

WALKING OUT WITH YOUR SPIRIT:  
THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF FORMER ABORIGINAL INMATES IN B.C.  
PRISON SETTINGS AS AN IMPETUS FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL PRISON  
EDUCATION

by  
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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies

(Educational Leadership and Policy)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

June 2012

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## **Abstract**

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), in its endeavour for rehabilitation, has neglected to find relevant solutions to address the growing statistics of incarceration in the federal prison settings as they relate to Aboriginal Peoples. The recent CSC figures (2008) state that 18% of federal inmates are Aboriginal men and 33.1% of the federal female population are Aboriginal women. This research project spotlights the federal prison education program as a medium for change and a stepping stone to enhance the lives of Aboriginal inmates after they leave the prison. Currently the Adult Basic Education program is situated inside the prison with a focus on elementary and high school. Twenty former Aboriginal inmates participated in individual interviews where they shared their lived experiences surrounding education in and out of prison. They also suggested ways that prison education could be improved.

The theoretical framework focused on how education can be used as a tool for liberation as opposed to assimilation, by focusing on collaboration through dialogue, a genuine appreciation for Aboriginal culture and an understanding of the impact of colonization. The research process of building on the voices of the Aboriginal inmates to suggest and create educational frameworks in order to advance much needed educational changes in CSC is a form of taking agency and a step towards liberation.

The findings of the research reveal challenges around historical and systemic barriers for the Aboriginal inmates that prevent them from participating fully in prison education. Recommendations are offered in the areas of support, educating staff on Aboriginal perspectives of justice, incorporating culture, making education mandatory and a transforming curriculum in regards to prison education for Aboriginal inmates.

An Aboriginal Educational Framework (AEF) for prison education was developed in response to the participants' suggestions and findings, the literature, and personal reflections. The AEF includes healing through emotional literacy, an emancipatory approach to pedagogy and curriculum, and strategies for transforming prison education by incorporating the suggestions from the project participants. These three key components solicit change on its own, but together they have the capacity to release the Aboriginal inmate along with their spirit.

## **Preface**

This work is approved by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board Certificate number H09-02041

The work presented in this thesis was edited by Joanne Bonderud, as well reviewed by my supervisory committee: Dr. Jo-ann Archibald, Dr. Stephen Ameway and Dr. Lee Brown.

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## **Glossary**

**Aboriginal** - Refers to one of the three groups of people (First Nations, Inuit and Métis).

**Academic Education** - Usually is provided in the form of GED or literacy classes [1]. These free classes assist the prisoner in learning to read, write, and perform basic mathematical computations.

**Adult Basic Education (ABE)** - Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Education Development (GED) programs. Students complete learning activities to improve reading comprehension in order to take and pass the GED test.

**Correctional Service Canada (CSC)** - The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), as part of the criminal justice system and respecting the rule of law, contributes to public safety by actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens, while exercising reasonable, safe, secure and humane control.

**Federal Prison** - Known as a penitentiary or correctional facility: federal institutions oversee sentences of longer than two years.

**First Nations** - Refers to persons that identify as First Nations people. This term includes those First Nations peoples living on reserve or off reserve, those

**Inuit** - Refers to one of three distinct groups (including First Nations and Métis) of constitutionally recognized Aboriginal People in Canada.

**Mainstream Education** - The current education system in elementary and high school which are based on the westernized philosophy and values.

**Métis** - Refers to one of three distinct groups (including First Nations and Inuit).

**Parole** - Parole is the supervised release of a prisoner before the completion of their sentence in prison. The law requires the release of offenders who have served two thirds of their sentence, but only if they are not considered dangerous.

**Provincial Prison** - Provincial institutions supervise sentences of two years and under.

**Psycho-Social Programs** - Programs such as drugs and alcohol, violent offender programming, sexual offender treatment program, cognitive program.

**Westernized Society** - European cultural influences which refers to a heritage of social norms, values, customs, religious beliefs, political systems.

**Vocational Education** - Usually are associated with concrete skills needed for employment, such as carpentry, food safe, first aid

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank my supervisor Dr, Joann Archibald. Without her guidance, her support and her patience this research project would not have become reality. I would also like thank Dr. Stephen Ameyaw for his endless effort and encouragement throughout the writing process and Dr. Lee Brown for all his teachings and advice.

I would like to honour and thank the twenty participants for sharing their stories and allowing me the privilege of representation. I admire their strength, courage and honesty in their narratives. They will be forever in my memory. Thank you Elder Russell Peters, from the Shuswap Nation for the afternoons of drinking coffee and listening to stories of the past. I am privileged to be part of his life.

I would also like to thank my family, Dave, David, Lucas, Kennedy, for their understanding and unwavering support over the years of this venture. I honour my father and mother for my cultural teachings and ongoing encouragement to pursue my dream. They all have remained my biggest fan.

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this work to my father who not only believed in me, but believed that education was a key to freedom. Thank you so much Babji.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

There are many people, groups, communities, and countries that are not in agreement in providing education for prison inmates. Some regard education as a privilege that incarcerated individuals do not deserve. Some countries will only support prison education for offenders with a low level of schooling. There is limited information on the educational experiences of Aboriginal inmates in the federal prison system. An examination of prison education is required in order to understand the problematic areas as they relate to the Aboriginal inmates.

The right to education for Canadian federal offenders was established in March of 1962 and implemented in The Penitentiary Act, under the heading Correctional Training Program, section 20. The Act states:

- There shall be, at each institution, an appropriate program of inmate activities designed, as far as practicable, to prepare inmates, upon discharge, to assume their responsibilities as citizens and to conform to the requirements of the law.
- For the purpose of giving effect to subsection (1) the commissioner shall, so far as practicable, make available to each inmate who is capable of benefiting there from, academic or vocational training, instructive or productive work, religious and recreational activities and psychiatric, psychological and social counselling.
- No inmate shall be compelled, against his or her wishes, to participate in religious or recreational activities.

In 1990, the Economic Council of the United Nations recommended that education should be an essential part of the prison system. It wasn't until 1997, at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, organized by UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg, that it was declared that education in the prison system was a government responsibility. The commitment by UNESCO gave importance to adult learning in prison settings. The agenda recognized the right to learn of all prison inmates: (a) By providing

prison inmates with information on and access to different levels of education and training; (b) By developing and implementing comprehensive education programs in prisons, with the participation of inmates, to meet their needs and learning aspirations; and (c) By making it easier for non-governmental organizations, teachers and other providers of educational activities to work in prisons, thereby providing prisoners with access to educational institutions and encouraging initiatives that link courses carried out inside and outside prisons (July 14-18, 1997).

All federal institutions in Canada offer Adult Basic Education ( ABE), grades 1 to 10, and secondary education grades 11 and 12 (the Correctional Service of Canada, 2000). The objectives of the educational programs offered by CSC are:

- To provide offenders with provincially accredited or certified programs which meet their identified education needs to assist them to reintegrate into the community as law-abiding citizens;
- To provide appropriate library services similar to those in the community, while meeting the needs of the correctional environment; and
- To facilitate continuity in educational programming when offenders are transferred between institutions or are released into the community (the Correctional Service of Canada, 1999, p. 2).

The goal of the Correctional Service of Canada is to manage the safe reintegration of federal offenders after they have served their time in prison. Literacy and employment needs have been identified as major barriers that hinder offenders in reintegration. The development of Adult Basic Education programs was to increase basic literacy skills for overall success in the community upon release. Prison education has countless possibilities. Bosworth (2005) makes an argument, based on the majority of the prison population being released into communities ill- equipped, that education has the potential to reduce the statistics on individuals returning to prison. Boe (1998) conducted a two year release follow-up of federal offenders who participated in the Adult Basic Education program and found

without basic literacy skills, offenders found it difficult to benefit from other correctional programs or work opportunities.

Upgrading prisoner literacy skills is widely seen as a priority component of successful rehabilitation and reduction in criminal behaviour. Gerber and Fritsch (1995) identified a range of benefits resulting from prison educational and vocational programs after reviewing 72 American studies on correctional education programs. They found fewer disciplinary violations during incarceration, reduction in recidivism, increase in employment opportunities, and increased participation in education upon release. A study by Gendreau (1993, as cited in Lilly, 1996) found that effective prison educational programs reduced recidivism among participants by 25% to 80%. One of the largest research studies that assessed the impact of prison education illustrated 13% reduction in re-arrests, 21% reduction in reconvictions, and 29% reduction in reincarceration (Steurer, Smith and Tracy, 2001). This study included 3,170 inmates that were divided into two groups that contained participants of education programs and non-participants. Lily (1996) claims that prison education is associated with reduced recidivism, hence prison education programs are an absolute necessity. The strong correlation between education level and employment was also highlighted as one of the positive aspects of prison education. Gillis, C., Motiuk, L. and Belcourt, R. (1998) declare that 47% of inmates do not have a steady employment history and the nature of the workforce demands higher skilled workers. Prison educational programs are necessary in order to be able to compete in the employment market of society.

Federal offenders undergo standardized testing upon admission to correctional facilities to determine their educational grade level. The Correctional Service of Canada (2001) released statistics that reveal 82% of offenders tested below the high school level at the time of their admission to prison. The Correctional Service of Canada (2006), in their questionnaire study, found that one-half of the federal prison population has less than a grade eight education.

## **Aboriginal Peoples' Incarceration**

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), in their endeavour for rehabilitation, has neglected to find relevant solutions to address the growing statistics of incarceration in the federal prison settings as it relates to the Aboriginal Peoples. The recent figures of CSC (2008) state that 18% of federal inmates are Aboriginal men and 33.1% of the federal female population are Aboriginal women. The need to expose and intervene by CSC is crucial in order to make available equal opportunities for Aboriginal Peoples who have been culturally misunderstood and subjected to multi levels of colonization. The current teaching and education in the prison system have failed to provide an education system that is specifically geared to benefit Aboriginal inmates. The importance of transforming the current Aboriginal prison inmates' teaching and educational programs requires priority attention. An examination of prison education is required in order to understand the problematic areas as it relates to the Aboriginal inmates.

