspectives are detrimental to Aboriginal students.

It would be wrong to argue that formal education does not "open doors to future social opportunities, but it is also affected by, and often reinforces, the social positions and experiences that accompany people into schooling. Schooling is also a critical site of social participation in its own right, affecting a person's orientation to self, to others, and to the world in general" (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003, p.10). Furthermore, the Euro-Canadian model does reflect the dominant discourse of Canadian society. Students who remain unsuccessful at navigating this system will likely remain at a social and economic disadvantage when compared with those who have been

able to master the system. Because the Euro-Canadian system is privileged here in Canada, being successful within this school system will likely translate into future success. It is however, not an impartial system – it is one that perpetuates Euro-Canadian values. It is one that may result in the displacement of traditional cultural knowledge, if it is successfully mastered.

*While I was teaching English Language Arts in this Aboriginal community, I found that I was making the same corrections on many of my students' papers. These corrections had to do with the local dialect. Students were writing sentences correctly according to the local dialect, however they were incorrect according to the grammatical rules of standard English. I found myself struggling with how to positively reinforce the language that the students were bringing into the classroom, and still give them the choice to communicate in standard English if they wished. As we discussed the two kinds of English, they came to the conclusion that they would be judged poorly, by outsiders, if they used their local dialect. I attempted to convey to them that they could choose to use their dialect as an act of resistance to colonialism, however I could not help but feel that they took away the message that their local dialect, the language taught to them by their parents and families, the language of their comforting and story telling, was somehow inferior.*

Because the contemporary curriculum is based upon the Euro-Canadian system, "the knowledge, values, skills, and interests that Indian students possess are largely ignored in favor of strategies aimed at enticing them to conform to mainstream education" (Cajete as cited in Antone, 2000, p.98). Due to the foreign nature of the curriculum and the learning situations, the students often have difficulty mastering the curriculum, leading educators to (wrongly) assume that the students lack the necessary intelligence to be successful in school. Rather than question the curriculum, educators find it easier to assume that the problem lies with the student (Jardine, 2005). Tests, such as the Foundation Skills Assessments (FSAs) in British Columbia disaggregate

results for Aboriginal students, which are much lower than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Results such as these are used to support this notion; however they could also be used to indicate a failure on the part of the education system, to meet the needs of these students. As Curwen Doige (2003) argued, "Aboriginal students often fail because the system fails them by not empowering them to connect with others and with their learning in ways that are meaningful to them" (p.152). Moreover, by adhering to the belief that Aboriginal students are not capable of higher achievement, educators are in effect buying into a deficit model where Aboriginal students are viewed as the problem.

As the professionals within the contemporary educational system fail to recognize the possibility that *they* may not be meeting the needs of these students, Aboriginal students are often streamed into adapted and modified classes. It has been shown that "institutional educational systems have tended to focus on Learners' 'needs'; that is, they have used a deficit model. They have not focused on Learners' strengths. Research has shown that teachers' expectations of Learners can impact their ability to learn" (Barriers to Literacy Learning in Aboriginal Communities, NADC, 2002).

Compounding the situation is the fact that many Aboriginal students have a home life that contrasts severely with the upbringing of Euro-Canadian, middle class teachers. It is often difficult for educators to avoid "pathologiz[ing] the experiences of children who come from situations of poverty" (Shields, 2007, p.24). Instead of engaging in this kind of behaviour, Shields (2007) advocated that educators must

> be able to identify areas in which our prejudices about class or ethnicity result in deficit thinking and learn to reject the assumption that students whose home experiences are different from the dominant experiences are different from the dominant experiences are in some way deficient and inherently less able to learn (p.91).

There are many challenges with contemporary attempts to educate Aboriginal students. As was indicated, Euro-Canadian attempts to educate Aboriginal students have been problematic at best and completely destructive at worst. It is important to recognize, however, that many of these challenges with contemporary education may be based upon the conflict between traditional Aboriginal teaching practices and Euro-Canadian teaching practices. It is believed that it is possible to educate Aboriginal students in a way that is respectful and inclusive. By integrating the strengths of both Aboriginal and contemporary Euro-Canadian teaching practices, it is possible that Aboriginal students will develop the ability to be successful in both contexts.

**CHAPTER III   Methodology**

This was an exploratory case study (Merriam, 1998) with one grade nine cohort of students in a predominantly Aboriginal high school. Within the realms of qualitative research, the case study was the most appropriate way to investigate the guiding questions of this study, which required the in-depth insights of adolescents and their teachers. Two studies which seemed to have had a similar focus (Broughton and Fairbanks, 2003; Noll, 1998) relied upon case studies to gain the most insight into their areas of research.

Initially the research questions addressed literacy specifically (see introduction), however following the preliminary findings, the focus of this research expanded to examine Aboriginal ancestry and education:

- How can ancestry influence the experiences of non-Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal students in the context of education and schooling?

- How can understandings of traditional Aboriginal teaching practices assist in the critique of contemporary educational practices?

- How can traditional Aboriginal teaching practices be integrated with contemporary teaching practices to better meet the educational needs of non-Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal students? How can these strategies be applied to improve print literacy instructional practices?

*Participants*

The research was conducted in a rural, isolated community in northern British Columbia. There are approximately 1600 residents in the community, most of whom are of Aboriginal ancestry, with over half of the residents living on reserve. Within the community there is one secondary school which at the time of the study, served approximately 200 students in grades

eight to twelve with additional adult learners in an adjacent adult learning centre. Approximately 70% of the students at the school were of Aboriginal ancestry. This was a unique setting in that the majority of the Aboriginal students were from the Haida nation.

The grade nine cohort of students, which constituted the case, consisted of approximately 40 students and was selected to produce minimal disruption for the students and staff of the school. As the research was conducted in October and November, the selection of a grade eight cohort would have been inappropriate given that those students were in the process of making a difficult transition from elementary school to high school. An older grade would have been equally unsuitable for ethical reasons, as I had taught many of those students previously. The students in this grade nine cohort were divided into two separate English Language Arts classes, taught by two different teachers. This was done to accommodate the large percentage of students who required adaptations and/or modifications in the curriculum to achieve the learning outcomes of the course.

Participation in the study was determined by parental permission and a willingness on the part of the student to be involved. Students were not excluded from this study based upon their ancestry, as it was believed that all students had the potential to make important contributions.

Thirteen students volunteered to complete the questionnaires; four of these students were from the adapted/modified class and nine were from the non-adapted/modified class. Of these students, ten indicated that they were of Aboriginal ancestry (seven females, three males) and three indicated that they were of non-Aboriginal ancestry (two females, one male). Student selection for the interviews was on a volunteer basis, and all six of the students who requested to participate in the interviews were included in the study. Two students were from the adapted/modified class, and four students were from the non-adapted/modified class. All of the students interviewed indicated they were of Aboriginal ancestry (four females, two males).

Three teachers also agreed to be interviewed, all of whom classified themselves as being of non-Aboriginal ancestry. Two of these teachers were teaching the cohort during the time when the study took place, and one of the teachers had taught the cohort prior to the time when the study took place.

Because this research was conducted in a small community, and the findings will be made available to community members, the participants in this study cannot be further identified to maintain their confidentiality.

### *Methods of Data Collection*

Data collection for this study consisted of classroom observations, questionnaires, interviews, and document reviews.

#### *Classroom Observations*

Although it was recognized that print literacy existed across all curricular areas, direct literacy instruction seemed to occur primarily in the English Language Arts class. As such, the observations which occurred during the initial two weeks of the study were only within the English Language Arts classroom. The purpose of these observations was two fold: to familiarize myself with the routines and rituals within the two English Language Arts classrooms, and to establish myself as a researcher, thus distancing myself from my previous role as a teacher within the school district.

During the third week of the study, I did a presentation for the students about my research and distributed permission forms for the students and their parents to complete. It was believed that all students, regardless of ancestry, had valuable contributions to make, therefore all students were invited to participate.

*Questionnaires*

During the fourth week of the study, the questionnaire was administered to all of the students willing to participate. This was done during class time. The teachers of both classes allowed this, indicating that they felt the research was important and expressed concern that participation would be minimal if it was done outside of class time. Some students volunteered to complete questionnaires, but forgot to return their consent forms. If consent forms were not received from their parents, the questionnaires were returned to the students prior to analysis and were not included in the study.

Questionnaires were developed according to the initial guiding research questions. They were piloted with students of a similar age to the participants in the study. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gain an overall perspective of the participants' views about print literacy and print literacy instruction. The questionnaires were also used to guide the development of a portion of the interview questions.

Although all of the students were invited to participate, some barriers to completing the questionnaire were: whether the students were in attendance the day of the administration, whether the students were comfortable with me, and whether their parents were comfortable with signing the three-page consent form.

See Appendix A for a sample of the questionnaire administered to the students in the study.

*Interviews*

During the fifth week, formal, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six of the students in the grade nine cohort. These interviews were approximately 30 to 40 minutes in length. The questions were based upon the information gathered from the above sources as well as relevant literature within the area of study. During the sixth week, additional interviews were

conducted with three teachers who were either instructing the grade nine cohort at the time of the study or who had instructed it prior to the study. All of the interviews occurred within the school to ensure that participants were in a familiar environment. All of the interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim to facilitate clarification and interpretation of the data.

Following the interviews, all of the participants (students and teachers) were provided with a verbatim copy of their interviews and requested to review them to determine whether they wished to have any portions omitted from the study. None of the participants indicated that they wished to have any portions omitted.

See Appendix B for a sample of the interview questions used with the students and Appendix C for a sample of the interview questions used with the teachers.

*Document Review*

To assist in the development of a better understanding of the mainstream academic achievements of the student interview participants, their recent report cards were reviewed during the seventh week.

***Data Analysis Procedures***

Following the verbatim transcription of the interviews, the student data and the teacher data were separated. Both sets of data were then clustered according the interview questions to determine which "constructs, themes, and patterns [could] be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied" (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996, p.562) would emerge. The various themes including the role of identity, specifically ancestry in school; the inseparability of print literacy and schooling; and the role of Aboriginal content in school, were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, as cited in Merriam, 1998). Categories were then constructed using the data from both the student and teacher interviews.

In writing up this study, excerpts from the verbatim interviews were selected to include based upon their capacity to illustrate examples described within the text. Minor changes were made with some of the quotes to facilitate clarity for the reader.

*Ethical Considerations*

In designing this research study, I incorporated the recommendations of Weaver (1997) for how to engage in respectful research relationships with Aboriginal communities, including: working with a community that is familiar with me; drawing upon my knowledge of our shared ancestry to ensure I was respectful throughout both the research process and the dissemination of the findings; and using the goals of the community and school district to guide the development of my research questions.

Furthermore, I adopted the perspective of "conducting research in my home". This means that I viewed the community as my home and allowed this to guide my conduct throughout the study. Specifically, I conducted myself as if I intended to reside in the community for the rest of my life. As such, I attempted to be respectful in my talking and writing about the research, and I thought about the potential consequences of my actions, not only for myself, but for the rest of my family. As I described in a previous narrative about the subject,

> If we look upon the community where we do our research as our home,
> it is easier to ask forgiveness for the mistakes that we make
> because our research is an investment
> in our *own* community.

This notion of "conducting research in my home" is very much in line with Smith's (1999) recognition that "insiders have to live with the consequences of their processes on a day-to-day basis for ever more, and so do their families and communities" (p.137). Furthermore, Smith (1999) advised that

> insider research has to be as ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical, as outsider research. It also needs to be humble. It needs to be humble because the researcher belongs

to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position. (p.139)

*Trustworthiness*

In an attempt to address validity concerns, I triangulated the data from the student and teacher interviews, the questionnaires, and the student documents. Although I did not conduct formal member checks, I employed active listening techniques during the interviews to ensure that I understood the information being provided by the participants. Following the completion of my study, I remained in the community to write my thesis. Even though I was not engaged in data collection following the initial seven weeks, I found that by remaining in the community I was better able to question my findings while still in the context of the research. I did not make use of peer examination; however, I discussed my findings and assumptions periodically with my father, who is a tsinnii[7] from the community.

As Merriam (1998) contended, "the term *reliability* in the traditional sense of the word seems to be something of a misfit when applied to qualitative research" (p.206). She suggested rather, focusing upon the dependability of the results. One of the ways to achieve results which are dependable is to ensure that the position of the researcher is described, in other words, to be reflexive. To engage in this practice also makes intuitive sense "because human beings are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, [and as such] interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their observations and interviews" (Merriam, 1998, p.203).

### *Researcher Positioning.*

In her article on reflexivity, Pillow (2003) critiqued the more traditional uses of reflexivity, namely "reflexivity as recognition of the self, reflexivity as recognition of the other, reflexivity as truth, and reflexivity as transcendence" (abstract, p.175). Because I concur with her

critiques, I have attempted to conduct an ongoing critique (Pillow, 2003) of my various subject positions in an endeavor to approach a reflexivity of discomfort (Pillow, 2003). That said, I recognize that I have not successfully eradicated all of the vestiges of the "present-day uses of reflexivity" (abstract, p.175).

*Once, for a university class assignment, I covered a piece of poster board with one hundred small, identical photos of myself. Under each one, I wrote one of my various identities: teacher, student, sister, mother, daughter,…. I was attempting to capture visually, that in the instant the photograph was taken, I was representing every one of those identities.*

I recognize that I have a multitude of subject positions; however, within the context of this study, it would seem that some may have had a more significant role, specifically those of community member, teacher, and researcher. My mixed Haida and European ancestry also added to the complexity of these subject positions within this study.