It is vital that a synopsis of history be narrated to support my inquiry into the importance of prison education for the Aboriginal inmates. Colonization has robbed the First People of their land, culture, and way of life, in the hopes that by doing so, assimilation would happen more efficiently and quickly (York, 1990). Oppression of the Aboriginal world view through racism-coloured glasses has led to the creation of second class citizens who struggle in an established Westernized society, where structures are in place that reinforce inequality due to dominant epistemologies. This can be seen in many communities, families, individuals, and institutions (Fournier and Crey, 1997). The healing journey as a result of colonization, for the Aboriginal Peoples, is one of difficulty and heartache, filled with obstacles created by Western worldviews. One specific obstacle that seems to be very influential is the oppression of cultural identity through education. Education has been, and still remains, a tool to continue assimilation through schools, and curriculum which preach the ideal Westernized life choices. The colonization of cultural identity has played an integral role in the destruction of Aboriginal life, leaving behind the aftermath of communities struggling to survive in a foreign lifestyle. The slow, torturing brainwashing by the European society to assimilate the Aboriginal Peoples has had severe consequences in

their ability to make reparation and attain all that has been lost or taken away, yet the resilience of the Aboriginal Peoples remains intact. The endurance of oppression has given strength to battle for all that has vanished. An Elder stated that:

Our ancestors warned and predicted that for many generations the people would have a hard time. A dark black cloud would surround and plague all the peoples of the Earth. They foretold this dark black cloud would bring darkness into people's lives. They foretold that for many generations this dark black cloud would cause great sorrow and suffering. That many would become sick at heart. And that the people would lose their way and powers. Their minds would become distorted and distracted. They would forget how to respect and survive in their own land. They would become filled with anger and gloom. They would begin to quarrel amongst themselves over worthless things. They would become unable to speak truthfully and to share honestly with each other. Slowly they would destroy and poison themselves and all they touched. It was foretold that the day would come when this dark cloud would weaken slowly at first and then diminish; and that the people would reawaken slowly as if from a long drugged sleep. It was also said these things would come to pass, and that the seventh generation would rise and become strong. They would do this by seeking out the ancient teaching of our forefathers (Saulteaux Elder, Campbell Papequash, 1997, p. 82).

Many Aboriginal Peoples have been "sick at heart" for many decades and as Campbell Papequash states, the time has come to awaken from the drugged sleep to reclamation. The concentration of the battle can be witnessed in various levels of federal government. Awareness and acknowledgment of the damages have been identified as well; policies are being developed by appointed task forces to assert that history does not repeat itself. Communities are accessing resources and fighting for autonomy and the rights for their people. Individuals are becoming cognizant of their history and unlocking the deep-rooted encoding of second class citizen values imposed by colonization (Brown, 2007; Jackson, 2002; Wiebe and Johnson, 1999).

## **The Trend Towards Transformation**

This current atmosphere of transformation is slow in coming and challenging in numerous venues. The strenuous task of rectifying the wrong that was inflicted on the Aboriginal Peoples is marginally being addressed by federal and provincial governments due to lack of knowledge and lack of understanding of the Aboriginal way of life. The limited capacity of understanding shown by the decision makers continues to oppress these individuals and can be witnessed in the child welfare, health, and justice systems.

Fournier and Crey (1997) give heart-wrenching stories of residential school experiences that formed the foundation for institutionalizing First Nations Peoples.

Through residential schools and its deliberate assault on the Aboriginal family, First Nations were vulnerable to the next wave of interventions: child abductions sanctioned by provincial child welfare laws. Residential schools incarcerated children for ten months of the year, but at least the children stayed in an Aboriginal peer group; they always knew their First Nation of origin and who their parents were, and they knew that eventually they would be going home. In the foster and adoptive care system, Aboriginal children typically vanished with scarcely a trace, the vast majority of them placed until they were adults in non-Aboriginal homes where their cultural identity, their legal Indian status, their knowledge of their own First Nation and even their birth names were erased, often forever. (p. 81)

Child welfare agencies successfully replaced residential school as the popular method of care for First Nations children by the 1960s (Armitage, 1995). The “sixties scoop”<sup>1</sup> endorsed the total lack of respect for the First Nations community, family and children (Fournier and Crey, 1997). The over-representation of First Nations children in child welfare has been noted by several authors (Armitage, 1995; Fournier and Crey, 1997). As well, the Assembly

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<sup>1</sup> The 60s Scoop refers to the adoption of First Nation/Métis children in Canada between the years of 1960 and the mid 1980’s. Large number of children were removed from their families and communities without knowledge or consent and placed or adopted into non-Aboriginal homes.

of First Nations and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada spotlighted the fact that having 27,000 Aboriginal children in state care should cause some alarm. Armitage (1995) pointed out a documentary prepared by the Yukon Indians for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's northern television network, where the producers suggested that "residential schools best prepared its graduates for other institutional communities, particularly such as jails and mental hospitals" (p. 143). The historical education system for the Aboriginal individuals was geared for the purpose of assimilation. Failure to comply would place Aboriginal learners in yet another institution like prisons. An indication of colonial impact is evidenced in the federal prison system with the overflowing numbers of incarcerated Aboriginal individuals who have difficulties assimilating into society (statistics available in the next chapter). An environment where control of an individual is deemed to be the focus, and the goal of the institution and rehabilitation is to emulate the values and lifestyle of the dominant culture, has led to the over representation of Aboriginal offenders in prison settings. Waldram (1997) asserts that Aboriginal men in the prison system are survivors of historical cultural trauma. The struggles of the Aboriginal inmates demonstrate resiliency to continue the pursuit of justice in an environment that denies uniqueness. This perspective stimulates the conversation around how to intervene in this arena to make space for educational transformation, so that these survivors are able to leave the institutions and start their journey towards healing instead of perpetuating the revolving prison door syndrome. A disruption in the existing education program that follows the status quo demands the exploration of Aboriginal inmates' history around education. The key for solutions can be found in the life experience of inmates and their thoughts. The focus on prison education for Aboriginal inmates needs to incorporate the voice of the inmates and their battle with mainstream education; after all, they are the experts on what does not work. Personal stories give us the impetus to point out the wrongdoings and empower individuals towards the future; it is also an explanation of our actions. The next section provides my personal impetus for tackling the research topic of prison education for Aboriginal inmates.

## **Personal Story and Position**

The word “overseas” represented a world that was foreign and exciting when I was young and lived in the Fiji Islands. I knew we were moving to Canada. My father believed that migrating to Canada would offer his children an improved quality of life. A feminist in his own way, he believed that I should have the freedom to become whatever I wanted, regardless of my gender. At that time, a move to the world of opportunities was like winning the lottery. I had read many books about the “white people” and already felt envious of their way of life. I remember reading a book about two young children going to school and their life seemed so fantastic that I could not wait to go. On arrival into the new world I was shocked by the weather. Landing in British Columbia and arriving in Kamloops in November proved to be a cold experience. Coming from the tropics I never really knew how it felt to be cold. I had never seen snow and was thrilled, but the cold was unbearable. I remember wanting to go home, back to Fiji, back to the sun. This strange land was so foreign in every way. As a child, it was a full time task trying to make sense of my new environment.

My school experience laid the foundation for being treated as a second class citizen. I had completed my class two in Fiji, but I was told that due to my poor use of the English language I needed to repeat grade two. I had always done very well at school and loved to learn. English was my favourite subject. I was one of three coloured students in my class; the other two were of Aboriginal descent. At that time, I was unaware of the colonial history of Canada. I felt a kinship to the two Aboriginal individuals and slowly the three of us became friends. My experience in school taught me that I was inferior to the white students. I didn’t dress properly and my lunches were made fun of. I learned to not eat lunch until later years when my parents became acculturated to mainstream society; until that time my ignorance was entertaining to many of the students. I wanted to assimilate into this society and forget my culture which brought so much heartache, but no matter how hard I tried, I was not able to mask my colour. Suppression of who I was seemed to be a matter of survival in this country. Assimilation was the key to acceptance at only a certain level, but even that was better than the option of loneliness. So taking up the traits of the dominant society I

became vigilant in my escapade to be accepted. It wasn't until later years in university that I learned that through education I could regain some of myself. The self-esteem and confidence that I gained through the different letters behind my name seemed to have opened the door into a world where my voice gained some volume. Liberation to explore who I was, without the past negative emotions, gained momentum and became a priority. In the hidden depth of embarrassment, guilt, and shame was an admission of a wandering individual who struggled with a sense of belonging.

I have learned to find home within myself and my family. Home has become where my loved ones are. I have journeyed far, to where my people were lured from and established connections that appease the restlessness. I have yet to learn to manage the anger that overcomes me when I see the struggles of the Aboriginal Peoples. The anger, at times, provides the impetus for my writing. The crusade to educate others and disrupt mainstream societal ideals is my passive aggressive way of fueling my identity and getting back the emotional safety I arrived with when I entered this country. Canada is a country that has been claimed by others but always will belong to the Aboriginal Peoples.

In my professional career, working as a contractor in the capacity of a clinical counsellor in the federal parole office, has given me the dedication and motivation to look at different ways of delivering services that have positive outcomes. As an Indigenous person, I subscribe to a multicultural approach to counselling because of my world view. Cultural background is a critical factor to be considered in counselling. Extreme caution and sensitivity is vital when working with individuals from another cultural background (Ishiyama, 2003). The importance of historical and cultural context must be acknowledged and respected in a counselling relationship. The belief that counselling is not linear and relies on a holistic approach is a fundamental belief in my personal approach to counselling. In order to work with the Aboriginal population, an understanding of historical trauma and internalized oppression must exist (Duran, 2006). Duran (2006) spotlights the notion of healing the soul wound from the impact of colonization.

I am of Indigenous heritage and my ancestors have faced colonization from the European wave. My ancestors arrived from India as indentured labourers in the 1800s with

promises of riches and a better way of life. The British used my people to build and cultivate the land of the native Fijians. Fiji gained independence from the British in 1970. I grew up cognizant of oppression. I am a long way from home and I feel one way to appease my internal fight for equality is by advocating for the First Peoples of this land. We share a similar history of colonization. My father, growing up in Fiji, realized mobility out of oppression was through education. Learning the language and tools of the dominant society was one way to achieve freedom. He moved the family to Canada, lured by the education system. For him freedom was through education.

I have witnessed many Aboriginal individuals who leave prisons ill-equipped and have difficulties reintegrating into the community. I have also worked with individuals who have participated in programs such as drug and alcohol, spiritual, and work experience and are able to have a positive outlook for their future. The future for some Aboriginal individuals who are released from prison and into the community is challenging. There are many obstacles to face and all require a good knowledge of resources, literacy skills, and confidence. For example, obtaining identification for individuals released from prison can be an enormous task considering all the administrative work required. Inmates require a basic level of literacy to complete forms. The question that needs to be asked is, “What aspect of prison can make the most difference for the Aboriginal individual in the prison system?” I chose education in the prison system as my research answer to the aforementioned question with a focus on male and female federal Aboriginal offenders. I am my father’s daughter and his teachings and values have given me a solid foundation of my personal assertions around prison education for Aboriginal inmates in the federal system. I believe that education is potentially a life changing experience; that Aboriginal success is influenced by the relevancy of the learning setting and materials to connect to Aboriginal culture, values, language knowledge, and lastly, that Aboriginal recidivism can be lowered by educational success inside or outside of prison.

For the purpose of this thesis the definition of Aboriginal will be adopted from the Canadian Constitution Act, section 35, which states, “In this Act, ‘Aboriginal Peoples of Canada’ includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada” (the Canadian Constitution

Act, section 35). The focus of this thesis is on federal prisons as opposed to provincial. Federal prisons are for individuals that have been sentenced to two and more years. Provincial prisons are for short term sentences under two years (CSC, 2006).

## **Canada's Federal Prisons and Aboriginal Peoples**

It is essential that an explanation of the statistics as it relates to federal prisons and Aboriginal Peoples be transparent to augment my inquiry. In June of 2008, Juristat, Statistics Canada released data for the years 2005-2006 associated with the Canadian prison system. In 2005 -2006 there were 192 federal prisons and jails in Canada. An average of 152,600 individuals were incarcerated or connected in some way with correctional service agencies in Canada. Another point of reference is related to the cost of incarceration. The Correctional Service of Canada has a 3 billion dollar a year cost; that does not include policing or court. The following is a more detailed account of the financial expenditure as it relates to CSC:

- Correctional services expenditures totaled \$2.8 billion in 2004/2005, up 2% in constant dollars from 2003/2004. Custodial services (prisons) accounted for the largest proportion (71%) of the expenditures, followed by community supervision services (14%), headquarters and central services (14%), and the Parole Board of Canada (formerly known as the National Parole Board) and provincial parole boards (2%). This figure does not include policing or court costs which bring the total expenditures up to more than \$10 billion for the year (*italics in original*).
- Cost of incarcerating a federal prisoner: \$259.05 per prisoner per day
- Cost of incarcerating a federal female prisoner: \$150,000-\$250,000 per prisoner per year; \$410.96 to \$684.93 per prisoner per day
- Cost of incarcerating a federal male prisoner: \$87,665 per prisoner per year; \$240.18 per prisoner per day
- Cost of incarcerating a provincial prisoner: \$141.78 per prisoner per day
- The cost of alternatives such as probation, bail supervision, and community supervision ranges from \$5-\$25 per person per day

The justice system is a billion dollar industry in Canada and seems to be thriving on the hurts and pains of certain percentages of the population who struggle in various aspects of their lives and are locked away for so-called rehabilitation. Spending associated with housing, monitoring, and rehabilitation can be costly. As already noted, 71% percent of the total expenses are related to prisons. It is interesting to note that education or vocational training costs about \$7,500 per year per inmate (the Correctional Service of Canada, 2000), which is \$20.55 per day.

According to CSC (2008), there are currently 54 federal prisons in Canada reported to be active. These prisons are dispersed in five regions: Atlantic (6 prisons), Quebec (13 prisons), Ontario (12 prisons), Prairie (14 prisons), and Pacific (9 prisons). There are 9 federal institutions that are maximum security, 20 medium security, 15 minimum security, and 10 multi-level. The only three prisons that house females are located in the Atlantic, Prairie, and Pacific regions.

When examining statistics pertaining to Aboriginal incarcerated men and women<sup>2</sup>, it is particularly interesting to note the following from the CSC 2005-2006 statistics:

### **Aboriginal Men**

- 4% of the total Canadian adult population (2006 census)
- 24% of admissions to provincial/territorial sentenced custody
- 18% of admissions to federal prisons
- 21% of the overall male prisoner population

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<sup>2</sup> The Annual Report of the Correctional Investigator gives more recent, alarming statistics on Aboriginal offenders in the prison setting. Aboriginal Peoples represented 2.7% of the total Canadian adult population in 2007/2008. Representation of the Aboriginal offenders was 19.6% admissions to the federal prisons. It is predicted that if this increasing trend persists, that the statistics will reach up to 25% in less than 10 years. Using the same 2007/2008 census statistics, the overall incarceration rate of Aboriginal Peoples is 983 per 100,000 or nine times higher than non-Aboriginals (p. 148).

- 19% of admissions to remand (accused persons held in custody without bail, before trial)
- In Saskatchewan -- Aboriginal adults are incarcerated at 35 times the rate of non-Aboriginals, where they make up 77% of the total prisoner population (10% of the outside population)
- In the Yukon -- Aboriginal adults make up 74% of the total prisoner population (20% of the outside population)
- In Manitoba -- Aboriginal adults make up 70% of the total prisoner population (11% of the outside population)
- In Alberta -- Aboriginal adults make up 38% of the total prisoner population (4% of the outside population)
- In Ontario -- Aboriginal adults make up 9% of the total prisoner population (1% of the outside population)
- In British Columbia -- Aboriginal adults make up 20% of the total prisoner population (10% of the outside population)

In comparison, the statistics on incarcerated Aboriginal women seem to tell a very similar story<sup>3</sup>.

### **Aboriginal Women**

- In the provincial/territorial prisons, 30% of female prisoners are Aboriginal (2004/2005)
- In Saskatchewan, Aboriginal women account for 87% of all female admissions
- In Manitoba and the Yukon, Aboriginal women account for 83% of all female admissions

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<sup>3</sup> The Annual report of the Correctional Investigator for September of 2007/2008 states the First Nations women in Federal system make up 45% in the maximum security prison, 44% in medium security prison and 18% in minimum security prison.

- In Alberta, Aboriginal women account for 54% of all female admissions
- In British Columbia, Aboriginal women account for 29% of all female admissions (Statistics Canada, 2004/2005)
- According to the 2008 stat, in the federal system, 33.1% of female prisoners are Aboriginal. This has increased steadily since 1997, when Aboriginal women made up 15% of federal female prisoners (Juristat, Statistics Canada, 2005/2006)

Juristat, Statistics Canada (2008), also claims that, while the general population's incarceration rate is dropping, the number of Aboriginal men and women in prison continues to increase, even with the existence of a separate Department of Aboriginal Justice developed to address specific struggles around recidivism for this population. Morin (1981) states, that the lack of education and training is one of the factors that keeps Aboriginal Peoples immobilized and continues the pattern of recidivism. The increasing rate of the Aboriginal statistics is cause for concern. I believe that the current ABE program can be enhanced to focus on Aboriginal needs in order to address the growing statistics. Sioui and Tibault (2002) conducted a survey with male Aboriginal inmates in federal prisons on recidivism and found that employment and education were factors that were strongly correlated with a decrease in recidivism, but only for Aboriginal specific programs.

## **Thesis Statement**

The Aboriginal population clearly holds the majority of seats in the federal prison system; more than 50% of the overall population. Rehabilitating from this institution requires taking on or assimilating the traits and values of the mainstream society, through various different programs that are designed to prepare inmates to conduct themselves as the majority of the population. Interestingly, the programs are based on having the physical, mental, and emotional capacity to take in information and learning. As already documented, the historical educational experiences of the Aboriginal Peoples have destroyed their way of life. This will be further discussed in the Literature Review section. Ross (1996) stresses the importance of a shift towards teaching and healing by examining the past and understanding

how things have come to be. He states that education should focus on presenting events or experiences in ways that encourage and empower. Brown (2007) explored emotional competency and how barriers are formed towards education at an early age due to emotional hurt. The lack of self-esteem and shame overpower the space to learn. Self-esteem and self-worth play a big role with incarcerated individuals and their ability to change. Brown (2005) defines self-esteem as how one feels about oneself. He states that self-esteem plays an important role in learning. Brown claims that when the removal of hurt happens, learning happens. Heckbert and Turkington (2001) also related stories of how emotional issues contributed to the capacity of learning.

And some days in class, I would have to literally force myself to put my hand up to answer a question because I would hear my mom's name—you stupid old squaw, you'll never amount to anything. Stuff like that held me back a lot. So I looked around the class and I seen all these people with their hands down. All these native people, and I thought, maybe they're thinking the same thing (Heckbert and Turkington, 2001, p. 51).

Education has the potential to return cultural self-esteem to Aboriginal male and female inmates, as well as to give them an opportunity to exit the life of crime. To accomplish this, the education program<sup>4</sup> in the prison system must transform to meet the needs of Aboriginal offenders. In order to improve prison education, I believe that it is important to learn from and understand the educational experiences of Aboriginal former inmates; therefore, my research questions start with their perspectives.

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<sup>4</sup>Prison education according to CSC can be academic or vocational programs. For the purpose of this thesis, prison education will be referred to as academic unless otherwise specified.

## **Research Questions**

From the above assertion the following are my research questions:

1. What was the nature and impact of the educational experiences of former Aboriginal male and female inmates before they went to prison?
2. What are the barriers and opportunities for educational access and learning for the Aboriginal male and female inmates in British Columbia's federal prisons?
3. What elements are necessary to improve Aboriginal male and female inmates' attendance and completion of education programs in British Columbia's federal prisons?

This research project explores the prison education experiences of Aboriginal male and female inmates who have been part of the federal penitentiary system. Through this study, new knowledge is created about ways to improve the existing education program to better service the specific needs of Aboriginal males and females in the federal prison system in order to give them a tool to improve their lives.

## **Introduction to the Chapters**

The basic contextual foundation of my research is situated in the literature review, which is Chapter 2. A thorough review of the existing literature will concentrate on four key focus areas: (1) Aboriginal offenders; (2) correction policies; (3) challenges and barriers; and (4) identifying the knowledge gap that is a reality in regards to research on prison education for Aboriginal inmates and generates questions that require answers. Chapter 3, theoretical framework, guides the research study with critical lenses and spotlights the rationale that endorses this study. The methodology chapter gives a detailed explanation on how the research was conducted. The importance of considering the best suited process that would show respect to the participants and the Aboriginal Peoples as a whole is emphasized. Chapter 4 gives a brief introduction to the participants of this research study. Chapter 5, data analysis, narrates the powerful words shared by a population of individuals who have been

silenced by the system. The participants voice their history and frustration with prison programs and express their wish list in relation to education. Chapter 6 reflects on the collected data to offer a transformational curriculum and is followed by Chapter 7 as a conclusion.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The focus of the literature review is to support and rationalize my research study. It is to review all factors involved with prison education for Aboriginal inmates. The following literature review is divided into four sections. These sections will provide a rationale for the research project. The first section of the literature review is a general overview of Aboriginal offenders in the federal prison system, outlining the impact of colonization and the over-representation of Aboriginal inmates that was discussed in the introduction. The second section refers to the broader historical contextual portrayal of the colonization impacts and the difficulties and tension in the justice system in addressing the needs of Aboriginal inmates. This section also speaks to the existing programs that are being initiated in Aboriginal Corrections and will point out the challenges that subsist. The third section states the barriers and challenges that inmates in the federal system face in relation to education. It is critical in the understanding of the Aboriginal circumstances. Also, this information gives impetus for modification of the learning atmosphere to enhance Aboriginal learning. The fourth section relates to the knowledge gap in prison education for the Aboriginal inmates and the absence of literature in the public domain. This portion is vital in the platform for my inquest.