According to Banks (1998), my role within this research study was that of the indigenous-outsider. He described the indigenous-outsider as one who was

> socialized within the cultural community but has experienced high levels of desocialization and cultural assimilation into an outside or oppositional culture or community. The values, beliefs, perspectives, and knowledge of this individual are indistinguishable from those of an outside culture or community. (p.8)

My position as an indigenous-outsider (as opposed to an indigenous-insider) can be explained by the following factors: my mother is of European ancestry and my father is of Haida and Tlingit ancestry, I am therefore of mixed ancestry; I was not raised in the community, rather I was raised in the Lower Mainland in a predominantly Euro-Canadian context; I attended postsecondary school in a Euro-Canadian context; and I was employed as a teacher for the local school district.

Historically, there were "sexual relations between colonizers and colonized which led to communities who were referred to as 'half-castes' or 'half-breeds', or stigmatized by some other

specific term which often excluded them from belonging to either settler or indigenous societies" (Smith, 1999, p. 27). This is still true today in the Aboriginal community where the study was conducted. As a woman of mixed ancestry, who physically appears to belong to an "ethnic minority", I have experienced racism and discrimination within the Euro-Canadian context, however because I am not wholly Aboriginal I have also experienced discrimination from within this Aboriginal community. Furthermore, because I was not raised in the community, my experiences as a child visiting this community were that of an outsider. It was not until I moved here in my mid-twenties that some members of the community began to accept me as a quasi-insider.

All of my schooling was conducted outside of the community in a Euro-Canadian context, which once again contributed to my experience as an indigenous-outsider in this community. As Smith (1999) indicated, the Aboriginal communities are still ambivalent about the role of Western education. She added, "while criticizing indigenous people who have been educated at universities, on one hand, many indigenous communities will struggle and save to send their children to university on the other" (p.71). My experiences in the community with regard to my formal education have replicated this mixed sentiment. On the one hand, community members have expressed their pride in my academic achievements; however on the other hand, I have also been excluded because of them.

As a result of my ancestry, I am often positioned within the context of the university and the school district as an indigenous-insider (Banks, 1998). I am uncomfortable with this position because it is inaccurate. Perhaps ironically, it seems to further support Banks' (1998) contention that the indigenous-outsider

> is often chosen by leaders of the mainstream community as their spokesperson for public and visible issues related to his or her ethnic group, is often highly praised and rewarded

by the mainstream community and is viewed as legitimate by the mainstream but not by the indigenous community. (p.8)

Because teachers within the Euro-Canadian context are often perceived by the community to be part of the colonial system, my role as a teacher also positioned me as an indigenous-outsider. To further support this claim, during my employment as a teacher within the school district, I engaged in teaching practices which could be construed as colonial in nature, in their capacity to negate Aboriginal ways of knowing. According to the work of Taylor (1995), I engaged in teaching practices akin to those used by "non-Native teachers teaching in Native communities".

Within the context of the study, I exercised agency (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 2003) in my subject positioning. That is, I was aware of which positions would best align me with the participants and I emphasized those, while simultaneously deemphasizing those which would separate us. The intention was not malicious, rather an attempt to ensure that participants were comfortable speaking and sharing with me during the interviews.

I would like to acknowledge my awareness of how my role as a researcher positioned me in a way that could be compared to that of the colonizer. I am cognizant of the power imbalance that exists when taking the responses of students and teachers, interpreting them, and then writing about them in my own words (Rogers, Tyson, and Marshall, 2000). I am aware that engaging in reflexivity does not absolve me of this truth, and that regardless of my attempts to make my positions transparent, reflexivity "always occurs of an unequal power relationship and, in fact, the act of reflexivity may perpetuate a colonial relationship while at the same time attempting to mask this power over the subject" (Pillow, 2003, p.185).

My research training has occurred within the context of a Euro-centric post-secondary institution and while working with researchers of European ancestry. I have relied upon my Euro-

centric training to conduct research which will be accepted by the academy as "mak[ing] an original contribution, through research, to the knowledge within a specific field" (University of British Columbia). I am aware that I have relied upon my ancestry and my familiarity with the community in an attempt to balance the power imbalances which exist as a result of my education and training. However, I hope that the people who participated in this study will benefit from having participated in it. Nevertheless, I am aware that my benefits are more immediate and obvious.
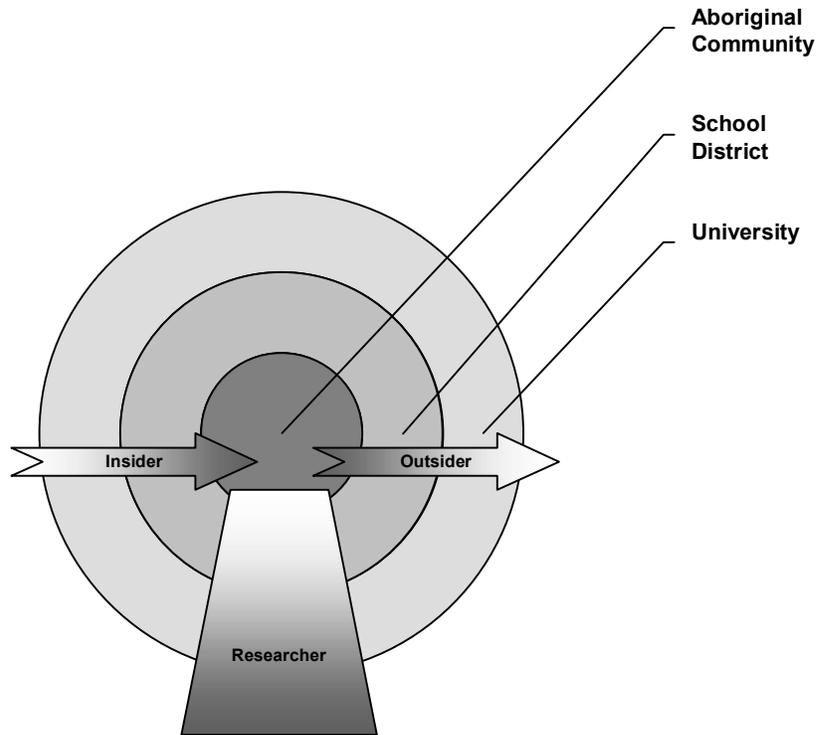
Figure 3.1 Researcher positioning within the research

Figure 3.1 is a visual representation of the complexity of my position within the context of this research. The various positions that I have held within this research traverse all of the communities represented in the study as I am a member of all three. Moving toward the centre of the rings means that one is moving toward an insider perspective, and moving toward the outer rings means that one is moving toward an outsider perspective. However, the positioning of the increments mean that one could be simultaneously positioned as an insider and an outsider. For example, in my role as a teacher, employed by the school district, I could be considered an outsider relative to the Aboriginal community, while also being an insider relative to the university community.

## CHAPTER IV   Perspectives on Identity

In entering an Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal researcher to talk to Aboriginal students, the role of identity must be considered. Furthermore, the teachers who were interviewed for this study were non-Aboriginal, something else that can not be overlooked given that many Aboriginal students have non-Aboriginal teachers.

### *Theoretical Perspectives on Identity*

"'Identity' is a concept that invokes and relates theories from various streams of psychology, social psychology, anthropology, sociology, and now from such interdisciplinary fields as cultural studies" (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998, p.4). However, "the term *identity* expressed popularly, as well as in academic circles, implies a fixed nature over a given time period" (Restoule, 2000, p.103). This concept of identity as an inflexible and perhaps singular entity implies that we have one identity which remains with us throughout our lives. As Restoule (2000) argued this concept of identity is not useful as it tends to imply that our identity is "persistent and stable over time, whereas cultures are in a constant state of reinvention" (p.103). Furthermore, he suggested that this particular view of identity relies upon the perspectives of others; that is, the identity of a group is determined by those who exist outside it. This perspective of identity, which leaves a group open to being defined solely by outsiders, could be construed as disenfranchising to that particular group because outsiders are not likely to understand the unique aspects of an identity and what they may mean to those from within the group. It also fails to recognize the capacity of an individual to exercise their own agency in determining their identity, that is to answer the question, how do they identify themselves?

Holland et al. (1998) also pointed out a challenge with the concept of identity as singular and fixed in their observation that "people's representations of themselves in the stream of everyday life reveal a multitude of selves that are neither bounded, stable, enduring, nor

impermeable" (p.29). They suggested rather that our identity is a complex blend of how others view an individual and how that individual views him- or herself. When seeking to understand identity, it needs to be recognized that "the discourse and categories dominant in a society…are 'inscribed' upon people, both interpersonally and institutionally….Selves are socially constructed through the mediation of powerful discourses and their artifacts – tax forms, census categories, curriculum vitae, and the like" (Holland et al., 1998, p.26). It is also important to recognize that while navigating various discourses which are used in attempts to define an individual, human agency must not be overlooked. As Holland et al., (1998) indicated,

> human agency may be frail, especially among those with little power, but it happens daily and mundanely, and it deserves our attention. Humans' capacity for self-objectification – and, through self-objectification, for self-direction – plays into both their domination by social relations of power and their possibilities for (partial) liberation from these forces (p.5).

### *Theoretical and Historical Perspectives on Aboriginal Identity*

In Restoule's (2000) article on Aboriginal identity, the difficulties with this more static and singular notion of identity were immediately apparent. As he pointed out, the singular *Aboriginal* identity "assumes a sameness and continuity that belies the fluidity and change that Aboriginal people experience and demonstrate. When this assumed permanence of character is run through institutions like the education and court systems 'Aboriginal identity' can be constrictive and colonizing" (p.103).

Perhaps in an attempt to counteract that obstacle, he introduced the concept of *identifying* which seemed to emphasize the agency discussed by Holland et al. (1998). He suggested that the challenge with identity is that it "implies fixedness; that the 'things' that make one Indian remain the same, and should be the same as those things associated with Indianness by the Europeans at the time of historical 'first' contact" (p.103). Furthermore, using a term such as identity, again gives the power to those who are outsiders and observing, allowing them to define the group and

assign the group their identity. Because they are outsiders who likely do not understand the nuances between, for example, different Aboriginal nations, all Aboriginal people are considered the same with a singular identity, which likely relies upon stereotypes and outdated referents. In contrast, Restoule (2000) suggested that *identifying* remedied the difficulties with this concept. He argued that it is more empowering for an individual to draw upon the present understandings of what it means to be a person of Aboriginal ancestry and that this experience may be empowering to the individual. As he explained,

> the power is placed in the self, for the Aboriginal person who emphasizes his or her Indigenous roots at a particular place and time. This allows for the salient components of an Aboriginal identity to be expressed as the actor feels is expedient, allowing for cultural change and adaptation. Identifying is situational and historical, whereas identity is thought to transcend history and social situations. (p.103)

In addition, Restoule (2000) pointed out that historically, in the eyes of the law, all Aboriginal people were viewed as the same. For example, "a Mohawk and an Ojibwe person could not have been considered identical by anyone knowledgeable of these two cultures, [however] Canadian legislation bestowed on these and other distinct peoples an Indian identity. In effect all Indians were the same in the eyes of Canadian law" (p.106).

The students in this study are familiar with the practice of identifying themselves as being Aboriginal. Every year documentation is completed in which their parents are requested to indicate whether or not their son or daughter is Aboriginal. This information assists in determining the funding the school will receive, as target funds are allotted to provide additional support for Aboriginal students. In addition, data on Aboriginal student achievement is disaggregated by the Ministry of Education in the provincial student achievement reports. As such, there are both political and financial incentives to identifying oneself as being of Aboriginal ancestry; however, these may be counteracted by the negative stereotypes sometimes associated

with being of Aboriginal ancestry. Clearly, the use of 'Aboriginal' as an identity marker is very politically and culturally complex.

***Student Ancestry***

The students who participated in the interviews in this study had numerous identities and subject positions; however, all of them identified themselves as being of Aboriginal ancestry. Following further discussion regarding ancestry, they indicated that they also had European ancestry within their lineage, and as a result some might refer to these students as being of mixed ancestry. At this point, it must be reiterated that there is no single Aboriginal identity, nor is there a single way to understand one's Aboriginal identity.

It is likely that the students identified themselves using the term "Aboriginal" initially because of the way the questions were posed, that is using the word "Aboriginal". However, later in the interviews the students reverted to terminology that was more common in the community, specifically the terms "Haida" and "non-Haida". These are not synonymous with "Aboriginal" and "non-Aboriginal" as there are individuals within the community who can be classified as Aboriginal, but who are not Haida.

***Student Perspectives on Student Ancestry.***

When the students discussed the representation of their ancestry within the school, they focused primarily upon the representation of their Aboriginal ancestry. All of the students stated that they felt that their ancestry was represented, with each of them identifying artifacts, such as the school logo and artwork that was displayed throughout the school, as this female student indicated.

*Researcher:* So you don't see any of aspects of your German ancestry here at the school?

*Student:* No.

*Researcher:* And what about your Haida ancestry?

*Student:* Well, there's lots of Haida people here, but …well, yeah, there's like stuff  about … but I have never ever been taught about … [being Haida] …

*Researcher:* So when you say there's stuff out there, do you mean like flyers and posters?

*Student:* Yeah, and like our school's logo … and like art right there [points to hallway] but that's pretty much the only thing that I do see. There's nothing else.

It is not clear whether the students' inability to identify the representation of any aspects of their non-Aboriginal ancestry was due to the fact that they did not believe that it was represented at the school or that they were unfamiliar with how those aspects of their ancestry might be represented.

Current attempts to integrate Aboriginal content into the curriculum are occurring in this school as in other parts of the province, however only one of the students indicated that she was learning about being Aboriginal/Haida in her courses. This is particularly significant as three of the students in the study were in the same Social Studies class in the previous year and only one indicated that she remembered learning about the Haida. One student, however, indicated that she believed that the reason she did not learn any Aboriginal content was because she was not enrolled in the Haida Language and Culture class. Students indicated that they thought they would learn about being Haida if they were taking that course.

Based upon their responses, the students' experiences with their Aboriginal ancestry were varied; however, of particular interest were the two students who described being called white by their peers. One of them, a female student, described her experience.

*Researcher:* Do you think that if you were of a different ancestry, your experience would be different in school?

*Student:* Probably. Well it is a little different because I have Haida in me, but I don't look Haida….And we have…like the people here that do look Haida and so they look down on you because you're like…like being called white…It doesn't really bother me, I just think it's kinda…

*Researcher:* So people – because you don't look Haida, some people, I am assuming you're saying Haida people, look down on you because you don't look Haida and they call you white.

*Student:* Yeah.

*Researcher:* Okay, so would you say that it's mainly students or teachers or…?

*Student:* Students and just other people too.

*Researcher:* So in the community?

*Student:* Yeah, I feel bad to be saying that 'cause people have like…they've always been labeled as something like that, but most of the time it's true. They do look down. Like people will say that, like they're Natives so they're cranky and they never like anyone that's white and I tried never to believe that 'cause I have that, but it's hard not to when there's…when there actually is lots of people like that.

*Researcher:* Okay, so what you are saying is that your experiences of some people who are Aboriginal, they have these stereotypes, so people call them the things that you said and you feel bad and you have tried not to buy into that, but because they are behaving that way to you, it is sometimes hard to do that.

*Student:* Yeah.

As an Aboriginal student who "looks white" in an Aboriginal community, this student's position is very complex. As she indicated, she is very aware of the stereotypes that exist about Aboriginal people; however, because of her own Aboriginal identity she demonstrated a high level of discomfort revealing this awareness to me. After reviewing her grades, I wondered if it could be possible that another reason she is being called white, had to do with specific behaviours, such as academic achievement, in combination with her physical appearance; however, because she focused upon her physical appearance, it is difficult to know for certain. This focus upon the physical markers of identity emerged many times during the interviews throughout the study. As the following excerpt indicates, she was also aware some of the negative stereotypes associated with Aboriginal people; and as such, she may have had a desire to

distance herself from her Aboriginal identity by emphasizing the fact that she doesn't look Aboriginal.

> …[Aboriginal people] go out and they get pregnant, never get a job, the guy leaves them, but I've seen that so much, like I…it sounds sick, but there is barely any Aborig- like it takes a lot for someone to go to school like that. I don't think they have much motivation – any motivation from their parents.

If in fact she was attempting to distance herself from her Aboriginal identity, she may have been attempting to counteract negative aspects of this associating with this identity. As Ferdman (1990) contended, if "features central to the group's cultural identity are viewed negatively in the larger society, the group will probably incorporate a negative component into its self-evaluation" (p.190).

In their research on "acting white" Fordham and Ogbu (1986) determined that among students of African American ancestry, "acting white" had more to do with actions than physical appearance. Despite the fact that they were not working with Aboriginal students, their findings can be considered relevant as they categorized both African American students and American Indian students within the same category, that of the subordinate minorities. This category included those people who had been "*involuntarily and permanently* incorporated into American society through slavery or conquest" (p.178). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) went on to describe that "along with the formation of an oppositional identity, subordinate minorities also develop an oppositional cultural frame of reference which includes devices for protecting their identity and for maintaining boundaries between them and white Americans" (p.181). As such there are certain behaviours that are "*not appropriate* for them because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings are characteristic of white Americans" (p.181). According to their study academic success is one such area. "School learning is therefore consciously or unconsciously perceived *as a subtractive process:* a minority person who learns successfully in school or who follows the

standard practices of the school is perceived as becoming acculturated into the white American cultural frame of reference at the expense of the minorities' cultural frame of reference and collective welfare" (pp. 182-183).

In my own experience, I purposefully attempted to use my academic achievement to 'act white'. I was aware of the negative associations to which Ferdman (1990) was referring, and I was aware of the stereotype that Aboriginal students were unable to achieve academic success. My behaviour was in line with Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) notion of acting white, in that I used my academic achievement and other activities to distance myself from the negative stereotypes of Aboriginal underachievement and alcohol and drug abuse.

*In high school, I did not want to be associated with the Aboriginal stereotypes, so I hid the fact that I was Aboriginal. Other students assumed that I was Spanish or Italian or something else equally as exotic. Lucky for me, I was a teenager when ethnic was in. Benetton ads were taped to the insides of lockers and splashed across billboards. Everyone wanted to look like me, but no one wanted to be Aboriginal. Aboriginal people were "lazy, uneducated, drunks". I wanted to be the opposite. I figured that the way to get there was to pretend to be something else, remove myself from the stereotype. I worked hard at my studies, I remained in French Immersion, and I made friends with non-Aboriginal people. I never lied about my ancestry, people just assumed that they knew, and I didn't correct them.*

"It is important to explore what identifying as Aboriginal means and what is gained and lost in attempting to erase that identity, as well as what it means to change the referents of what is meant by Aboriginal identity" (Restoule, 2000, p.102). On other occasions, when it was more advantageous for me to reveal my Aboriginal identity, I did so. For example within the context of this study, and when working in this community, I believe that on many (not all) occasions, my mixed Aboriginal ancestry worked in my favour.

Another student in the study indicated his awareness of the negative stereotypes associated with Aboriginal people by suggesting that his Aboriginal ancestry might affect his entry into postsecondary institutions.

*Researcher:* So you don't feel like it makes a difference to be Haida or not Haida?

*Student:* Not really.

*Researcher:* And do you think that your ancestry has any effect on what you will do after graduation? Like when you're done high school, do you think it will make a difference whether you are Haida or not?

*Student:* To some people it might, but I don't really show it [look Haida].

*Researcher:* So when you say 'to some people,' what do you mean by that?

*Student:* Well, like if I was trying to go to college or something and the teacher doesn't like Haidas, they could do something about it…

*Researcher:* Okay, so maybe not let you into college, like if you were Haida?

*Student:* Something like that. Might not be like that, I don't really know.

Although this student admitted that he did not know for sure that he could be denied access to a postsecondary institution based upon his ancestry, he was applying his knowledge of some of the limitations that Aboriginal people face, to an unfamiliar situation.

One student, who was non-Haida and Aboriginal, explained that she was being bullied by other students because of her ancestry.

*Student:* Well some people get a little racist and call me brown or black or …

*Researcher:* Because of your ancestry?

*Student:* [nods]

*Researcher:* And is it because … [of] the way you physically look or because of what they know about your ancestry?

*Student:* I think … a little bit of both.

There were many other differences between this student and others, so it was unclear whether her experiences with racism were solely as a result of her ancestry. Based upon prior experiences, I am inclined to say that her difficulties manifested themselves as racism because physical appearance was the easiest way for the other students to discriminate.

All of the students interviewed had varying experiences with their Aboriginal and/or Haida ancestry; however, it did seem to make up an important and influential identity for them. Although ancestry did seem to matter to these particular students, the degree of importance was not consistent between them. Based upon my interviews, observations, and experiences in this community, ancestry and other physical markers are used to divide students, teachers, and other community members into separate groups. It is possible that the students are unaware of the degree to which ancestry and these physical markers played a role in their lives, due to the high degree of homogeneity within this particular population. That is discrimination, although it exists here, may manifest itself differently based upon this homogeneity. When the school community is examined closely, however, many friendships are formed along family and/or ancestry lines.

### Teacher Perspectives on Student Ancestry.
Within the classroom, one teacher described that the students of Aboriginal ancestry sat on the opposite side from the students of non-Aboriginal ancestry.

*Researcher:* So you see a division between the Aboriginal students and the non-Aboriginal students?

*Teacher:* Yeah and it depends…[there] is a mix of kids from [the other town] and the kids from [the other town] are predominantly the logging, different kind of income than [the Haida students], so like I am not sure if it's the ancestry. It might just be that they are out of the environment of [this town] for most of the time right? So they haven't made the binding and the relationships with the kids here.

As is indicated, this teacher was unsure if this division could be entirely attributed to the ancestry of the students, suggesting that it could also have had to do with other factors. Another, perhaps

more subtle separation between students which was observed by this teacher was the division between families:

> I'm learning kind of the unique culture of the Haida. Like you know, how there's always certain families that – it's strange and I'm not sure that it's because people always have a view of the certain families or because the certain families have a certain view of themselves or that certain families are, not necessarily made fun of, but they're kind of the…it's always "Blame it on that particular family," or you know it's like if somebody's selling drugs, it would be that family. It's kind of like it's a challenge to not buy into many of the stereotypes because the child should walk through that door and I don't wanna hear it.

As this teacher expressed, it is difficult for those from outside the community to understand the divisions which exist between families. I have often been approached by outsiders wishing to understand this further; however, due to the complexity of this subject it is difficult to provide a simple explanation. What is important in this context is that many divisions exist in the community along family lines. These may be based upon past disagreements, indiscretions, or misunderstandings. When considering this, it is important to recall that in this community, as in other Aboriginal communities an entire family may be held accountable for the actions of a single member.

### Teacher Ancestry

Although the literature remains inconclusive (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003), it has been suggested that one way to promote Aboriginal student success in school is to increase the number of Aboriginal teachers (Silver, Mallett, Greene, and Simard, 2002). Likely the assumption is that an Aboriginal teacher would be able to solve the perceived challenges that a non-Aboriginal teacher faces, namely the inclusion of Aboriginal content and the capacity to serve as a role model for Aboriginal students. (The assumption that teachers of Aboriginal ancestry will automatically transform Euro-Canadian teaching practices and curriculum content into that which is more culturally responsive, may be somewhat unfair in that these Aboriginal

educators have already successfully navigated the Euro-Canadian post-secondary system). It is also believed that "the presence of teachers who share a common heritage with the students they teach fosters a sense of acceptance and may facilitate stronger communication among education system personnel, students, and parents" (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003, pp.116-117). This belief was held, not only by educators and students, but also by community members in Silver et al.'s (2002) study, where 92% of the community respondents believed that

> it would make a difference if there were more Aboriginal teachers….More Aboriginal teachers, they said, would contribute to overcoming the distance between schools and Aboriginal students and their families, and would make both students and parents feel more comfortable in schools. (p.20)

The perceived challenge for teachers who are not of Aboriginal ancestry is that there is a "divide or 'disconnect,' on cultural and class grounds, between the Aboriginal students and their largely white, middle class teachers" (Silver, et al., 2002, p.17). Many of the students and community members in their study reported that despite the efforts of the non-Aboriginal teachers, the Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal teachers came from two very distinct cultures and classes (Silver et al., 2002). They also found that less than half of the respondents in their study believed that teachers "understood them in particular, or understood Aboriginal students more generally" (p.18). When asked how well the teachers got along with Aboriginal students, less than half responded positively (Silver et al., 2002).

One suggestion to alleviate the challenges that non-Aboriginal teachers face is to improve the training on Aboriginal issues and realities that they receive in their teacher training programs. Because many of the non-Aboriginal teachers have been raised in predominantly white communities and educated in white institutions, their knowledge of Aboriginal culture and history is very limited. Furthermore, "the secondhand information they have received through textbooks, media and friends and family has often been distorted by negative, stereotypical

attitudes about people of color which are so pervasive in American culture" (Lawrence and

Tatum, as cited in Silver et al., 2002, p.45).

The relationship between the Aboriginal student and the non-Aboriginal educator is

particularly challenging because of the historical power imbalances. As Carlson pointed out,

> schools continue to be colonial in character, and to express colonial power relations:
> 'Since colonial education includes the active construction of power relations of
> domination and subordination, it also always involves control of the schooling process by
> the dominating culture, in this case a white dominating culture. This domination is
> represented visually to students and the community by the fact that teachers and
> administrators are primarily white.' (as cited in Silver et al., 2002, p.36)

This power imbalance compounded with the fact that there has been much difficulty in recruiting

Aboriginal teachers means that it is crucial to find effective ways for Aboriginal students and

non-Aboriginal teachers to work together.

### *Student Perspectives on Teacher Ancestry.*

When the students in this study were asked about whether it was important to have an

Aboriginal teacher in an Aboriginal community they provided a range of answers. Two students

responded affirmatively, because they felt that the community needed to be represented and

because the teachers and students might have had common experiences growing up.

> *Researcher:* If you had a teacher who was Aboriginal, some people might say that
> because that teacher is Aboriginal and you're Aboriginal that that would help you in
> some way…
>
> *Student:* Yeah, maybe they'd … 'cause they have this big thing to be like challenged in
> school and everything and if they were challenged in school – maybe these [non-
> Aboriginal] teachers weren't challenged as much as we are in school, but maybe if they
> were, but they got through it and they worked hard they'd understand where we're
> at…and how much help we need and what it feels like not to get help. I guess some
> [teachers] here don't.
>
> *Researcher:* So your belief is that some of the teachers here may not have had the same
> experiences as you because they are not Aboriginal?
>
> *Student:* If they're not Aboriginal. Maybe not just that, maybe they just haven't…

*Researcher:* …had different experiences.

*Student:* Yeah, they probably had better experiences than we were having.