### **Aboriginal Inmates**

According to the Correctional Service of Canada, there is an over-representation of the Aboriginal population in the federal penitentiary system. As well, the prison “revolving door syndrome” (reconviction) is still very prevalent with Aboriginal Peoples. Sioui and Thibault (2001), in their study, found that the statistical rate of recidivism is higher among Aboriginal offenders than non-Aboriginal offenders. For example, within a six-month period, 18% of Aboriginal offenders were re-admitted compared to 11% of non-Aboriginal offenders. These differences remained for longer follow-up periods (33% versus 20% for a one-year follow-up period). Monture-Angus (1999) claims that the justice system is still very active in the colonization of the Aboriginal population; it has become one of the factors of recidivism that is intertwined systemically in the justice system. Angus asserts that

discrimination is witnessed from the initial contact with police to the inside of the prison walls. She further alleges the system of incarceration has replaced the residential schools. The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba (2001) confirmed in their report that Aboriginal Peoples are the victims of a discriminatory justice system from the over-incarceration of Aboriginal offenders in the prison system to the under-employment of Aboriginal Peoples in the justice system. Aboriginal Peoples struggle for justice at every level of the criminal justice process (Law Reform Commission, 1991; Zimmerman, 1992). They are “over-policed” and are more likely to be arrested and less likely to have adequate legal representation. Due to their lack understanding of court procedures, they are more likely to plead guilty. In the prison setting, Aboriginal inmates have a harder time receiving probation and parole. York (1990) states that because of the unfamiliarity of the parole release programs, the Aboriginal offenders tend to waive their rights. When they do apply, some are rejected due to limitations around job skills and a lack of definite plans for the future. Al Chartrand, president of the Native Clan Organization, states that the justice system consistently puts Aboriginal Peoples at a disadvantage because of the lack of understanding of the Aboriginal Peoples by the justice system in all areas. He or she will probably appear in front of a non-Aboriginal judge, be defended and prosecuted by non-Aboriginal lawyers, and if he or she goes to jail he or she will be supervised by non-Aboriginal guards (York, 1990). The Native Clan Organization is a support agency that helps Aboriginal offenders and non-offenders reintegrate into the community. The Aboriginal Peoples of Canada often do not receive equal treatment in Canadian law (Copenace, 2000). “We know you have a legal system; we’re just not sure it’s a justice system” (Cree Elder cited in Ross, 1996, p. 253). Jackson (2002), in his book *Justice Behind the Wall*, recounts the disparity between inmates and employees of CSC that seriously crosses the line of fairness. The disregard for policy masked by interpretations and assumptions to justify practice is exercised routinely by CSC staff. Jackson asserts that the limited understanding of Aboriginal Peoples by CSC employees inside federal prisons continues to plague the Aboriginal inmate.

Ross (1996) states that one of the gaps in the justice system is a different perception of wrongdoing or definition of crime and how to best treat violators, “the Indian communities view a wrongdoing as a misbehaviour which requires teaching or an illness which requires healing” (p. 5). In the western world, crime is a behaviour that needs to be

punished. Violators of law should be prosecuted and put away in prisons so society can be safe. The goal of the Aboriginal justice system is teaching, healing, and reconciliation between the offender and the community, not punishment (Copenace, 2000).

Ross (1996) examines seven different perception dichotomies between western law and Aboriginal traditional ways. First, according to western law, offenders can be dealt with individually through deterrent or rehabilitation. An Aboriginal traditional way calls upon the community. It is based on relationships for both offender and victim. Second, western law perceives that individuals can make choices to change their antisocial behaviours. Aboriginal traditional ways state that one needs to look at all aspects of one's life. History is integral in one's healing and unless one changes one's reactions to historical impact, one will continue to engage in destructive behaviour. Emphasis is on healing and teaching offenders of the reality of their situation. Third, western law focuses on acts that are alleged or the need for proof/evidence. Aboriginal traditional ways look at proof as clues to disharmony in relationships between individuals and aspects of creation and between the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of the individual. Thus, these areas need to be explored instead of the focus being on just the index crime<sup>5</sup>. Fourth, western law is more of an adversarial process which leads to antagonism. Aboriginal traditional ways state that it is the antagonism/struggle within the relationship that is the crux of the adversarial act. Healing that would focus on reducing the antagonism and understanding the struggle seems more beneficial. Fifth, western law is notorious for labelling and stigmatizing individuals. An Aboriginal traditional way attempts to make people think of themselves beyond their problematic behaviour; instead emphasizing that they are capable of learning how to deal with their situation. Sixth, western law states that "taking responsibility for your act" means to acknowledge, pay restitution, or serve time imprisoned. An Aboriginal traditional way suggests that the criminal act is important when you look at the consequences on the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health of everyone that it has affected. Everyone has an opportunity to respond respectfully in order to help the offender take responsibility. Seventh, solutions under western law are provided through professional, third party strangers, like judges and psychiatrists. An Aboriginal traditional way postulates that people who

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<sup>5</sup> Index crime refers to the initial crime that the offender was charged and incarcerated with.

understand the relationship between offender and victim, community, and Creator are involved. The role of the third party is to regulate the process, teach values, and role model. The Aboriginal justice system or the Aboriginal traditional ways not only address the issues of justice on the surface, but encompass the root of the problems in individuals and communities. The need to examine family breakdown, violence, lengthy criminal records, alcohol abuse, and isolation in Aboriginal communities through traditional ways must be considered seriously in order to make a dent in the overwhelming representation of Aboriginal inmates in prison.

Bonata, Lipinski, and Martin (1992) claim that the majority of the Aboriginal offenders have a higher rate of returning to prison than non-Aboriginals. Sioui and Tibault (2002) found that 18% of Aboriginal offenders were back in prison within six months. La Prairie (1996) correlates this high number to age, unemployment, and poverty. In addition to socio-economic factors, a large percentage of crimes take place under the influence of alcohol and drugs. Waldram (1997) concurs that the use of alcohol and drugs are prevalent in the Aboriginal communities. It has become a coping mechanism against despair, loneliness, incompleteness, and being discriminated against and shamed by society. Waldram (1997), in his interviews, traced the blame to residential school, dysfunctional families, and lack of cultural identity. Transformation in the justice system is slow in taking place.

To reiterate, Aboriginal offenders comprise approximately 18% of the prison population even though they comprise 4% of the Canadian population (CSC 2006). Many suffer from disadvantages similar to other prisoners, but they also suffer from additional conditions such as loss of cultural identity, spirituality, language, and the loss of self-esteem that is based on not having a respected place in their own country (Waldram, 1997). Moore and Trevenhan (2000) described the Aboriginal male inmate profile as “complex” and “multi-faceted.” They report that 63% of Aboriginal offenders had been involved in the child welfare system as well; negative childhood experiences were strong contributors for incarceration. For many, their knowledge of or experience with their culture had been limited. CSC (2003) found that Aboriginal female offenders in federal prisons are often

between the ages of 20 and 34 and are usually serving their first sentence: 90% of these individuals have been physically abused and 61% have been sexually abused. Sioui and Tibault (2002) noted that some of the participants in their research study had little or no knowledge of Aboriginal culture.

## **Correction Policies**

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) states they have been and are developing strategies to address the current situation in relation to Aboriginal inmates. In the last 10 years, task forces have been established to develop initiatives to implement and deal with this crisis. Every province has developed, through formal or informal processes, Aboriginal justice policies. Regional, provincial and territorial First Nations and Métis governments, as well as political organizations, have explored legal traditions to meet the needs of their communities or greater political authority over the response to crime and other justice challenges (Whyte, 2008). Research, media, and text have created awareness of the problem facing Aboriginal inmates in the prison system and yet the statistics grow in numbers and solutions are needed.

There have been many attempts and reports submitted to address the needs of Aboriginal inmates by the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). The Constitution Act, 1982, recognized the special needs of Aboriginal offenders and the social and cultural isolation of these inmates. This led to a native inmate self-help movement in institutions which progressed to the formation of brotherhoods and sisterhoods. On March 30, 1983, two Aboriginal inmates in Kent Institution, a maximum-security federal penitentiary located in British Columbia, began a spiritual fast to protest the denial of their rights to practice their spirituality (Waldram, 1997). The fast continued for 34 days before the warden assured inmates that spiritual ceremonies would be allowed. Seven months later the first sweat lodge ceremony was held. This was a perfect example of Aboriginal Peoples taking agency to establish an important aspect of their healing. Agreement for change, to better service Aboriginal inmates, pioneered the development of task forces to investigate and establish initiatives. In 1985, the recognition of the importance of traditional culture and values

initiated an exploration of Aboriginal spirituality by CSC. In 1987, a policy on native offender programs was created to ensure the recognition of spirituality. The lack of power behind the prison walls is an accepted norm within the prison population. Ironically, the voice of the Aboriginal inmates was vital in establishing policy that deals with healing inside the prison walls. In this same year, the Task Force on Aboriginal Peoples in Federal Corrections was established to examine the process which Aboriginal offenders go through from admission to warrant expiry date (CSC, 1987). Another milestone was established in 1989; the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women recommended the creation of a healing lodge for federally sentenced Aboriginal females. It wasn't until 1995 that the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge opened. The lodge is located in Saskatchewan on the Nekaneet Reserve. This lodge utilizes Aboriginal traditional practices in a holistic and respectful way (CSC, 2006. vol.31:1).

In 1988, the Task Force on Aboriginal Peoples in Federal Corrections recognized the “traditional Indian” view that spiritual and cultural background is imperative and should take place when developing programs. The report failed to mention the therapeutic value of spirituality programs, but did report that Elders and spiritual programs be recognized with the same status as chaplains and other religions (Waldram, 1997). It wasn't until the 1992 Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA) that recognition of Elders and spirituality were given the same importance as other religions and religious leaders. The CCRA replaced the Penitentiary Act and the Parole Act that had previously governed the CSC and the Parole Board of Canada (formerly known as the National Parole Board). Its primary purpose is to promote a just, peaceful, and safe society. The CCRA sets out a variety of rights and responsibilities; the transfer of offenders, prison discipline, administrative segregation, search and seizure, programs, health care, religion, programming for Aboriginal offenders, and programs designed to meet the needs of women offenders. Section 70 of the CCRA also directs that the CSC shall take all reasonable steps to ensure that the penitentiaries, the penitentiary environment, the living and working conditions of inmates, and the working conditions of staff members are safe, healthful and free of practices that undermine a person's sense of personal dignity. Victims' rights and concerns are also reflected in the Act, allowing for victims to be kept informed of an offender's prison and

parole status; information from victims to be considered at parole reviews; and victims to attend parole hearings at the discretion of NPB rather than of the offender (*Corrections and Conditional Release Act* S.C., 1992, c.20).