*Researcher:* And so they can't relate to your experiences.

*Student:* Yeah.

One male student said that it was kind of important to have Aboriginal teachers so that the

students would have someone to look up to.

*Researcher:* Some people would say that it's important to have Aboriginal    teachers in a community that has a lot of Aboriginal students. Do you agree with that or   do you think it makes a difference?

*Student:* It kinda makes a difference for some people like they could look up to that person. Like knowing even …know there is racism in the world against them that they could still do kind of stuff, like be a teacher.

*Researcher:* So you think that by having an Aboriginal teacher in the school, the Aboriginal students could realize that you could overcome racism…

*Student:* Yeah.

Two students said that it didn't matter; and one female student said that it was not important, that

what was most important was that the teacher was good.

*Researcher:* Some people believe that it's important to have Aboriginal teachers in Aboriginal communities, do you agree?

*Student:* Well, you don't really have to have an Aboriginal teacher all the time. He or she could be from Nova Scotia or Northwest Territories and she would still just be a teacher.

*Researcher:* Okay, as long as they have the [positive] qualities you were describing before?

*Student:* Yeah.

*Researcher:* That's the most important thing? Not that they're Aboriginal or not Aboriginal?

*Student:* No, that wouldn't matter to me.

***Teacher Perspectives on Teacher Ancestry.***

All of the teachers in the study identified themselves as being of European ancestry, however one also added that she considered herself to be of "mixed ancestry". The teachers stated that their ancestry was represented at the school; one spoke of the mixed ancestry that she shared with the students and one discussed how the school was in line with her worldview.

> *Researcher:* Do you feel that your ancestry is represented at this school?
>
> *Teacher:* I don't think of it that way…I think more broadly, my way of growing up, so my worldview is definitely represented at this school. I think growing up in a white wealthy neighbourhood in Ontario…is representative of broader society and all the norms that we take for granted and that's the way I grew up so it's definitely my world view and the school system is part of that so I think how we go about our daily schedules here at the school is something that I'm comfortable with because that's what I grew up with… So I do think, maybe not ancestry because I think that's too detailed, I think more broadly that yes, my world view is represented.

As this teacher indicated, her worldview is represented at this particular school. Despite the fact that it is located in an Aboriginal community, the structures of the school are more in line with that of a Euro-Canadian context. Based on some later statements made by this teacher (see below), I believe that she was aware of her position of power based upon her ancestry, and she struggled with how she was positioned as a 'white' teacher.

Two of the teachers believed that their Euro-Canadian ancestry made their initial experiences in trying to connect with the students more difficult. As one stated,

> I think I am treated differently because I think it requires a lot more trust because of what's associated with where I come from with our students and that used to come up a lot actually, when I first came here, from parents and from students. And I haven't heard it in so long that I guess it just took me awhile to click into that question, but it definitely has affected my experience. The whole "I'm white, you're not" "Why are you here?" I've had parents accuse me of just practicing on their kids.

This experience could be contrasted with the experience of another teacher who was perceived as being of Aboriginal ancestry. She stated that this inaccurate perception made her integration into the school community much easier.

So, like I don't have [Aboriginal] ancestry, but the kids assumed I did. For the longest time until they felt comfortable enough to ask me and then they just kind of accepted me for who I was after that. And because I don't...I've noticed some other students or some other teachers who have been pinpointed like, who look very English or very *Other* and it's been harder. The kids have a harder time bonding with them.

This is another example of how individuals are positioned based upon the physical markers of their identity. What is of particular interest here is that although the assumptions made were incorrect, the teacher still benefited from those incorrect assumptions.

One teacher gave an example of the difference in language used by the students of Aboriginal ancestry that she attributed to her Euro-Canadian ancestry.

*Teacher:* At the beginning, anyways, and maybe this happens with all beginning teachers, they have a really hard time trusting people. They don't know if you're gonna stay. If you're not from this community, why are you here? And a lot of the language with just even the short list of Haida words that are common, like my *tsinnii*, my *gagee*[8], *how'aa*[9], all those things, they don't say. Like sometimes I wonder, "Why did you just say grandma with me, when I know that you say *naanii* when you're with your friends?" So I know that they do things differently.

*Researcher:* But you notice that there's been a shift sort of as they get to know you?

*Teacher:* Yeah, and I think mostly it's their sense of humour that shifts. I think the more they feel comfortable, the more they know they can talk with you like they talk with their family or friends...And that just opens up a whole other more comfortable way of using language and so things come more naturally rather than feeling like, "Oooo, there's a white teacher and I need to use this other kind of language around her".

The students in this example, engaged in code switching, demonstrated by the changes in the language that they used, in response to the 'white' ancestry of their teacher. Later on, as the students began to accept her, they did this less. Based on this example, the code switching could have been used as an indicator of whether the students had accepted an educator into their school community.

All the teachers stated that they believed that a teacher of Aboriginal ancestry would have an easier time gaining the trust of the students. The teachers also agreed that having more teachers of Aboriginal ancestry would be an asset, however they shared different reasons for this

including the ability to provide insider information and perspectives, as well as to act as role models for the students.

> [The students] don't see a value in education in many ways and living here you don't necessarily need it for many of the things that they seek in employment. So, having a First Nations [teacher] who's gone and … worked towards something and it has to do with education, it puts a value on it… "Oh, okay they have placed a priority on that so maybe it's not such a, you know, I won't be made fun of, or I won't be put down…" There's this fear of going outside the community to get education and then this fear of coming back, "How much will I have changed?"

One teacher shared an experience that had occurred with an Aboriginal teacher when they were doing their teacher's training together. This teacher believed that there would be many challenges that an Aboriginal educator might face in returning to teach in his or her home community.

> It didn't seem like [this Aboriginal teacher] was very interested in going back [to his home community] right away and … I was in a conversation with another student and I was like, "Oh no, it would be a real challenge to go back because you'd really be like the saviour, you know coming back, you're gonna bring it all around, here we go, you know like everything is on your back, you know you can't do anything wrong, but you have to do everything suddenly. It's pressure."

The teachers also expressed the belief that having more Aboriginal teachers would help to bridge the gap between the community and the school. All the teachers stated that having teachers of Aboriginal ancestry had a positive impact on the school.

> *Researcher:* Some people believe that it's important to have Aboriginal teachers in Aboriginal communities, do you agree with that?
>
> *Teacher:* Absolutely. I just think it's so important, role models are so important and especially with our community where I feel there's a lack of confidence and understanding of the Haida culture amongst the Haida and there's this whole movement of trying to gain it back, and how better to do that than to have the Haida right here in the school? I wish we had all Haida teachers.
>
> *Researcher:* So your feeling is that by having Aboriginal teachers they could serve as role models and they could also-
>
> *Teacher:* -share a lot of knowledge that we don't have.

The role of identity with a particular focus on Aboriginal ancestry was vital for this research and ancestry indirectly permeated every aspect of this study. Furthermore, identity, particularly ancestry is present in every aspect of daily life within this community, especially in the area of education.

Based upon the review of traditional Aboriginal teaching practices and the role of identity for Aboriginal students, it is conceivable that there are ways to effectively engage these students without compromising their identity as students of Aboriginal ancestry. Although it may seem desirable to achieve this by increasing the number of Aboriginal educators in the system, this is an unrealistic solution. A solution worth exploring, however, is the integration of the strengths of traditional Aboriginal teaching practices and Euro-Canadian teaching practices to better meet the needs of Aboriginal students.

*academic indian*

*i find it difficult to analyze*
*cultural experiences*
*academically*
*taking apart what i understand by living*
*piece by piece*

*i do not know how to be indian and academic*

*i read these stories and i know them*
*like i know my own hands*
*i live them*
*and yet*
*i do not know the answers to your questions*

*you are the expert here*
*and i am left without original words or ideas*

*so i sit here in silence*
*listening to your words*
*writing down your ideas*
*to regurgitate them*
*later.*

**CHAPTER V   Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives with Contemporary Educational Practices**

In an attempt to "better understand how to create schools in which all students from many cultures, backgrounds, and languages may live and learn together" (p.6), Shields (2007) drew upon selections of Bakhtin's literary theory. Given her focus upon supporting educators to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, her interpretations of Bakhtin's work are particularly relevant when considering how to integrate traditional Aboriginal teaching practices with contemporary Euro-Canadian teaching practices.

Shields' (2007) interpretation of Bakhtin's work was not specifically developed for Aboriginal students, and it would not be appropriate to use the work of Bakhtin to advocate for a singular solution for educating all Aboriginal students. Rather, her work is based upon the perspective that students are fundamentally individuals and, as such, effective educational strategies must rely upon meeting their *individual* needs. In fact, Shields' (2007) interpretations criticized such universal endeavours to support students, arguing that "there is no one 'best' practice…, no one 'right' way, but a myriad of approaches used to determine the best ways to teach a particular child in a specific context" (p.16). That said, many Aboriginal students may be experiencing similar challenges with contemporary Euro-Canadian educational practices based upon their shared history with colonialism. However, it must be reiterated that references to Aboriginal students are not meant to encompass all Aboriginal students, nor are they intended to imply that suggestions made would not be applicable to non-Aboriginal students.

As has been indicated previously, Aboriginal ways of knowing are often undermined within the contemporary Euro-Canadian school system. However, as Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) countered,

> schools can sometimes introduce indigenous students to their roots in ways that evoke powerful responses. In short, formal education, or schooling, is critically important for its

ability to provide the kinds of experiences, knowledge, skills, and credentials required for success in contemporary Aboriginal communities and Canadian society… (p.2)

They also recognized, however, that this may not be without consequences for students of Aboriginal ancestry. Nevertheless, it is also important to recall that educational practices do not need to be mutually exclusive. Although Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian educational practices are distinct from one another, there are contributions from both practices that can promote Aboriginal student academic achievement. In endeavoring to integrate the strengths of both perspectives, the words of an Aboriginal Elder can be remembered,

> in order to survive in the 20th century, we must really come to grips with the white man's culture and with white man ways. You must stop lamenting the past. The white man has many good things. Borrow. Master and apply his technology. Discover and define the harmonies between the two general cultures. To be fully Indian we must become bilingual and bicultural. In doing so, we will survive as Indian people, true to our past. (Couture, as cited in Gamlin, 2003, p.16)

### *Learning can be Holistic*

"Aboriginal children tend to prefer a holistic or integrated approach to learning. This reflects the Aboriginal world-view where everything is interrelated and all relationships are important. It also reflects the importance of family and place" (Nichol and Robinson, 2000, p.498). Learning does not need to be compartmentalized and separate, as it is within the contemporary school system. Without dramatically changing the structures of the school, educators can work together to create cohesion across the various discipline areas. Learning strategies used for achieving literacy and numeracy, relevant to all curricular areas, can be integrated into each class. This may assist in providing some much-needed continuity for Aboriginal students. Furthermore, fundamental teachings such as respect and compassion, as well as 'ways of being' in a Euro-Canadian context can be modeled to students in all situations.

In her book *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, Delpit (1995) argued that there are codes of power that must be acquired for a student to be successful in

society. In this case, these codes of power would be reflected in the culture and values of the Euro-Canadians. Delpit argued that for minority students to be successful, they needed to have access to these codes of power. Villegas and Lucas (2002) also advocated for these kinds of opportunities, in their recognition that minority students needed not only to be knowledgeable about the curriculum, but they also needed to know "the culturally appropriate ways of participating in learning events and of displaying what they know" (Villegas and Lucas, 2002, p.107). Shields (2007) further argued that,

> in every situation there are 'rules of power' – rules that benefit those who are already familiar with the context and hence share the power, but that marginalize those who are outside, who do not already understand the context and hence, for whom the words have no meaning. (p.43)

One should proceed with caution however, because as Fecho, Davis, and Moore (2006) warned, "those who too readily embrace mainstream power codes run the risk of forsaking their culture and the dialect that ties them to that culture" (p.189).

One way to ensure that instruction in the codes of power does not override a student's cultural knowledge, is to provide additional instruction on how to critique those codes of power, from the perspective of a student's own culture. As Fecho, et al. (2006) suggested, it is possible to draw upon Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia to achieve balance between the need for instruction on Delpit's (1995) codes of power and the need to question the way that they operate. They suggested the following framework for consideration when working with minority students:

> 1) All students must be taught mainstream power codes because not to do so will further marginalize those who are already marginalized from access to social, economic, and political power venues.
> 2) Teachers must find ways to legitimize, validate, and celebrate the home and other personal codes students bring to the classroom. Not to do so is to create a gulf among the child, his home, and the school.
> 3) Students need to be taught mainstream power codes in ways that critique those codes and open them to further expansion and greater inclusion. Only through critique will the codes become more representational and equitable. (Fecho, et al, 2006, pp.189-190)

It can be argued that one aspect of providing holistic instruction means educating students how to use these codes of power to be successful within the Euro-Canadian context. Because the Euro-Canadian school system is based upon these cultural values, it would seem an ideal location to educate students on how to demonstrate their knowledge within this context. It is important to recall, however, that being able to critique these Euro-Canadian codes of power is equally important for Aboriginal students so that their traditional ways of knowing are not undermined.

### *Learning can be Relationship-Based*

Students, in particular adolescents, enjoy activities which involve some social interaction. Educators do not need to rely solely on independent activities for their students; rather they can use the students' desire to socialize to their advantage. In her description of how to motivate Northern learners, Swanson (2003) suggested that, "the classroom should provide a social environment where personal interaction takes place. The use of cooperative learning groups provides a supportive learning environment, and activities that allow cooperative work in the classroom do a good job of retaining interest" (p.67).

In this study, when the students were asked about the activities they enjoyed in English class, one male student talked about the fact that he enjoyed working in a group.

> *Student:* Well, we did other activities and stuff, but…we had this story we had to do, like a story that [the teacher] gave us…we could like make it up, but it had to be the same thing just with different people and stuff? And we could like act it out or draw pictures…or just read it out in class. We did that in groups.
>
> *Researcher:* So what did you like about that?
>
> *Student:* We acted it out.
>
> *Researcher:* Okay, so the drama? You liked the drama?
>
> *Student:* Sorta. Like being able to act stuff out.
>
> *Researcher:* And did you like about working with the group?

*Student:* Yeah. I'd rather work with a group than by myself…with stuff like that.

Besides building relationships between students, relationships can also be formed between the educator and the students, the importance of which cannot be underestimated. Although the fostering of these relationships appeals to a common-sense understanding of a successful teaching practice, it is also supported by the research (eg. Bazylak, 2002; Goulet, 2001; Taylor, 1995). Furthermore, Bakhtinian perspectives suggest that "relationship is essential to understanding, and to the creation of shared meaning" (Shields, 2007, p.45). Bazylak (2002) also advocated for the building of relationships with his recognition that "strong, healthy relationships built on trust and mutual respect contribute to the educational success of Aboriginal students [and the] strength of the student-teacher relationship often dictates the level of success the student achieves in school" (p.145).

It has also been argued that building strong relationships is crucial to creating a classroom environment that enhances the learning process (Melnechenko and Horsman, as cited in Bazylak, 2002). Other research has indicated that students "want to feel connected personally to their teachers…they want to know that teachers have thoughts, feelings, and experiences that both enliven and go beyond the academic content of the classroom" (Phelan, Davidson, and Cao, as cited in Bazylak, 2002, p.146).

Within this study, five of the six students interviewed, thought it was important that their teachers know them to increase their success in school. However, for the most part this meant that their teachers should know them as learners as opposed to knowing anything about their personal lives and/or interests.

*Researcher:* Some people would also say that it's really important for teachers to know their students, what do you think about that?

*Student:* Yeah, I think it is. Then like, you understand where they're at and all that.

*Researcher:* Okay, so when I say "know their students" are you talking about know what they do outside of school or know how they think or how they learn?

*Student:* Yeah, how they learn. So then you know where they're at and how they teach.

For the most part the students felt that their teachers knew them, yet only one student reported feeling like he or she knew his or her teacher. The students in this study expressed that it was *more important* for the teacher to know them than vice versa. The one student who thought it was important to know his teacher focused upon the need to know how far he could "push them" as opposed to anything of a personal nature.

*Researcher:* What kinds of things should you know about your teacher?

*Student:* I dunno, just how much they can take from us, so you know when to stop.

In Goulet's (2001) study of two teachers who were considered to be effective at teaching Aboriginal students, it was also determined that from the teacher's perspective, the teacher/student relationship was an integral part of successful teaching. "Deyhle and Swisher (1997) believe that the level of trust between students and teachers is crucial to understanding why some students are able to learn in classrooms and others are not" (Goulet, 2001, p.73). Furthermore, as Taylor (1995) pointed out, even carefully planned lessons can be ineffective if the student-teacher relationship is weak, however with a stronger relationship, the teacher "has a foundation for demanding more from the student" (p.236).

The teachers in this study also believed that it was important to both know their students and have their students know them on a more personal level.

*Researcher:* Some people believe that it's important for teachers to know their students to improve their learning, how do you feel about that?

*Teacher:* Yup.

*Researcher:* When I say "know your students" do you think it's important to know more their learning styles or what they enjoy doing outside of school or…?

*Teacher:* Combination, I think. The things that I try to do is outreaching with the community as being basketball, by being outdoor guy, by doing all those things. If I don't know this kid's patterns outside the classroom, how am I supposed to know it inside?

*Researcher:* And what about the students knowing you?

*Teacher:* Same goes. I'm big about that as well, as a teacher, as a human, you know that I'm not some sort of person that's not connected to the community, not connected to what they're doing…I mean I turned down the position of working in a suburb of Vancouver where I would drive in and drive out, I think that's ridiculous, I just like the community, you know, people should see me, they should smell me, they should see all sides of me.

My own experiences in the community would support the notion that students need to know their teachers before they are able to learn from them. My father's family is from the community so I have the advantage of being able to talk about my relatives and students recognize them. I suspect that part of the reason students have difficulty articulating the importance of personal relationships with their teachers is because they take them for granted in the sense that they live in a small community and personal relationships are more common in such a community than in larger urban centres.

Although, the individual relationship between the teacher and the student is significant, it is also necessary to consider how this relationship moves into the broader context of the community and how the teacher's interactions with the family and the community influence their relationship with the student. This is of particular importance among Aboriginal people where relationships make up a vital part of the social structure of the community.

The relationship between teachers and the community in which they teach has a tremendous impact on the teacher's ability to be effective in the classroom. How the teacher navigates these relationships will greatly influence how the teacher will be perceived by both the community and the students (Taylor, 1995). This is particularly arduous for teachers who do not share the ancestry of their students. In these situations, it is critical that the community and the students perceive that the teacher is being respectful of the traditional practices of the community.

This is not to say that the interest would not be genuine, however if a teacher does not participate in those events that are meaningful to the community, they will have difficulty understanding the students and engaging with the students' families. This is a particularly challenging balance to achieve. Non-Aboriginal teachers who engage themselves too much may be perceived as being too involved in a culture that is not theirs, however those who choose not to engage at all risk inadvertently ostracizing their students.

> Although few students express the thought openly, they are concerned about what their non-Native teacher thinks and feels about their reserve. They want their teacher to like and respect the community. Obvious isolation is interpreted by students as a rejection of the community and, indirectly, of themselves. (Taylor, 1995, p.226)

Taylor (1995) did not, however, advocate for the same level of community involvement from each teacher. Rather he suggested that each teacher must find their own way to participate with the community. It must be authentic, as it becomes the way for the teacher to communicate to the community their respect and support and he suggested that in turn the teacher may receive the support of the community.

As Taylor (1995) went on to point out, students of Aboriginal ancestry are often struggling with their identity and that teachers have the capacity have either a positive or a negative impact. It is hoped that the teacher will attempt to counteract the many negative influences, such as prejudiced attitudes, poverty, stereotypes, that Aboriginal students must contend with, and all which influence their self image. The relationships the teacher develops with "students, other teachers, parents, and the community will greatly influence how they are perceived, and this will alter their effectiveness as teachers" (p.225).

Relationships are not only formed between people, they can also be formed between the students and the curriculum. Incorporating information about historical contributions that Aboriginal people have made to the various curricular areas and integrating the work of

Aboriginal authors are two examples of ways to foster connections between the Aboriginal students and the curriculum. These strategies can also validate Aboriginal ways of knowing, without diminishing their importance or implying that Aboriginal people and their ways of knowing existed solely in the past. Well-meaning educators may attempt to insert generic components of Aboriginal culture into the curriculum to meet a need for Aboriginal content. However this has the potential to trivialize knowledge which may be meaningful and sacred to a particular group of Aboriginal people.

### *Learning can be Contextualized*

It has been argued that "by contextualizing learning, students discover that education is meaningful and relevant to their own lives" (Nichol and Robinson, 2000, p.500). This may mean teaching students outside of the classroom environment, so that they can see the immediate applications of their lessons. It may mean bringing in guests or experts in a particular field, so that students are able to learn about later applications of the curriculum they are learning in class. Role models from the community who are willing to discuss the education they needed to obtain employment in their field may also assist with this particular situation. For example, within this study, one female student did not seem to be able to understand the applications for Social Studies beyond the ability to become a Social Studies teacher.

> *Researcher:* Do you think that what you learn in Social Studies will be useful to you in your future?

> *Student:* Only if I wanted to be a Social Studies teacher.

From a broader perspective, contextualized learning also encompasses the need to recognize the context in which the education is occurring. Some non-Aboriginal educators, for example, may struggle with their role in Aboriginal communities. As one teacher described, it

was very challenging to understand the role of a non-Aboriginal educator in an Aboriginal community.

> Yeah, so it took me awhile to feel comfortable and to have the confidence that "Yeah, I'm here because I love the community and want to help" but you need to reach that level of confidence. I went through definitely a hard time of questioning like "Why am I here?"

This sentiment may become particularly pronounced when educators consider the historical role of residential schools.

In this context, Bakhtin's notion of chronotope may provide educators with a framework through which to consider some of the devastating events in history which have impacted education as well as their students, in a way that does not immobilize their capacity to continue on in their role as educators. Chronotope, which Bakhtin (1981) described as "the inseparability of space and time" (p.84) allows educators to recognize the significance of the past while continuing to focus upon the present. By adopting this perspective, educators can examine issues such as the impact of residential school without glossing over their significance or becoming immobilized by the devastation that they created. As Shields (2007) further explained,

> the experiences of Native American residential schools may be seen as inconsequential once those schools have been discontinued. However, both the historic significance and future import of these and many other events are lost if they are seen as simply artifacts of a specific past situation. (p.26)

### *Learning can be Practical*
As mentioned previously, education within the contemporary context can be too theoretical for some students because the applications of the learning which occurs at school may not be immediately obvious to them. Classroom activities comprised of predominantly textbook activities may fall into this theoretical category for some students. The students in this study, including this female student, described their desire for more "hands on learning" as opposed to textbook learning.

*Researcher:* Okay. What are some things that you think teachers could do to make it less boring for you?

*Student:* I dunno, just somehow make it fun, like I'm not sure, but…

*Researcher:* Is there anything that you have done that has been fun this year? In any of your classes?

*Student:* In Science we're doing chemical reactions and we had cases, well two liters of pop…And put Mentos in it and it blew up. Things like that.

*Researcher:* That were hands-on?

*Student:* Yeah, hands-on is better.

*Researcher:* Okay, so can you think of what "hands-on" would look like in Math? What kinds of things could you do in Math that were "hands-on"?

*Student:* Blocks.

*Researcher:* Blocks? And English? What could you do that is "hands-on" in English?

*Student:* Like drama and plays and everything.

In addition, the inclusion of work experience and other such endeavours mean that students can immediately use what they are learning. Providing students with opportunities to job shadow and apprentice with masters in a field of interest to the student can also provide them with valuable skills, while reflecting traditional Aboriginal teaching practices. Educators unable to make such long-term arrangements can bring professionals into the classroom or go on field trips to accommodate short term learning experiences outside of the classroom.

### Learning can be Continuous

Learning within the contemporary Canadian context does not need to have an endpoint. Rather than being examples of individuals who have achieved the endpoint of their education, which can create a kind of hierarchy between the educator and the student, educators can model the concept of continuous education for their students. Bakhtin's notion of carnival, which was described by Shields (2007) as "a way of breaking down barriers, of overcoming power inequities

and hierarchies, of reforming and renewing relationships both personal and institutional" (p.97), is particularly useful for this purpose.

Bakhtin incorporated two types of medieval feasts to describe his notion of the carnival. The first was the official feast of the Middle Ages which was "always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biologic or historic timeliness" (as cited in Morris, 1994, pp.198-199). These official feasts "did not lead people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it" (as cited in Morris, 1994, p.199). This type of feast could be compared to the Haida potlatch which is

> our supreme court where our laws are established and reaffirmed. The potlatch is a public forum where songs, which are inherited as property, are transferred and sung by their rightful owners. It is where the chiefs claim their position. It is where names, titles, and social privileges are handed down to the rightful person through our mothers, since we are a matrilineal society. (Davidson, 1991, p.2)

The second type of feast that Bakhtin described was the one which was the complete opposite of the official feast. This feast, on which his notion of the carnival was based, "celebrated the temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (as cited in Morris, 1994, p.199). Shields (2007) suggested this feast or carnival, was used by Bakhtin to describe "a way of breaking out of the confines of tradition, hierarchy, and oppression, and of finding new, explicit and more egalitarian ways of interacting" (pp.97-98).

In this context, both of the feasts are applicable. A non-Aboriginal educator who attends an official feast or Haida potlatch within the Haida community will likely be unfamiliar with the traditions and will need to rely on his or her students to teach him or her how to behave appropriately. This brings the example metaphorically into the second kind of feast or carnival, which serves to challenge the traditional hierarchies that were established in the school system,

where the teacher is viewed as the expert, or one who has attained the height of their educational achievement. In this context, the student becomes the expert, and plays the role of the educator for the duration of the potlatch or carnival experience. As Taylor (1995) pointed out, "it is important to let students teach you what they know about the topic. Teachers may be more knowledgeable about a topic they have researched, but the student is dealing in life experiences and knows things that non-Native persons do not know" (p.237). The importance of this is that "unless we take time to engage in encounter (and carnival is only one way of doing so), we can never know more than our own way; we can never learn about or from another, and we cannot develop to be more fully human" (Shields, 2007, p.162).

As Shields (2007) argued, "hierarchical structures maintain distance, provide appropriate chains of command, and require formality rather than familiarity. They were established ways of governance that maintain order and discipline, but were never intended as mechanisms or vehicles of learning" (p.162). This point is particularly critical in Aboriginal communities, where traditional teaching practices contrast with Euro-Canadian teaching models.