This Act, as well, made provisions that CSC has the responsibility to take steps to ensure Aboriginal inmates have available a spiritual leader or Elder (CSC, 1994). Waldram (1997) writes that Elders still find difficulties entering prison facilities and face discriminative treatment by the guards. Elders are not recognized equally in financial compensation and do not feel they are on the same status scale as chaplains. Aboriginal spirituality is not practiced only on Sundays and in a church; this rule and structure make it cumbersome for the Elders. CSC has problems with the lack of documentation or progress reports that they require from Elders. The rules and regulations of institutions are discriminatory of Aboriginal ways. In 1991, the Task Force on the Criminal Justice System stated:

It is our position that numerous changes be made relatively quickly to the existing criminal justice system to make it more sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal people. The first step in this process is the “indigenization” of the criminal justice system...[which] can, in fact, go a long way toward meeting the wishes of some Aboriginal people (p. 1-7).

The Task Force further explains that indigenization refers to the accused of Aboriginal descent, understanding the law, court procedures, and legal process as it relates to them. Again the Aboriginal Peoples are expected to adjust to the existing procedures, processes, and policies. As well, representation by Aboriginal Peoples is in all levels of the criminal justice process. For example, more Aboriginal police officers, more translators, and more native court workers. Ironically, the attempt at indigenizing the criminal justice system resembles assimilation.

We believe that to achieve harmony between the justice system and the Aboriginal people they must be fully involved in any policy development, program planning and

implementation and service delivery with respect to the criminal justice system (Task Force, 1991, p1).

The focus of the Task Force was in reality to “westernize” the Aboriginal Peoples by including them and having them participate in the criminal justice system. The effort to make the Aboriginal Peoples more visible in the justice system is an erroneous use of the term indigenization by the Task Force.

Jackson (2002), Waldram (1997), and Ross (1996) suggested that the federal government should go a step further than just having the Aboriginal Peoples understand the criminal justice system; that the government should try to understand the Aboriginal Peoples and their way of life when defining indigenization. Ross (1996) concludes that only then can the government really understand and deal positively with Aboriginals in the justice system. Acknowledgement and understanding would be the first step to break down barriers and start the process of lowering the numbers in the prison setting.

Judge Barry Stuart, from the Yukon Territorial Court, advanced Aboriginal justice by introducing sentencing circles in his presiding area. Stuart (1992) used *Philip Moses vs. The Queen* to implement a sentencing circle that utilized the community members in sentencing Philip Moses. Judge Stuart, after reading Moses’ criminal history, felt something different needed to happen. He felt the justice system was ineffective with Moses, which exacerbated Moses’ problem. The monetary expenditures on Moses by CSC, was about a quarter of a million dollars. Stuart used a circle to signify equality and invited all relations to this circle. He allowed everyone to speak and come up with a solution that best served Moses. Stuart continues to use sentencing circles when dealing with the Aboriginal accused. In the same context, but more of a progression, is the project in British Columbia involving the Nuuchahnulth (South Island) Tribal Council. Here, the re-establishment of the Council of the S’ul Hwen, who are representatives of different families, partner with the court to take care of matters normally under the provincial court system. Historically, the S’ul Hwen Council was the way of the Salish community. The approach was holistic and emphasis was on healing and reconciliation rather than punishment (Tennant, 1985). The future for the Salish

would be to hold council without the interference of the court system, to be allowed to follow their traditional way, and to not have the western legal power and control to further devastate their people.

In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples brought to the attention of the governments the severity of problems for Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. They concluded that the justice system had failed these individuals. Again, a call to better understand Aboriginal Peoples and their ways was identified. The response to this dilemma was in the form of amendments to the Criminal Code. Provisions for alternative measures and diversionary programs were explored. In 1996, *Manasie Ipeelee versus the Supreme Court* acknowledged the over representation of Aboriginal offenders in the federal prison system as a crisis. In reaction, section 718.2(e) of the criminal code was established to explore other means of sanction other than imprisonment that can take into consideration the circumstances of Aboriginal offenders when sentencing. The plea to take judicial notice of how the impact of colonialism, displacement, residential schools, lower educational attainment, lower incomes, higher unemployment, drugs and alcohol, all relate to overrepresentation of Aboriginal offenders must be given importance. For numerous reasons section 718.2(e) was not universally well-received. Ten years later the statistics indicate the overrepresentation and alienation of the Aboriginal Peoples in the criminal justice system has only worsened. Section 718.2(e) also stated that sentencing judges should take into consideration all available sanctions other than imprisonment that are reasonable in the circumstances for all offenders, with particular attention to the circumstances of Aboriginal offenders. This led to the 1999 Supreme Court of Canada decision *R. vs. Gladue* that initiated the direction in how this section would be applied. Gladue was a young woman who had stabbed her common law husband while under the influence of alcohol. The judge looked at all factors from environmental to situational and that both victim and offender had been living away from their Aboriginal communities. This young woman, who was a first time offender, had supports in her community and was involved in counselling. Consequently, the young woman spent six months in a correctional centre as opposed to three years in a federal prison. This decision accepted the place in the criminal justice system of Aboriginal beliefs on

justice and reconciliation and on the relationships between families and communities (Haslip, 2000).

In 1997, the Aboriginal Initiatives Branch in the CSC approved the development of the National Action Plan on Aboriginal Corrections (NAPAC) to strategize around Aboriginal issues. NAPAC responded and delivered a paper outlining 14 different CSC Aboriginal initiatives to be implemented.

1. Aboriginal offender programming (institutional and community)
2. Aboriginal health issues (fetal alcohol syndrome effects, HIV/AIDS, and traditional healers).
3. Aboriginal research (Aboriginal intake assessment and Aboriginal offender data).
4. Aboriginal healing lodges
5. Section 81 and 84 agreements (details below)
6. Aboriginal human resources (national recruitment strategy, cross-cultural Aboriginal awareness).
7. Aboriginal Elders and native liaison workers
8. Partnerships (in CSC, federal, provincial, international, Aboriginal advisory committees, national Aboriginal organizations)
9. Aboriginal gangs and Aboriginal youth
10. Aboriginal women offenders
11. Specific Aboriginal groups (Métis, Inuit, and urban)
12. Supporting Aboriginal business (CORCAN and employability, federal /Aboriginal procurement strategy)
13. Aboriginal restorative justice
14. Human rights and Aboriginal offenders (CSC, 2001)

## **Aboriginal Offender Programming**

The Corrections and Conditional Release Act, sections 76 and 80, stipulates that Aboriginal offenders be provided with culturally appropriate programs to meet their correctional needs. One of the programs referenced was *The Aboriginal Orientation Program*. Self-identified Aboriginal offenders partake in an orientation/assessment that will identify cultural and criminogenic needs, as well educate offenders about correction, Aboriginal heritage and healing opportunities. The purpose is to identify needs for future program planning.

The development of an Aboriginal healing program that considers regional and cultural differences was noted as important by NAPAC. As well, NAPAC encouraged and supported programs of reintegration for Aboriginal offenders. The vision to develop intensive core programs that would address the criminogenic behaviours in a culturally appropriate way was summed up as a respectful alternative to the existing programs. NAPAC outlined guiding principles to ensure that Aboriginal programming meets the CSC standards and regulations in order to make these programs compatible with the non-Aboriginal core programs. NAPAC also asserted the need for these programs to be developed by Aboriginal Peoples who have recognized expertise in effective correctional service and traditional cultural healing (CSC, 2001). Call for proposals and exploration of budget was deemed the next step.

NAPAC pointed out the importance of collaboration with Aboriginal communities. The notion of assessing, strengthening, and building capacity, in the hopes of allowing low risk offenders to be released in their own communities, was also considered imperative.

## **Aboriginal Health Issues**

It is noted that Aboriginal Peoples are significantly over-represented in almost every area in health issues. These include diabetes, HIV/AIDS, FASD, tuberculosis, hepatitis, smoking, and substance abuse. A consideration was made to hire a full-time Aboriginal co-

ordinator to develop an Aboriginal offender health strategy in federal corrections. Of importance is a need to address aging Aboriginal offenders. CSC is awaiting research to further explore the needs of these individuals. A gathering of Elders from across Canada was organized to discuss issues of traditional healing in the prison system. The Aboriginal Branch and Elders will consult to determine appropriate policy on traditional healing services to Aboriginal offenders.

## **Aboriginal Research**

Existing research claims no distinction between Aboriginal and general offender population. Research is necessary for awareness and identifying needs of the Aboriginal offenders. Through the Aboriginal Issues Branch there appear to be many topics of research underway as well as future planned research projects which CSC (1997) demonstrates their actions to better understand the Aboriginal inmates by committing to research. Some of the research that is underway is focused on reintegration and evaluation of programs in the community that focus on healing and supporting the Aboriginal inmate. CSC (2000) has established topics of interest and plans to carry out further research, such as the construct of psychopathy among Aboriginal Peoples. Of interest, CSC (2000) discusses opportunities for research projects that target Aboriginal women offenders and Aboriginal youth affiliated with gangs and fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) in federal prisons. It is worthy to note that the focus of research and projects is not related to specific Aboriginal programs in prison or education as it relates to Aboriginal inmates. Also, it appears that the voices of Aboriginal inmates are not considered valuable for CSC due to lack of any future research focusing on the experience and thoughts of the Aboriginal offender.

Currently, the need to measure the effects of Aboriginal offender programs is at the forefront of research. Aboriginal Issues Branch in partnership with Management Systems Branch and the Performance Assurance Sector, will develop a standard set of measures to assess and compare offender data. To note, all research inside prisons needs approval from CSC and must meet their criteria for approval.

## **Aboriginal Healing Lodges**

CSC will be funding the development of a minimum of six healing lodges in addition to the Samson Cree and Nikaneet lodges already in existence. Healing lodges operate from a unique perspective, focusing on spiritual leadership as well as role modeling through life experiences of staff. These lodges provide Aboriginal teachings, ceremonies, contact with Elders and children, and interaction with nature. Healing lodges identify and plan individualized holistic, interactive treatment in conjunction with the community. Currently, there are six healing lodges across Canada and more in the developing stages (CSC, 2000). There are two types of healing lodges: one that is administered by CSC and considered a correctional facility, the other through section 81 (refer to information below) which is managed by the community. NAPAC summarized the ongoing progress for additional healing lodges.

## **Sections 81 and 84**

NAPAC made focal the implementation of Sections 81 and 84 from the Corrections and Conditional Release Act. Both sections have been in place for a few years. These sections allow CSC to work directly with Aboriginal communities to plan for individual's success in prison and after release.

Section 81 provides general custody agreements for the transfer of an Aboriginal offender to an Aboriginal community in a non-institutional setting with supervision treatment and programming provided under 24 hour supervision of community members. Three other types of arrangements are also possible under Section 81 to facilitate the transfer of an Aboriginal offender to a spiritual or healing lodge, or other treatment facility in an urban setting.

Section 84 provides Aboriginal communities with the opportunity to participate in an offender's release plan from a penal institution. The release plan must address the concerns and needs of the community as well as those of the offender. Successful reintegration becomes part of the overall healing path for all involved: the community, the offender, and the victim (CSC, 2006).