### *Finding the Balance between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian Ways of Knowing*

Educators cannot continue to ignore the knowledge and experiences that Aboriginal students bring to school. "To overlook the resources children bring to school is to deny them access to learning. To overlook the resources children bring to school is to deny them access to the knowledge construction process" (Villegas and Lucas, 2002, p.73). As Noll's (1998) research demonstrated "by validating expression of cultural knowledge, perspectives, and personal experiences through language, art, dance, and music, the literacy strengths that exist in the lives of Indian youth outside of school might be more clearly revealed within school" (p.230).

Equally important, however, are the Euro-Canadian educational practices and the recognition of the importance of being academically successful within this system. Currently, the

Euro-Canadian system reflects the dominant discourse within Canadian society, and to deny

Aboriginal students an education in this system may inhibit their future success. Battiste and

Henderson (2000) advised that Aboriginal educators need to

> balance traditional Indigenous ways of knowing with the Eurocentric tradition. They must respect and understand other ways of knowing. They must embrace the paradox of subjective and objective ways of knowing that do not collapse into either inward or outward illusions, but bring us all into a living dialogical relationship with the world that our knowledge gives us. (p.94)

It would seem that this recommendation is relevant to all educators, for regardless of what

educators believe, Aboriginal students have a right to an education based upon the strengths of

the Euro-Canadian as well as the traditional Aboriginal systems.

Because achievement in print literacy is such an integral part of achievement in the Euro-

Canadian school system, it would seem appropriate to examine how to apply this notion of

integrating Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian teaching practices in the context of literacy. It is

anticipated that this will clarify any remaining questions about how this may be achieved.


### *Aboriginal Literacy*

Historically Eurocentric and Aboriginal concepts of literacy were incompatible with one

another, with Eurocentric concepts focusing exclusively upon reading and writing and Aboriginal

concepts incorporating more holistic perspectives. Although it can be argued that Euro-Canadian

society continues to privilege print literacy, recent developments in the field of literacy seem to

be more compatible with Aboriginal perspectives. It is hoped that these new understandings will

lead to increased respect for Aboriginal literacies and improved academic achievement for

students of Aboriginal ancestry.

*Aboriginal Perspectives on Literacy*

  Aboriginal perspectives of literacy extend beyond the concept of literacy consisting only of reading and writing; rather, literacy is viewed from a holistic perspective, encompassing the individual and their community (Antone, 2003). As Paulsen (2003) explained, "[Aboriginal] literacy embodies factors of culture, tradition, language, and ways of knowing and being" (p.24). In contrast to some Eurocentric conceptions, which regard literacy as something that can be measurably achieved, Aboriginal literacy is considered a life-long process (Paulsen, 2003). Battiste described Aboriginal literacy as "a relative social concept more reflective of culture and context than of the levels of formal instruction by which it is usually measured" (as cited in Antone, 2003, p.9). In this context, literacy is often described as holistic and the use of the Medicine Wheel, which incorporates mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional knowing, is used to assist in this description (e.g., Antone, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Swanson, 2003). In her discussion of historical perspectives on Aboriginal literacy, Curwen Doige (2001) succinctly incorporated Aboriginal perspectives to define literacy as "the ability to use reading, writing, reasoning, listening, and speaking to make meaning from contemporary visual symbols that communicate ideas, values, and traditions in society" (p.117).

  When considering the educational needs of Aboriginal students it is important to recall that historically this population has had a challenging relationship with the formal education system (e.g., Orr & Friesen, 1999; Whattam, 2003). As a result, the level of mistrust that many Aboriginal people feel toward the formal education system is understandably elevated. This mistrust is evident in much of the writing about Aboriginal literacy (e.g., Antone, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Swanson, 2003) where concerns about the impact of the Euro-Canadian education system and concepts of literacy on Aboriginal students, are frequently voiced. Furthermore, in the sense that literacy is viewed as a component of Euro-Canadian education, and thus as a tool for

assessment (Antone, 2003; Paulsen, 2003) rather than a strategy for gaining information, it has

been rejected by some Aboriginal scholars who are concerned that their traditional ways of

learning are being overlooked (Swanson, 2003). Educators wishing to provide instruction for

these students, within the context of the Euro-Canadian education system, need to proceed

carefully, for as Battiste cautioned "when one culture's form of literacy is forced on another, it

becomes cultural and cognitive assimilation" (as cited in Paulsen, 2003, p.25).

It has been recognized by some that Western educators are slowly "moving away from

the restricted definitions of literacy as being only empirically measurable skills in reading,

writing, and Numeracy (Collins, 1998; Court, 1997)" (Paulsen, 2003, p. 25); however, as Paulsen

(2003) stated, "it is important to define and understand [Aboriginal] literacy in order to move

away from the situation of Aboriginal students being measured by Euro-Western definitions and

move into a balanced, non-competitive relationship between the cultures" (p.27). Although this

advice needs to be heeded, it is also important that Aboriginal students gain the necessary

academic skills to succeed within the Euro-Canadian context.

### *Conflict between Aboriginal and Eurocentric Forms of Literacy*

The challenge for Aboriginal people is that mastering Eurocentric forms of literacy may

compromise the attainment of their own literacies. As Ferdman (1990) indicated, he was

concerned that

> the student must either adopt the perspective of the school, at the risk of developing a
> negative component to his or her cultural identity, or else resist these externally imposed
> activities and meanings, at the risk of becoming alienated from the school. (p.195)

Hermes and Uran (2006) also questioned whether "achievement of literacy in the colonial

language [is] empowering" (p.393). Regardless of the answer, this question serves to illustrate the

complexity of Aboriginal people learning Eurocentric forms of literacy. Hermes and Uran (2006)

further argued that attempting to empower a child using education and technology may not only

separate them from their parents, but also negate "familial and larger social networks of generational authority and expertise" (p.395). In addition, Aboriginal culture is focused upon activities which have "tangible, practical, and visible results. Reading and writing are not considered to be such activities" (White-Kaulaity, 2007, p.561). Other challenges exist for Aboriginal people because mastering Eurocentric literacies not only means that there is the potential to replace their own ways of knowing with those of the colonizers, but specifically "the written word was often used to discredit Native American culture or rob [them] of [their] rights, [and] writing and reading are considered by some to be 'white man's' activities" (White-Kaulaity, 2007, p.561).

It is recognized that "some literacies have a higher status than others, for various reasons, as [Western] literacy has had a higher status than Aboriginal literacy" (Doige, 2001, p.125) which is the reason for continuing to acknowledge the importance of effective literacy instructional practices within the Euro-Canadian context. That said, it is also important that educators recognize that "the literacy that Aboriginal students bring is not only acceptable but is fundamental to the learning that occurs in the class because it reveals Aboriginal ways of thinking and understanding the world" (Doige, 2001, p.125).

According to Bakhtin's concept of chronotope, "we must recognize the complex interactions among past, present, and future. Educators must become aware of how the intersection of past, present, and future may result in different learning approaches and characteristics for different groups of children" (Sheilds, 2007, p.18). As such, while recognizing the importance of traditional Aboriginal literacies, the role that Eurocentric literacies play in the contemporary context is equally important. Given that Eurocentric literacies are currently privileged in the Canadian context, Aboriginal students need to master these literacies if they wish to be successful within this context. In addition, "...*basic* level literacy is insufficient in

today's world where both reading and writing tasks required of adolescents are continuing to increase in complexity and difficulty" (Alvermann, 2001, p.4). That said, Euro-Canadian literacy practices must not replace Aboriginal literacies rather they must exist along side of them; neither being displaced by the other.

"…[B]ecause literacy education tends to be left primarily to school, children become literate in the cultural image represented by their school" (Ferdman, 1990, p.189). It is therefore the educator's responsibility to be familiar with traditional Aboriginal literacies which are traditionally overlooked (White-Kaulaity, 2007) so that they can reinforce these ways of knowing while continuing to provide instruction within the Euro-Canadian context. However, as mainstream achievement indicators demonstrate, educators continue to be unable to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal students.

### *Contemporary Practices*

Within the contemporary context, educators of the core subject areas[10] (with the exception of English Language Arts) view themselves as specialists in their field and are either uncomfortable teaching literacy skills or believe that it is not their responsibility (Donahue, 2003). Compounding this apparent reluctance to provide literacy instruction to secondary students are the curricular demands that are placed upon educators which often preclude the ability to provide literacy instruction (Schoenbach, Braunger, Greenleaf, & Litman, 2003). As a result, literacy instruction is left to the English Language Arts educators. This means that literacy instruction has become compartmentalized, and literacy strategies learned in English Language Arts may have become designated by the students as strategies only applicable within this curricular area.

***Perspectives on English Language Arts.***

The students in this study obtained the majority of their school-based literacy instruction within the English Language Arts classroom. For this reason when we discussed school-based literacy instruction we were predominantly talking about the instruction that they received in their English Language Arts class. For the most part, they reported enjoying English class, with only one male who reported that he enjoyed it only sometimes. One of the students who reported that English class was her favourite class stated that she enjoyed the content of the class (i.e. reading and writing). Two of the other students (males) reported that they enjoyed what the teacher was doing and the activities. When asked about their favourite activities in English, two students said they enjoyed the shared writing, citing the interactive nature of the activity; two students said that they enjoyed silent reading because the room was quiet and they got to choose what they would read; one student picked spelling because she enjoyed learning new words; and one student described the "Role Model Project" because he got to choose who he would interview and he was proud of the outcome.

*Researcher:* What's your favourite thing to do in English class?

*Student:* Huh. I don't know. I liked doing the interview things we did last year.

*Researcher:* Was this the role model [project]?

*Student:* Yeah, those role models.

*Researcher:* What did you like about doing that?

*Student:* Doing like the report on it. All the grade nines last year thought they were done by grade twelves, all of the older kids, 'cause of how well they were done.

*Researcher:* Wow, so did you have to come up with the interviews?

*Student:* We had to come up with the questions and then we wrote down, like, the answers and then we wrote it down.

Some students admitted feeling bored in English class, however they were divided about what contributed to their boredom: two of the students said that it was because of how the class was being taught and two of the students said that it was because they were bored with the activity that they were doing.

> *Researcher:* I just want to clarify, it sounded like what you were saying was that you thought the content [of English class] is okay, so what you're learning in the course is okay, but it's how it's being taught that's the problem for you.

> *Student:* Yeah, it's how it's being taught and the same thing again, like it's boring. I don't want to read a book that doesn't interest me, I don't want to read a poem or study a poem that I don't understand…

Because literacy instruction could be beneficial in all subject areas, it is unfortunate that educators remain unwilling to integrate literacy instruction across curricular areas. This integration might make literacy activities more meaningful and diverse for students. It seems that educators may be concerned that by focusing upon literacy instruction they will fall behind in their content instruction, and as a result they seek other forms of content instruction that do not rely upon student literacy (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, and Hurwitz, 1999). Unfortunately this reduces the amount of time that their students have to further develop their reading skills. Also, as Alvermann (2001) pointed out,

> adolescents respond to the literacy demands of their subject area classes when they have appropriate background knowledge and strategies for reading a variety of texts. Effective instruction develops students' abilities to comprehend, discuss, study, and write about multiple forms of text (print, visual, and oral) by taking into account what they are capable of doing as everyday users of language and literacy. (pp.8-9)

### *Perspectives on Literacy.*
The generalized perception is that one of the challenges for Aboriginal students is that families are unsupportive of school-based literacy instruction. This finding was not supported by this research where all of the students believed that their families thought that reading and writing

were important. Families demonstrated this to the students by encouraging them to read, explaining why it was important to read, and trying to help them when they didn't understand.

Student responses were divided about the reading and writing level students should have achieved by graduation; half of the students suggested a grade ten level and half suggested grade twelve level or more. When asked whether the level should be different if a student wished to continue on to college or university, two said no, that the level should remain the same and one student thought that the level should be lower. One student had the unexpected response that the grade level should be *increased* if the student did *not* wish to attend university or college as this would mean that their opportunity to improve their reading and writing would end with high school and he suggested that the student would need to know more.

> *Researcher:* And if you didn't want to go to university or college do you think that [reading and writing level] would be different [than if you did]?

> *Student:* If I didn't really want to [go], I'd try to make it higher. So I'd know more even, 'cause if I'm not going to college I still need to know a bit.

Teachers also shared their perspectives on the level of reading they thought their students should have achieved upon graduation, however their perspectives focused more upon the practical aspects of literacy rather than specific grade levels.

> *Researcher:* What level of reading and writing do you believe that your students should have when they finish high school?

> *Teacher:* Well, this room is surrounded by paper, if they can pick any of the stuff up and start charting their way through it in one way or another, it doesn't matter what it is. That they can read the back of a shampoo bottle, they can also make their way though a conversation about a school somewhere in Guelph or whatever…

### Perspectives on Literacy at Home and at School.
Some researchers have advocated for school-based literacy instruction to reflect home literacy practices (e.g., Alvermann, 2001). It is thought that this will improve literacy achievement, particularly for minority students whose literacy practices are not often reflected in

the school setting (Heath, 1983). My discussions with students did not address any literacies that could be categorized as traditionally Aboriginal, such as oral story telling or interpreting the complex symbols in Haida art. Rather the discussion revolved around more contemporary Euro-centric literacies, such as computer use and magazines. This is not to say that previous findings are inaccurate, rather that there may be other home literacy practices that Aboriginal students are engaging in, which may also be relevant.

When the students in this study were asked about what kinds of reading they did at home, four of them made references to MSN messenger; four of the students stated that they read magazines, and two of the students stated that they read novels. All of this reading contrasted with the reading that they did at school, which they stated was predominantly text book reading. The most common distinction that the students made between the reading at home and the reading at school was that they enjoyed what they read at home and felt that they were forced to read at school.

> *Researcher:* What's the difference between the reading that you do at home and the reading that you do at school?
>
> *Student:* At school, it's mostly like forced reading. Like you have to do this or you'll fall behind? And at home you want to read it.

Another student made the distinction between the reading he did at home and the reading he did at school by referring to the cues that he got at home:

> *Researcher:* What would you say the main difference is between the reading you do at home and the reading you do at school?
>
> *Student:* I do a lot more reading at school, like reading out of textbooks, like at home I'll read something where I can see what's going on, like a picture or something. Like a magazine, they'll have a picture there.

One student stated that the reading at school, and the reading at home was done for different purposes. Almost all of the students expressed that they preferred the reading that they did at home.

Although the students did not articulate that they engaged in less writing than reading at home, their responses did not provide the same depth as they did for reading, and there were some indications that they preferred reading to writing at home.

*Researcher:* And writing, you don't really like to write, like if you don't have to?

*Student:* I would write, like I got no problem doing it, it's just like, like if I don't have to write something, I won't do it. It frustrates me.

Once again MSN messenger was the predominant way that students engaged in writing at home. Students made similar distinctions between the writing that they did at home and the writing that they did at school, however it seemed that considerably less writing occurred at home than reading. Once again, students appreciated having more choice and control over the content of the writing and particularly the reading, which they expressed that they had when they were at home.

Students had difficulty articulating what they learned in school about reading and writing; however, when prompted they responded that they learned about grammar, vocabulary, and spelling and one student said that she learned how to do handwriting. When asked if they used what they learned about reading and writing (in school) in their lives outside of school, three students could not think of any occasions when they did. One student stated that she used the alphabet, and two students stated that they used their instruction in spelling. When asked about what they thought they would use in the future, three students said that they would use spelling and one student said that everything they are learning now would be useful to her in the future.

*Integration of Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian Practices*

It has been illustrated historically that those who were most successful at educating Aboriginal people to become print literate, were those who incorporated Aboriginal beliefs and practices into their teaching methods (Curwen Doige, 2001). Furthermore, as Smith (2000) indicated, some of the most successful educational strategies have relied upon the integration of pedagogical practices that reflected the culture of the students. It can be assumed by the current levels of academic achievement for Aboriginal students, that when this does not occur, student achievement will likely suffer. Current literacy instructional strategies, although more effective than those utilized in the past, are still not sufficient for Aboriginal students as is indicated by their current levels of achievement within the Euro-Canadian context.

Given the need for Aboriginal students to become adept at the Euro-Canadian forms of literacy while retaining their Aboriginal literacies, the "merging" of the two to form hybrid methods of literacy instruction might be a more effective way to serve the needs of the students and the educators. It is believed that "both types of literacy can work together to educate children to be lifelong learners" (White-Kaulaity, 2007, p.566), and these hybrid literacy practices could potentially meet the cultural needs of the students, while meeting the curricular needs of the educators. To facilitate this process, it would be appropriate to use an existing literacy instructional framework that has already proven successful and enhance it by including culturally responsive pedagogical practices.

### *The Reading Apprenticeship Framework.*

The Reading Apprenticeship Framework (Schoenbach, et al., 1999) has been successfully implemented in a school in San Francisco in 1997 where "approximately two hundred students pre- and post-tested had improved their reading comprehension from an average late seventh-grade level to an average late ninth-grade level" (Schoenbach, et al, 1999, p.14). Schoenbach et al

(1999) further reported that "these gains in test scores were consistent across all ethnic groups and across four different classrooms in which four different teachers implemented a course based upon reading apprenticeship" (p.15). As such, it can be considered an effective method of reading instruction for Eurocentric literacies. The framework divides instruction into four dimensions: the personal dimension, the social dimension, the cognitive dimension, and the knowledge-building dimension. Each dimension focuses upon a series of strategies to improve literacy and incorporates the findings from psycholinguistic, cognitive psychology, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural perspectives on literacy.

Apprenticeship is a way of educating that was used traditionally within the Aboriginal communities, and continues to be used today as a way to transmit knowledge from one generation to the next, particularly among Aboriginal artists. Because the framework is based upon an apprenticeship model, with the educator taking on the role of an expert reader, the style of teaching may be familiar to Aboriginal students.

The framework, which relies upon four different areas and kinds of instruction, could also be construed as holistic in nature. Furthermore the divided nature of the framework facilitates the integration of the culturally responsive pedagogical practices while maintaining the effective framework for becoming literate within the Euro-Canadian context. By integrating the strengths of the Reading Apprenticeship Framework and traditional Aboriginal pedagogical practices, it is possible to transform literacy instruction from being somewhat singular in nature to instruction that is more holistic, relationship-based, contextualized, and continuous in nature. Furthermore, by integrating literacy instructional practices based upon Aboriginal literacy perspectives, not only are educators able to meet the needs of Aboriginal students, they are also reinforcing the important contributions of Aboriginal people, resulting in a higher profile of Aboriginal literacy and pedagogical practices.

***Literacy Instruction Can Be Holistic***

The importance of incorporating instructional practices which are holistic in nature

cannot be underestimated. In their position paper on Aboriginal literacy, the National Aboriginal

Design Committee (2002) advocated that "Aboriginal literacy programs MUST continue to

develop learning outcomes that address the whole person." Although this particular model does

not address the whole person, it does integrate a wider range of experiences for students, which

could be construed as *more* holistic in nature. If examined within the framework of the Medicine

Wheel, the Reading Apprenticeship Framework incorporates, mental and emotional ways of

knowing, while previous attempts to provide literacy instruction focused only on the mental. If

further attempts were made by the educator to integrate Aboriginal perspectives on literacy, it

would be possible to integrate physical and spiritual ways of knowing as well.

***Literacy Instruction Can Be Relationship-Based.***

The importance of relationship-building must also be recognized when considering

literacy instruction for Aboriginal students, particularly since, "Aboriginal literacy is not

individualization; it is about relationship" (Antone, 2003, p.9). In addition, Dunn (2001) pointed

out that "literacy education should involve families so that literacy development is a three-way

interaction between school, child, and family" (p.685). The social dimension of the framework

focuses upon building relationships between students within the context of literacy. Therefore

when students are learning this part of the framework they are able to engage in relationship-

building activities which would be necessary to honour their traditional Aboriginal ways, while

acquiring the necessary skills for success within the Euro-Canadian context. Within this

dimension, students work to create a sense of safety within the classroom, so that they can

examine and share their experiences as a reader in a safe and secure environment. Students also

investigate the connection between Euro-centric literacies and power. During the instruction of

the social dimension, it would be an ideal time to both investigate the codes of power (Delpit, 1995) associated with Euro-centric literacies as well as introducing ways to challenge those perceptions with Aboriginal literacies. Lastly, within this dimension students learn to observe and model other's ways of reading. This strategy requires observation which is also valued within the traditional Aboriginal ways of transmitting knowledge, so it would likely be familiar to Aboriginal students. White-Kaulaity (2007) suggested that

> an effective practice for adults is to talk about their personal reading, sharing the curiosity, enthusiasm, and enjoyment that books bring. Students need to envision both their teachers and parents reading outside of school so they can learn that the pleasure of reading transcends the moment and that if one cannot be at the place where the story is, the story can come to the reader. (p.568)

In my own experience, I found that I was able to use books as a way to build relationships with my students.

*I remember walking back from a field trip at the beach with some of my students, a small group of 11 and 12 year-old boys. We had all read the book The Wringer by Jerry Spinelli, and we were talking about it. The conversation was easy, a mutual exchange of thoughts and ideas about the book. Later, as I reflected upon the exchange, I realized that I had nothing in common with a group of preteen boys, however because we had read the same book, we had this amazing, albeit momentary, connection.*

I read as many young adult books as I could, so that I could recommend books to my students. I found that as a result of this book-sharing I was able to form connections with my students that I do not believe would have been possible had we not read the same books. Some of my best moments as an educator were when students began recommending books to me.

### *Literacy Instruction Can Be Continuous.*
Aboriginal students who have embraced the idea that learning experiences are ongoing will likely be reassured by the notion that literacy learning is also continuous. The National

Council of Teachers of English (2004) view reading, not as "a technical skill acquired once and for all in the primary grades, but rather a developmental process. A reader's competence continues to grow through engagement with various types of texts and wide reading for various purposes over a lifetime." Because the framework requires the educator to be viewed as an expert reader, the students must understand that educators and other expert readers continue to be readers, regardless of their age and experience. As such, reading is not a skill that is only used within the context of school for the purpose of formal education. This view of literacy learning as continuous and ongoing is compatible with Aboriginal perspectives of learning.

### *Literacy Instruction Can Be Contextualized.*

The Reading Apprenticeship Framework relies upon reading instruction which occurs during reading. This is in line with Alvermann's (2001) suggestion that "to be effective, [literacy] instruction must be embedded in the regular curriculum..." (p.12). Educators using this framework, model reading to their students, thus demystifying the reading process. Students need to "see what happens inside the mind of a proficient reader, someone who is willing to make the invisible visible by externalizing his or her mental activity" (Schoenbach, et al., 1999, p.21). Within this framework, reading instruction occurs in the context it is used, furthermore because it occurs during authentic reading activities, students can better understand the relevance of being literate within the Euro-Canadian context.

Following this brief overview of Aboriginal perspectives on literacy, it is understandable why Aboriginal people have expressed concern that Western and Aboriginal concepts of literacy are not compatible. However recent findings, in particular within the sociocultural context, demonstrate some degree of overlap with Aboriginal perspectives on literacy. It is anticipated that the proposed model of a hybrid form of literacy instruction which integrates the strengths of all literacy instructional practices, including those of Aboriginal people, will improve academic

achievement for Aboriginal students. Furthermore, it is believed that the overt integration of Aboriginal perspectives on literacy into the Euro-Canadian curriculum will also raise the profile of Aboriginal contributions to education, particularly in the area of literacy.

As was illustrated, Aboriginal students can benefit from instruction within the Euro-Canadian context, which openly embraces some of their traditional ways of learning. By merging the educational practices of these two distinct ways of knowing, Aboriginal students can benefit from Euro-Canadian instruction, which will prepare them to cope with the codes of power prevalent in Euro-Canadian society, without compromising fluency in their own traditional ways.

**CHAPTER VI   Conclusion**

Traditional Aboriginal educational practices consisted of learning that was holistic, relationship-based, contextualized, practical, and continuous. Despite the fact that many of these practices may not exist today in the way that they did in the past, they are a component of the history of many Aboriginal nations across Canada. As such, aspects of these traditional practices remain within the upbringing of many of today's Aboriginal students. Educational endeavours which disregard these principles, as they did in residential schools, will likely remain inappropriate ways to educate many Aboriginal students. In reviewing the traditional teaching practices of Aboriginal people, it becomes clear why contemporary teaching practices may not be achieving the desired level of success with Aboriginal students.

The historical role of education and schooling has had a tremendous impact on this particular community. The experience of residential school, as well as past negative experiences in the secondary school, have strained the capacity for effective partnerships between the community and the school. Non-Aboriginal educators are challenged by their role in an Aboriginal community. Here Bakhtin's notion of chronotope is particularly useful as a way to acknowledge the past and its impact on the present, while continuing to remain focused upon the present.

Identity, particularly ancestry, played a significant role in the lives of both the students and the teachers in this study. Some students believed that their options were limited and that they had more difficulty with school because of their ancestry. Teachers felt that their ability to connect with the students was challenged by their non-Aboriginal ancestry. Although it seemed that once the connection was made between the teacher and students that ancestry did not play a significant role. The physical markers associated with student and teacher ancestry also played a considerable role within this community. Interestingly, even when the assumptions made by

students regarding the physical markers associated with ancestry were shown to be inaccurate, they remained a significant way to determine how to interact with an individual. Ancestry and divisions along family lines were also noted as a way to separate both the students within the school and community members outside the school. This was not explored in depth; however, it was mentioned by a teacher wishing to further understand it.

Although the students in the study were mixed in their views on the importance of having a teacher of Aboriginal ancestry, the teachers were unanimous in their belief that having more Aboriginal teachers would improve education for Aboriginal students. Some students believed that Aboriginal teachers would be good role models and they would be able to understand the unique challenges of being an Aboriginal student, however some of the students believed that ancestry did not matter, what was most important was that the teacher was "good". The teachers wished to have more Aboriginal teachers to aide in their understanding of how to best support the students and to provide them with insights about the culture and practices of the community.

From a theoretical perspective, notions of agency prevalent in the work of Bakhtin and the work of Holland, et al. (1998) were particularly helpful in making sense of the role of identity in this research. This notion of agency was relevant in both my conversations with students and teachers, as well as my own experiences as a researcher.

Following the review of traditional Aboriginal teaching practices and the role of identity for Aboriginal students, it is believed that there are ways to support Aboriginal students to be successful within the Euro-Canadian context without undermining their identity as Aboriginal students. This can be achieved by integrating the strengths of traditional Aboriginal teaching practices as well as Euro-Canadian educational practices. Being academically successful within this Euro-Canadian context can be understood as an extension of Delpit's (1995) codes of power due to the fact that Euro-Canadian society privileges its own cultural capital. Aboriginal students

whose home lives may reflect a different set of values can be taught within the contemporary school system how to operate within this context while also learning to critique it, so that students may become academically successful without undermining their own ways of knowing.