According to the Office of the Correctional Investigator 2007-2008, from 1999 to 2008; only four Section 81's were signed due to the limited capacity of Aboriginal communities. Seventeen years after the law allowed for healing lodges, an audit concluded that there was no CSC policy framework in place to support the sustainability of healing lodges, as well, no clear direction from CSC policies and procedure. Monitoring and assessing mechanisms were not followed through and documented. The audit commented on the lack of consistency in the delivery of the programs and services in the healing lodge. The investigator's office documented that the healing lodges were not operating with full occupancy. As of 2009, CSC was waiting on a progress report from a newly developed Healing Lodge Action Plan (Mann, 2009).

Section 84 appears to be more utilized on a regular basis. Review of Section 84 seems imminent to identify barriers and make it more viable in the community and for the offender. The numbers for Section 84 are inconsistent on a yearly basis and according to the Office of the Correctional Investigator; ineffective use of Section 84 and inadequate monitoring mechanisms make any assessment tasking.

### **Aboriginal Human Resources**

Aboriginal offenders comprise approximately 18% of the prison population out of a national 4% population. It was important then to create an Aboriginal personnel employment strategy based on the population it serves. Information on the number of Aboriginal employees needs to be collected to assess the priority of CSC human resources and their strategy to better serve the Aboriginal inmates. A National Aboriginal Recruitment Team was proposed to be established in order to deal with this issue. Furthermore it was noted that there is imminent need to educate and sensitize CSC staff to Aboriginal culture so they are better prepared to deal with operational and program issues that arise. A need to recognize National Aboriginal Awareness Week and National Aboriginal Day was also a part of the strategy.

## **Aboriginal Elders and Native Liaison Workers**

In CSC, a requirement is that Elders be treated with respect and ensure treatment be similar to that of a chaplain. In conversation with Chris Hans (December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011), who is a parole officer in the Kamloops, BC, office, Elders are chosen thorough networking in the communities. Mr. Hans is Aboriginal and states that Elders are identified by the community members and have in the past obtained contracts. He mentioned that the Elder position is becoming full time. The importance of including Elders in the prison system is a sign of positive mobility. Traditional medicines and the use of ceremonial artifacts need to be respected without judgment and interrogation. Native liaison workers also need to be recognized and paid equitably to other staff or contractors.

## **Partnership**

The 1999 Strategic Planning Conference of EXCOM supported working together in a multi-faceted approach. CSC believes in the importance of working together within the service. Currently, the Aboriginal Issues Branch works on developing initiatives and strategies related to Aboriginal offenders and other branches/sectors that manage the initiative within their priorities. In addition, the Aboriginal Branch is involved in indigenous sub-committees that were established by the International Corrections and Prisons Association. The Corrections and Conditional Release Act requires that CSC maintain a national Aboriginal Advisory Committee. These committees consult regularly with Aboriginal communities and other appropriate persons associated with knowledge of Aboriginal matters.

## **Aboriginal Gangs and Aboriginal Young Offenders**

NAPAC addressed the above issue as one needing magnification. CSC must address effective management and safe reintegration of Aboriginal gang members. It is believed that there are between 800 and 1000 active gang members in Canada. There are an estimated 250 gang members in federal institutions (the majority being in the prairies). These youth are

overwhelmingly represented in the prison setting. Poverty and a plethora of socio-economic disadvantages are ideal conditions that create the climate where the Indian Posse, the Manitoba Warriors, and other Aboriginal gangs have emerged (Statistic Canada, 2005). In 2008/2009, Aboriginal youth accounted for 27% of youth admitted to remand (awaiting trial, who have not been convicted), 36% of youth admitted to sentenced custody, and 24% of youth admitted to probation, indicating that the Aboriginal per capita rate is three times higher than the non-Aboriginal rate. The Youth Criminal Justice Act has participated in these high statistics by allowing the age of young offenders to be tried in adult court to be lowered to 14 years old for serious crimes. One object of this shift was to alleviate congestion in youth detention (Statistics Canada, 2000). This alteration will have grave consequences. For example, 48% of the Aboriginal population consists of children and youth aged 24 or younger, compared to 31% of the non-Aboriginal population. The number of Aboriginal youth is estimated to increase 10% from 2001 to 2017, compared to a decline of 8% for non-Aboriginal young persons. The future looks bleak for Aboriginal youth; if this pattern continues, the statistics in the prison system will rise with youth and problems of gangs will increase (Statistic Canada, 2005). Resources need to be developed quickly to service these young individuals. Again, CSC maintains that they will work together with Aboriginal communities and the provinces to address this issue.

### **Aboriginal Women**

The Aboriginal Issues Branch, in conjunction with the Women Offender Sector, is responsible to ensure the needs of Aboriginal women are being met. The increasing statistics (refer to introduction) for Aboriginal women continue to grow. In February of 2001, the Women Offender Sector sponsored a women Elders' gathering. One issue for conversation was women offenders and facilities. Discussion around development and expansion of healing lodges was documented at that time for the Aboriginal Issues Branch. The Elders stressed the importance of programming and mechanisms to improve the reintegration efforts and successes with Aboriginal women offenders (CSC, 2001). Aboriginal women offenders do not have access to adequate programs or services while they are in the federal prison system. The programs that are offered in the federal correctional system are not designed for

reintegration into the community nor is it culturally appropriate. In 2003, the Auditor General's Report commented on concerns over the incarceration of women at a distance from their families, the quality of rehabilitation programs available to women in corrections facilities, and the incarceration of women prisoners in facilities with higher security levels than would be required by the assessment of their individual risk.

### **Specific Aboriginal Groups**

There is currently an absence of Métis culture in the prison system. CSC has provided funding to the Métis National Council to begin the development of strategies to address Métis concerns in federal corrections. CSC will also provide funding for the Inuit in order to address their issues. In the past, the Inuit have been very dissatisfied with CSC's response to their needs. As well, CSC is working closely with the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples to determine better practices in dealing with urban Aboriginal offenders' issues.

### **Supporting Aboriginal Business**

CORCAN is a rehabilitation program of CSC. It provides employment and employability skills training to incarcerated offenders in federal penitentiaries. It operates in 31 institutions across Canada and has four business lines. CORCAN has developed partnerships with private sector Aboriginal businesses to employ and train Aboriginal offenders. The federal government has committed to invest additional funds into the Aboriginal economic development initiatives. The Aboriginal Branch will work with CORCAN to establish employment opportunities for Aboriginal offenders upon release from prisons.

### **Aboriginal Restorative Justice**

CSC recognizes the importance of traditional healing practices as they relate to restoring the offender, the victim, and the community. Efforts to promote restorative justice and dispute resolution projects within Aboriginal communities will be endorsed by CSC.

## **Human Rights and Aboriginal Offenders**

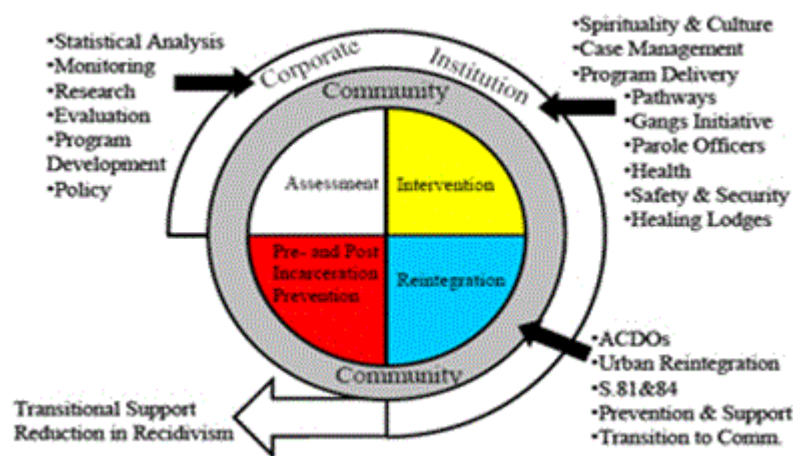
The Aboriginal Issues Branch participates on the CSC National Steering Committee on Human Rights. The Human Rights Branch is developing a human rights audit plan comprising 18 key areas. All audits take into consideration the specific needs and issues of the Aboriginal inmates. The Aboriginal Issues Branch has also developed an Aboriginal offender and human rights checklist.

There have been great movements in the Correctional Service of Canada since the NAPAC started. The 14 initiatives clearly cover many gaps in the system in dealing with Aboriginal offenders. For instance, a financial budget must be established for programming for Aboriginal men and women that is more culturally appropriate. The need to provide information on Aboriginal health issues is imperative. The justice system should be cognizant of Aboriginal issues and implement programs that will focus on reintegration. CSC needs to take seriously Section 81 and Section 84 by building capacity in Aboriginal communities and constructing more healing lodges and hiring Aboriginal staff. Realistically, some initiatives are still in the discussion stages and evaluation of their status needs to be done. Others initiatives have been implemented but lack of evaluation to assess success or barriers are not in place. Detailed examination of implemented programs needs to show if they are Aboriginal directed as well if they are being utilized.

A Corrections Continuum of Care (Continuum) model, developed in 2003 in consultation with Aboriginal stakeholders partnering with CSC, is in place to ensure Aboriginal offenders are supported at every level of their encounter in the justice system figure. This model is designed to represent the medicine wheel and a reminder that any form of intervention with the Aboriginal offenders takes into consideration the past, the present, and the future. The Continuum also recognizes that the communities must be involved in supporting Aboriginal offenders during their healing journey and reintegration. The realization through research has indicated that the major factors contributing to Aboriginal offenders' success upon release were their participation in spiritual and cultural activities as well as Aboriginal directed programs. This again is an interesting concept to note when

considering programs that benefit Aboriginal inmates. The Continuum starts at intake and ends with the establishment of community supports to sustain progress beyond the end of the sentence and prevent re-offending. It takes into consideration healing inside the institution to better prepare Aboriginal offenders for transfer to lower security and conditional release. The goal of the Continuum is to encourage Aboriginal inmates to bridge the disconnect with their culture and communities.

**Figure 1: Correction Continuum of Care**



Corrections Continuum of Care. [Online image]. Retrieved April 11, 2009 from <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/abinit/plan06-eng.shtml#6>. Reproduced with permission.

The Aboriginal Corrections Continuum of Care model now forms the basis for which CSC identifies priorities for action. Therefore, educating staff and inmates of this model will ensure services are implemented in a respectful way. The need to work together is required under this Continuum model. The Continuum model does not emphasize education as a primary focal in their priority, although program delivery is part of institution initiative.