What is perhaps most important is that learning in the contemporary context can be holistic, relationship-based, continuous, and contextualized. By working at the secondary level to integrate different content areas, teachers can provide students with a sense of unity instead of segregation between their various subject areas. By incorporating activities in the classroom which rely upon fostering relationships between students, students and teachers, and students and the curriculum, education can be relationship-based. By attending community events, students become teachers, while teachers become learners, and the traditional hierarchies are challenged. Furthermore by having teachers adopt the roles of learners, they are able to model that learning is a continuous ongoing process. By providing opportunities such as work experience and apprenticeship learning, students can engage in contextualized learning.

### Final Reflections

I have never believed that Euro-Canadian education is impartial. I have always considered it; however, a necessary part of living in Canada in the twenty-first century. As an educator, I believed that my job was to prepare students to be able to operate in the world as it is today, not how it might be in the future. This meant that I taught using the British Columbia Performance Standards and worked with students on strategies to do their best work on Euro-centric assessments such as tests. Although I still believe this is part of my job as an educator, my experience with this research has forced me to examine the impact of my decisions, namely the way in which I may have inadvertently undervalued the knowledge and expertise of my students. I have reflected upon ways to support my students, particularly those of Aboriginal ancestry to

achieve academically within the Euro-Canadian context, without undermining their more traditional ways of knowing.

I have concluded that school may not be the best place for Aboriginal students to learn about what it means to be Aboriginal. Schools are colonial institutions; however, we need to view this as their strength. They provide the ideal environment for Aboriginal students to learn about the Euro-Canadian context and how to navigate it in a way that does not compromise their identity as Aboriginal people. Educators need to view school as an opportunity to make transparent these Euro-Canadian codes of power so that the needs of Aboriginal students can finally be met.

Educators need to realize that there may be cultural differences which exist between themselves and their students regardless of their ancestry, and as a result they may need to provide explicit instruction on how to achieve academic success within the context of Euro-Canadian schools. Furthermore, educators need to respect that there are other ways of knowing and being in the world, so it is their responsibility to model how to critique the Euro-Canadian context and the kinds of knowledge that it privileges. They need to help all of their students to understand that just because the Euro-Canadian way dominates, does not mean that it is superior. They need to facilitate the capacity of the students to retain their ways of knowing so that they are not lost. Success within the Euro-Canadian context and the Aboriginal context do not become mutually exclusive. A child should never have to compromise their identity and what it means to belong to their culture, for a mainstream education.

My position as an indigenous outsider (Banks, 1998) within the context of this research deeply impacted the outcomes of this study. My understanding of the complex challenges faced by this community, my commitment to the outcomes which will impact the students and their families, and my knowledge of how this information may be used beyond the scope of this

community have all been influenced by this position. Because of the precarious position I am in, I have chosen to remain silent about some of the knowledge I have and some of the knowledge I have obtained. I know this may influence the quality of my research; however, I must consider the consequences for my community, my family, and myself if I choose to violate these silences.

This has been an emotional journey, in ways that I never imagined possible. I have had my strength tested, my beliefs challenged, and my decisions questioned. The solid foundation of all that I thought I knew when I began was destroyed. I discovered that knowledge is like water, not rocks. We can float for an instant, but then there are ripples, and all that we know is transformed once again.

*I am offering these ideas as a place to start,*
*for if we all remain silent,*
*everything will remain the same.*

How'aa

**Notes**

[1] The Haida word for grandmother.

[2] Due to the remote location of the community, there were a very limited number of certified professionals able to work as substitute teachers.

[3] I have chosen to use the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2007) definition for Aboriginal student which is "A student who has reported him/herself as being of Aboriginal ancestry (First Nations: status and non-status, Metis, and Inuit)".

[4] These are classes for students who require adaptations or modifications to meet the learning outcomes for the course.

[5] The term traditional is being used here to refer to practices which occurred prior to residential schools and/or those which continue to occur outside the Euro-Canadian school system.

[6] Aboriginal students attended residential schools from the 1920s to the 1980s.

[7] The Haida word for grandfather.

[8] The Haida word for uncle.

[9] The Haida word for thank you.

[10] Core subject areas usually include math, science, social studies, and English Language Arts.

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# APPENDICES

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Name: _____

## ADOLESCENT PERSPECTIVES ON LITERACY

Student Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please answer the following questions by checking the appropriate box and/or writing your answer on the lines provided. If you need more space please ask for additional paper. You may decline to answer questions and, at any time, you may withdraw from this study without any consequences.

- ☐ I am of Aboriginal ancestry
- ☐ I am not of Aboriginal ancestry
- ☐ I prefer not to say

## SECTION A: THE IMPORTANCE OF READING AND WRITING.

**A1.    Being able to read is important.**    ▪    ▪    ▪    ▪    ▪        ☐ yes  ☐ no

*Please explain.*

_____

_____

**A2.    Being able to write is important.**    ▪    ▪    ▪    ▪    ▪        ☐ yes  ☐ no

*Please explain.*

_____

_____

## SECTION B: READING AND WRITING AT HOME AND AT SCHOOL.

**B1.    What I learn about reading and writing in school is useful to me outside of school.**

☐ yes  ☐ no

*Please explain.*

_____

_____

**B2.    What I learn about reading and writing in school will be useful to me in the future.**

☐ yes  ☐ no

*Please explain.*

_____

_____

**B3. At <u>home</u>, I <u>read</u>** (check all that apply):

☐ websites/blogs

☐ e-mails

☐ msn messages

☐ movies/TV/community channel

☐ comics/graphic novels

☐ picture books

☐ novels

☐ poetry/songs (lyrics)

☐ textbooks/reference books

☐ newspapers/magazines/newsletters

☐ letters/postcards

☐ notes from friends/family

☐ directions (cookbooks, manuals)

☐ packages (cereal boxes, nutritional

information)

☐other:_____

**B4. At <u>home</u>, I <u>write</u>** (check all that apply):

☐ websites/blogs

☐ e-mails

☐ msn messages

☐ essays/research reports

☐ stories

☐ poetry/songs (lyrics)

☐ comics/graphic novels

☐ newsletters

☐ notes to friends/family

☐ letters/postcards

☐ resumes/cover letters

☐ job applications

☐other:_____

**B5. At <u>school</u>, I <u>read</u>** (check all that apply):

☐ websites/blogs

☐ e-mails

☐ msn messages

☐ movies/TV/community channel

☐ comics/graphic novels

☐ picture books

☐ novels

☐ poetry/songs (lyrics)

☐ textbooks/reference books

☐ newspapers/magazines/newsletters

☐ letters/postcards

☐ notes from friends/family

☐ directions (cookbooks, manuals)

☐ packages (cereal boxes, nutritional

information)

☐other:_____

**B6. At <u>school</u>, I <u>write</u>** (check all that apply):

☐ websites/blogs

☐ e-mails

☐ msn messages

☐ essays/research reports

☐ stories

☐ poetry/songs (lyrics)

☐ comics/graphic novels

☐ newsletters

☐ notes to friends/family

☐ letters/postcards

☐ resumes/cover letters

☐ job applications

☐other:_____

**B7.** **The reading and writing that I do at <u>home</u> is enjoyable.** ▪ ▪ ☐ yes ☐ no

*Please explain.*

_____

_____


**B8.** **The reading and writing that I do at <u>school</u> is enjoyable.** ▪ ▪ ☐ yes ☐ no

*Please explain.*

_____

_____

**B9.** **The reading and writing that I do at <u>school</u> is difficult.** ▪ ▪ ☐ yes ☐ no

*Please explain.*

_____

_____


## SECTION C: EFFECTIVE TEACHING PRACTICES AT <u>SCHOOL</u>.

**C1.** **I have learned important things about reading and writing at school.** ☐ yes ☐ no

*What are the most important things you have learned at school about reading and writing?*

*Reading:*

1. _____

2. _____

*Writing:*

1. _____

2. _____

**C2.** **I enjoy <u>at least some</u> activities at school that involve reading and writing.**

☐ yes ☐ no

*What school activities do you enjoy most that involve reading and writing?*

*Reading:*

1. _____

2. _____


*Writing:*

1. _____

2. _____

**C3.**      **I enjoy <u>at least some</u> activities in English class.** ▪          ▪          ▪          ☐ **yes**   ☐ **no**

*What is your favourite activity in English class?*

_____

_____

**C4.**      **<u>I</u> am working as hard as I can to do my best reading and writing at school.**

☐ **yes**    ☐ **no**

*What could you do to help yourself read and write better at school?*

_____

_____

**C5.**      **The <u>teachers and/or the staff</u> at my school give me enough support to do my best reading and writing at school.**                              ☐ **yes**   ☐ **no**

*What could your teacher and/or the staff at the school do to help you to read and write better?*

1. _____

2. _____

**C6.**      **My <u>family</u> gives me enough support for me to do my best reading and writing at school.**

☐ **yes**    ☐ **no**

*What could your family do at home to help you to read and write better?*

1. _____

2. _____


**SECTION D: FINAL THOUGHTS**

**D1.**      **Is there any information that you would like to add?**

_____

_____

_____

**D2.**      **Are there any questions that you would like to ask at this time?**

_____

Appendix B: Interview Guide – Student

**Background/General**
- What do you enjoy doing?
- What kinds of things do you do outside of school?
- What would you like to do after you graduate?
- Tell me about one of your role models.
- What do you respect about them?
- What have they taught you? How did they do this?

**Ancestry**
- Can you tell me a bit about your ancestry?
- Do you feel that your ancestry is represented at this school? If so, how?
- How does your ancestry affect your experience at this school?
- Are there any Aboriginal teachers at this school?
- Does this have an impact on the environment of the school?

**School**
- What do you think that your parents and family think about school?
- What do you like about school? What don't you like about school?
- Tell me about some of the barriers for you in this school. How could they be removed?
- What is your favourite subject in school? Do you think that it will be useful in your future?
- What is difficult about school?
- What do you learn at school that you believe is important?
- What skills do you believe you should have when you finish high school?

**The Importance of Reading and Writing**
- What do you think that your parents and family think about reading and writing?
- What do you think that the community thinks about reading and writing?
- Tell me about reading and writing in your own life.
- Can you imagine what your life would be like if you could not read or write?
- What level of reading and writing do you believe that your students should have when they finish high school?
- If a student did not want to go to university or college, do you think that the level of reading and writing that they need should be different?

**Reading and Writing at Home and at School**
- What kinds of reading do you do at home?
- What is the main difference between the reading you do at home and the reading you do at school?
- What kinds of writing do you do at home?
- What is the main difference between the writing you do at home and the writing you do at school?
- What kinds of things do you learn about reading in school? About writing?

- What kinds of things do you learn about reading and writing that you believe is useful now in your life outside of school? In the future?

**Effective Teaching Practices**
- Do you enjoy English class?
- What is your favourite thing to do in English class? Your least favourite?
- Think about good teachers that you had, what were they like? What made them good?
- Some people believe that it is important to have Aboriginal teachers in Aboriginal communities, do you agree? Why or why not?
- Some people believe that it is important for teachers to know their students to improve their learning, do you agree? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that you know your teachers? Do you feel that they know you?
- Are there any changes that you can think of at the school that would help you?

**Additional Information**
- Is there anything that you would like to add?
- Is there anything that you would like to ask me?

Appendix C: Interview Questions – Teacher

**Background/General**
- What do you enjoy doing?
- What kinds of things do you do outside of teaching?
- Tell me about one of your role models.
- What do you respect about them?
- What have they taught you? How did they do this?

**Ancestry**
- Can you tell me a bit about your ancestry?
- Do you feel that your ancestry is represented at this school? If so, how?
- How does your ancestry affect your experience at this school?
- Are there any Aboriginal teachers at this school?
- Does this have an impact on the environment of the school?

**School**
- What do you think that parents and community members think about this school?
- What are some of the positive aspects of this school? The negative?
- What are some of the challenges about working in this school? This community?
- Tell me about some of the barriers for you in this school and this community.
- How could they be removed?
- What do you teach at this school that you believe is important?
- What skills do you believe that students should have when they finish high school?

**The Importance of Reading and Writing**
- What do you think that the parents and community think about reading and writing?
- Tell me about reading and writing in your own life.
- Do you think that it is important to be able to read? To write?
- What level of reading and writing do you believe that your students should have when they finish high school?
- If a student did not want to go to university or college, do you think that the level of reading and writing that they need should be different?

**Reading and Writing at Home and at School**
- What kinds of reading and writing do you do at home?
- What kinds of reading and writing do you think are appropriate for your students at school? At home?
- What kinds of things do you teach students about reading in English? About writing?
- What kinds of things do you teach about reading and writing that you believe students use now in their lives outside of school?
- What kinds of things do you teach about reading and writing that you believe students will use after they have finished high school?
- How do you decide what you will teach?

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**Effective Teaching Practices**
- Did you enjoy English when you were a student?
- Do you enjoy teaching English?
- Think about good teachers that you had when you were a student, what were they like? What made them good?
- How does this influence the way that you teach?
- How do you think that your experiences with school and reading and writing influence your teaching today?
- Some people believe that it is important to have Aboriginal teachers in Aboriginal communities, do you agree? Why or why not?
- Some people believe that it is important for teachers to know their students to improve their learning, do you agree?
- Do you feel that you know your students? Do you feel that they know you?
- What are some of the things that you have learned about working effectively with students of Aboriginal ancestry?
- How was your class composition determined? How does this influence your teaching?
- Are there any changes that you can think of at the school that would help you?

**Additional Information**
- Is there anything that you would like to add?
- Is there anything that you would like to ask me?