Transformation is slow in coming, and celebrating small victories, such as the development of the Continuum Model, can aid in the battle. The process of destroying the Aboriginal Peoples has taken many forms at many levels. The criminal justice system is one

level where inequality is seen by the overwhelming representation of the Aboriginal offenders. Solutions are being attempted by CSC to deal with Aboriginal offenders in a respectful manner. Acknowledgement and understanding by government needs to be shown at every level. The question that needs to be answered is why the number of Aboriginal offenders keeps rising when CSC has put in numerous Aboriginal programs that focus on conforming to societal guidelines and ongoing initiatives that consistently spotlight the weakness in the justice system as it pertains to Aboriginal offenders. The need to relinquish power and control over the Aboriginal Peoples and allow self-government as it relates to justice needs to be addressed.

Ross (1996), Waldram (1997), and Copenace (2000) argue that the Aboriginal traditional way of dealing with crime is oppositional to western law. CSC must listen to the Elders and make space for their ways in order to reduce the hegemony in the prison system. The time to concentrate on supplying accurate knowledge and wrestling with policies to address the increasing statistics has been forced by the status of the situation. Awareness of the crisis has been challenging. Aboriginal leaders, researchers, authors, and educators are uniting and keeping the attention on the blaring statistics as they relate to Aboriginal men, women and youth in the prison setting. Mainstream education has become a necessity for survival and an instrument for rectifying historical legitimacy for all Aboriginal Peoples. Tomson Highway (1989) states:

...we are witnessing the emergence of a generation of Indian people clearly more vocal, more articulate, and more aggressively unwilling to continue playing victim. This generation is fluent in the English language for one thing, but even more important it is armed with University degrees and diplomas.... (York, 1990, vii)

### **Challenges and Barriers for Aboriginal Inmates**

The ideal venue for Aboriginal inmates would address the barriers and challenges that they face routinely. A justice system is just when it reorients and encourages inmates toward their highest and best achievement. The federal prisons do not foster an ideal learning

environment for Aboriginal inmates due to the limited understanding of the numerous issues that plague the individual when entering the prison system.

### **Physical Barriers**

There are some physical barriers to education that limit individuals from furthering their education, such as lack of resources, low levels of literacy, program budget cuts, and lack of familial and academic support. Curry, Wolf, Boutilier, and Chan (2003) surveyed the libraries in the Canadian penal system and found the system lacking in information and technology. The majority of the prison libraries have adapted to the high technology of information that society has become accustomed to, such as computers and e-mail, which makes accessing information more difficult for the inmates due to their limited knowledge of electronic technology. Access to prison libraries is another problem that individuals face considering they are in a very controlled environment. The freedom to enter at will is not an option. There are designated times and conditions for this privilege. The content of the literature is also very controlled and therefore censorship of books is applied. The use of the existing prison library, or the need to read, is not a popular endeavour in the prison system. As well, many of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal inmates struggle with literacy. This is not uncommon in the Aboriginal population, since the school system has failed them dramatically. CSC (2001) data show that one third (31%) of First Nations, over one half (57%) of Inuit, and one fifth (21%) of Métis in the federal prison system have less than a grade 8 education.

Literacy skills are not only important in society but in the prison system as well. Kerka (1995) adds that inmates must fill out forms and make requests, letters that are vital links to the outside world. Some prison jobs require literacy skills and are also a way to pass time in a locked environment (Paul, 1991). The routine of prison life does not foster positive schooling experiences. Lockdowns, headcounts, inmate's hearings, or meetings with lawyers are disruptive and difficult for prison educators. Tutors and students are locked in rooms monitored by guards (Shethar, 1993). Prison environment is not conducive to successful education (Paul, 1991). Funding problems, budget cuts, a lack of equipment, as well a lack

of support from administrators, make it difficult to further the cause of education. The support for inmates is very limited. In the Aboriginal community, family and community are involved in an offender's life to encourage and motivate individuals to change. Family members have difficulty obtaining visitation rights. There are strict rules and regulations around visitations. Certain criteria need to be met, for instance, a criminal record check (Corrections Canada, 2001). The paper shuffling and CSC standards amplify barriers for the Aboriginal inmate to receive fair treatment.

### **Mental Barriers**

Kirmayer, Simpson, Cargo discuss the mental health barriers that the Aboriginal male and female inmates face, such as social problems, demoralization, depression, substance abuse, suicide, as well as other issues. These familiar issues create distraction in the individual and perpetuate low self-esteem, which becomes an internal struggle that is difficult to break. Heckbert and Turkington (2002) interviewed 68 male inmates for their research on factors related to successful integration. They found the profiles of the offenders to be filled with despair and hopelessness: "...you're already trained at birth, you know? You see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing, say nothing.....and you take this with you in the world" (p. 54).

Sexual abuse, physical abuse, and psychological neglect was a way of life for many of the interviewed inmates. Waldram (1997), in his interviews with incarcerated Aboriginal men, found several themes that were common in their life stories. For instance, physical violence by parents, violence between spouses or against other family members, as well as witnessing of all the above:

I didn't have it easy. There's not very many people that believe what I went through. I used to be beat with a bridle over my head and I got proof of evidence and marks on my back, on my head. If I had a hairless scalp right now, you would see dents that you would never believe to see..... When I got older, I was violent (p. 47).

The majority of the men were raised by extended family members due to their parents not being able to care adequately for them. According to Waldram's interviews, in many instances, this did not stop the abuse. Family disruption was common for many of the men who would ultimately end up in jail. Basic necessities of life were rationed or simply not provided.

Well my dad never did hit us, but we never had anything to eat in our place. My aunt used to bring us food all the time, cause my parents drank day and night. They were never home at all (1995, p. 49).

Criminal activity was seen by some as a form of escape from desperate home and community situations.

There was a lot of alcoholism in my family, lots of fights, lots of arguments, lots of abuse. That's why I started to get into trouble. I just wanted to get out of there, so I did some B&E's. The cops didn't find nobody who has done them, so I just phoned there and I said, "I did it" (ibid, p. 50).

Removal of Aboriginal children from their parental homes and communities because of violence and abuse, and placement in non-Aboriginal foster homes that denied their cultural ways, made them feel inferior. Foster homes were sometimes abusive places where physical, verbal, and sexual abuse took place. Many interviewees felt they were treated badly and exploited in many ways.

Our foster father, he was sexually assaulting my sister all the time. I was seven years old and I didn't really know what to do, out of fear. So I tried to fight him a few times and that, so I'd get beaten up so bad I couldn't even go to school. I had black eyes and everything. So I promised myself when I grow up, I'll beat him up. You know, here's my sister crying. When I turned twelve years old I beat him up with a baseball bat and I took my sister and ran away. And we grew up on the streets (ibid, p. 51).

Residential school was another place where abuse and cultural denial were acted out. The attempt in this environment was to take the native out of these children. This abuse formulated the experience of school and was permanently planted in the memories of these youngsters. Another interviewee in Waldram's (1997) study states:

At a very early age, my parents put us in a residential school. We went through a lot of problems at the residential school. English was the only language that we were allowed to speak, and if we did speak our own language, we were severely reprimanded. So basically, there was a lot of hatred, fear, and a lot of negative things that I hated against the people in authority or people with power. I also felt that I was just dumped there, with promises from my mother that she'd be back in a week to pick us up. So I had a tendency to run away and rebel at very early age, more out of fear of living in the residential school because I was physically abused and sexually abused (ibid, p. 53).

The stories all are filled with tragedy, hurt, and pain. Trust for adults and the environment was violated and replaced with fear. Suppression of emotions, in order to survive on a daily basis, was the goal for these individuals growing up. The abuse was incomprehensible. Goleman (1995) points out that imprints of horror can last a lifetime.

Traumatic memories in childhood, such as being chronically ignored, deprived of attention or tenderness by one's parents, abandonment or loss, or social rejection leaves their imprint on emotional brain, creating distortions, tears, rage, and intimate relationship problems later in life (p. 212).

Duran (2006) holds the view that trauma is passed from generation to generation. When trauma is not dealt with in previous generations, it has to be dealt with in subsequent generations. Duran believes that unresolved trauma becomes more severe each time it is passed on to the next generation. Waldram (1997) reiterates the significant role childhood trauma has had on incarcerated Aboriginal inmates. He further states that self-identity can be compromised as a result of long-term abuse. For these inmates their identity lies within the system. For some, institutions have been part of their life, from residential school to foster care and finally graduating to the prison system.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is another struggle for the Aboriginal population that greatly affects the learning process. According to the Canadian Public Health Association, a needs assessment on mental health issues of federal inmates in Canada explored and confirmed the following:

- Inmates have substantially higher prevalences of mental disorders compared with the general public: rates of most disorders are higher in female than in male inmates.
- The majority of inmates suffer from a substance abuse disorder and, in many cases, their substance use contributed to committing the crime that resulted in their incarceration.
- Suicide rates in inmates are substantially higher than in comparably-aged general public and are higher than those observed in prisons in several other countries (April, 2004, p. 30).

Treatment available to inmates with mental disorders is inadequate and hinders their release into communities. The aforementioned needs assessment examined Canadian prisons and was not specific on details pertaining to the Aboriginal offenders.

A high percentage of female offenders struggle with substance abuse issues and are three times more likely than men or females not in custody to suffer from depression. They are more likely to be diagnosed with mental illness than male offenders, as well as to partake in self-abusive behaviours and suicide attempts (CSC, 2001). Again, there is limited information specifically on female Aboriginal offenders and mental health issues.

### **Emotional Barriers**

The ABE model for education relies on cognitive learning and does not consider emotional barriers or emotional connection to determine learning outcomes as a detriment to learning. The western world view of emotion has been one that is seen as redundant, unhealthy, and needing to be controlled (Brown, 2007). Behaviour modification is utilized in

various settings, from daycare to prison settings, in anticipation of controlling emotions and modifying behaviour. Some renowned philosophers who have struggled with the explanation of mind infected people with the idea that emotion was perversion, irrational, and did not have a place within the individual. Descartes' notion of existence fundamentally relied on cognition. The notion that the heart and mind are two separate entities and are in conflict was preached by these European writers to eliminate feelings from human beings, or to make it seem that emotions are not important. Brown (2007), in his research, stipulated "the necessity of the European to colonize their own emotion before they could bring oppression of colonization to the rest of the world" (p. 11). How else are individuals capable of such destruction unless they rationalize their own actions by their logic in the absence of emotion? Emotional detachment is evidenced by European history and their actions against many indigenous groups around the world.

When the Europeans made contact with the First Peoples of this nation, the construction of Aboriginalism was given birth. Information flowed easily over the ocean, describing the Aboriginal Peoples as primitive, childlike, not capable of complex thought and relying on intuition, "their ceremonies thought of as fantasy and based on magic" (Waldram, 2004, p. 10). The notion that "these people" were somehow inferior, the descriptor "primitive" as a sign or evidence of an earlier stage of human cognitive evolution, was being marketed to the European crowd. Jean Jacques Rousseau, who, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, coined the phrase the "noble savage" in reference to Aboriginal Peoples, reinforced the inferiority belief (Lindholm, 2001, p. 33). Other descriptors by Europeans included barbaric, childlike, simple, free of the constraints of reason, and animalistic (Waldram, 2004). With these thoughts spreading in the European continent like wild fire, and the use of weaponry to control, Eurocentric ideals dominated and the task of civilizing these primitive communities began. Brown (2007) writes:

Europeans focused on the destruction of the Aboriginal emotional self during the process of colonization (p. 18). European epistemology separated the mind, body, spirit, and heart, which conflicted with the medicine wheel teaching that the four work together into a holistic model of being (p. 21).

With two contrasting views, the dominant European path led the way, causing continued havoc.

## **Spiritual Barriers**

Lack of spirituality and culture is another barrier to the Aboriginal population. Morin (1989), who is an Aboriginal inmate, speaks to the importance of spirituality and teachings of the Elders. He states that spiritual programs are instrumental in identity, self-esteem, and nativeness. He talks about the Native Brotherhood that is making attempts to advocate help for other Aboriginal inmates with spiritual and cultural needs. The Native Brotherhood is a self-help group that is organized in many federal institutions in British Columbia. The Brotherhood promotes programs such as life skills, peer group counselling, and traditional native ceremonies. They advocate for better understanding of the Aboriginal culture. This becomes a task when faced with administrators who have difficulties understanding Aboriginal culture and the Aboriginal ways and view the group as a vehicle for potential racism. Waldram (1997) views native spirituality programs as being very effective in the mental and physical health of the offenders. Waldram (1997) conducted an ethnographic interview using open ended questions to Aboriginal inmates about their cultural and prison experience. He found that Aboriginal healing programs have a healing component and are very much needed in this environment. Heckbert and Turkington (2002), in their qualitative research study, found that spirituality and culture were necessary for the success of Aboriginal inmates. The two researchers interviewed 68 offenders to identify factors that related to successful integration. In *Stolen Life*, by Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson (1998), the biography of an Aboriginal woman (Yvonne Johnson), the healing lodge played an important role in her recovery. Her conversations with an Elder proved to be cathartic in her acceptance of her actions. It provided the channel for emotional release of memories. Elders and sweat lodges are common in many prisons; the success of interaction with Elders and the use of sweat lodges are difficult to evaluate. Success usually pertains to recidivism and not individual emotional and mental gains (Waldram, 1997).

## Knowledge Gap

To repeat, all federal institutions in Canada offer education programs (the Correctional Service of Canada, 1999). The objectives of the educational programs offered by CSC are:

- To provide offenders with provincially accredited or certified programs which meet their identified education needs to assist them to reintegrate into the community as law-abiding citizens;
- To provide appropriate library services similar to those in the community, while meeting the needs of the correctional environment; and
- To facilitate continuity in educational programming when offenders are transferred between institutions or are released to the community (the Correctional Service of Canada, 1999, p. 2).

A survey done by the Correctional Service of Canada recognized the movement toward implementing programs that are focused towards Aboriginal needs in order to deal with the over-representation of the Aboriginal population in prison. The Correctional Service of Canada (2000b) implemented 13 programs in the federal prison system. All programs were focused on substance abuse, childhood trauma, foster homes and/or boarding schools, cultural issues, traditions, and spirituality. The heart of these programs concentrated on mainstream information. Education did not seem to make the list of programs that would need to be examined. LaPrairie's research (1996) discusses the need for more Aboriginal focused educational and cultural programs. He states that the existing programs have yet to be evaluated; therefore, it is hard to assess outcome benefits. The push to build education programs to address the over-representation of the Aboriginal population in the federal prisons is becoming a priority.

The Forum on Corrections Research (1991) states that participation in basic education programs by adult male offenders has a positive effect on their recidivism rates.

As well, participants stated that obtaining a grade 8 level helped them: 47% stated that it helped a great deal, 30% said it helped them very much in their job search, and another 30% stated it helped somewhat. The aforementioned research, as well as the studies mentioned in the introduction, do not show participants' heritage or history.

Sioui and Tibault (2002) conducted a survey with male Aboriginal inmates in federal prisons on recidivism, and found that employment and education were factors that were strongly correlated with a decrease in recidivism, but only for Aboriginal specific programs. The researchers found that the majority of the Aboriginal inmates wanted to learn more about Aboriginal culture and establishing identity. Other factors that were found to be a deterrent to prison were spirituality and cultural identity (Waldram, 1997; Sioui and Tibault, 2002). Consequently, most of the literature has focused on the need for Aboriginal cultural programs and the benefits such programs would provide this population. Dr. Theresa Howell (2008) researched factors that were associated with maintaining a crime free lifestyle after incarceration. She interviewed Aboriginal offenders and identified cultural and traditional experiences and professional support and programming as two of the nine reasons for remaining crime free. She noted that a lack of opportunity and professional support is one of the four obstacles that disrupt successful transition. Again, there seems to be very little information about the quality and impact of prison education for Aboriginal inmates.

There has been limited research associated with Aboriginal inmates in the prison system, and there seems to be even less information concerning Aboriginal female inmates. They are known to be invisible in the justice system (CSC, 2006). There are very limited statistics on Aboriginal female inmates in relation to the Adult Basic Education program. However, Pollock-Byrne (1990), in their research, found that there is a real lack of focus on education for federal women. There is upgrading available, but again, this study does not show participants' heritage or history. CSC (2001) places importance on life skill programming for females due to the increasing number of women entering the federal prison system. The CSC's Research Branch has funded numerous studies from Gerber and Fritsch, Gendreau, Pollock-Byrne, Sioui, and Tibault that validate educational programs as a factor

that raises the chances of offenders obtaining employment, yet none mention women or Aboriginal women.

When examining the research on the current Adult Basic Education program in the federal prisons, there does not seem to be a breakdown on the progress of Aboriginal inmates, male or females. There is limited information on the educational experiences of Aboriginal inmates in the federal prison system. Research does state that there is a correlation between recidivism and education in the overall prison population (Bosworth, 2005; Morin, 1981; Ross, 1996). However, education in the prison system does not meet the holistic needs of the Aboriginal population. The Adult Basic Education program does not address spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of the Aboriginal population and only addresses the mental needs at a less than satisfactory level. What seems to be missing is the experience of Aboriginal inmates in relation to education in the prison system. What has been their experience with prison education? What needs to be implemented in order to best service this population? Stories of lived experience hold the answers for educational liberation of imprisonment. The individuals' lived experience is a snap shot of their truth and reality of how they perceive the world. An exploration of historical testimonies from the participants needs to be exposed to trigger the process for transformation to occur in prisons, as well as to provide an opportunity for the individuals to deconstruct their lives and be empowered through their reality and participation.

## **Summary**

The literature review has provided my platform for inquiry into education for Aboriginal inmates. It demonstrates a real problem of overrepresentation of the Aboriginal population in prisons for males and females as it correlates discriminatory actions and impact of forced assimilation. CSC has made attempts to address the needs of this population by establishing an Aboriginal Corrections Branch. As asserted in the literature, numerous task forces have been developed and it confirms movement in conversation around addressing the cultural uniqueness of the Aboriginal inmates. Policy change happened when Aboriginal inmates protested the lack of spirituality in the prison system, giving hope for other changes.

Aboriginal inmates taking agency to make change is powerful and holds the key to identifying the limits and changes needed in prison education as it relates to them. Therefore it is only natural that my research will involve partnership with former Aboriginal inmates. The challenges and barriers illustrate the real need for awareness by the institution when discussing Aboriginal inmate participation and development of Aboriginal specific education programs. One important change that can happen is in the education arena. Education has the power to alter cognition and change patterns of behaviour that potentially will have long term benefits of freedom from the prisons and the road to self-awareness.

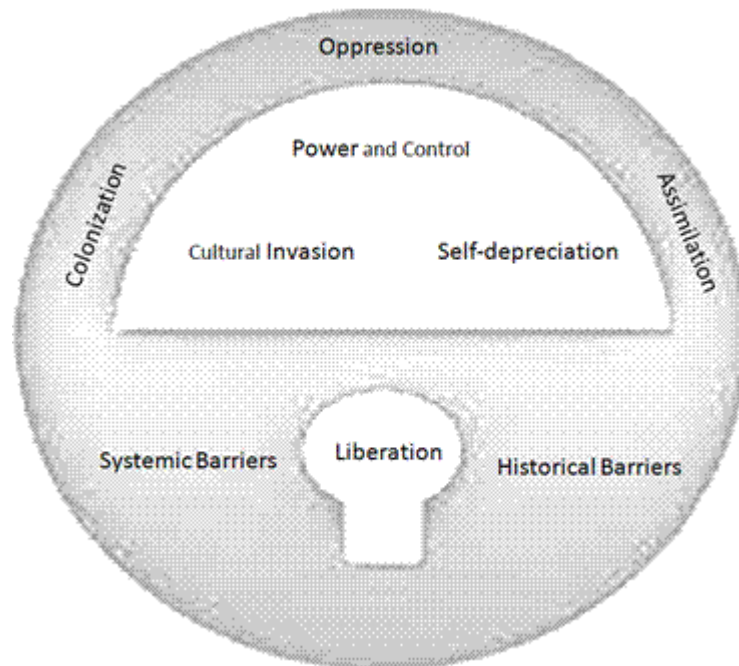
### Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.

Steven Biko, Speech in Cape Town, 1971

The call for revolution is inferred from the words of Steven Biko. The recognition of imperial indoctrination must diffuse into the individual consciousness for transference of power to occur from the oppressor to the oppressed. The federal prison system is a structure that obstructs any form of revolt. Michel Foucault (1975), in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, discusses the origins of prison. He makes polemic arguments concerning the nature of prisons as a method of punishment through the deprivation of liberty. He also asserts that prisons are an observable scenario of control that is replicated in society and can be seen in schools, the military, and hospitals. It was the new technological power for discipline. Foucault believes that prisons were established to socially train criminals to be productive in society. Even after the knowledge that this was not working, prisons remained because it benefitted the ruling class. It also allowed the ones in power to continue the subjugation of the lower class by effectively incarcerating, isolating, and economically controlling the lower class. This subjugation can be seen in the relationship between the Aboriginal Peoples and the arrival of the European. The hegemonic behaviour of the European at contact laid the colonial foundation and legacy for the Aboriginal Peoples. This is depicted in the diagram below. The Aboriginal inmates enter federal prison systems attired with numerous inflections caused by colonization.

**Figure 2: Framework for Colonization**



### **A Theoretical Framework for Colonization**

The colonization framework diagram depicts the historical story of the Aboriginal inmates. The agenda for colonization is assimilation by oppression. The continued power and control over a population deemed not worthy and not following the mainstream agenda are locked away and further subjugated to power and control in the federal prison system. Both Foucault and Freire emphasize the importance of control and power shown through colonization. Freire's (1997) concept of cultural invasion states:

In this phenomenon, the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter's potentialities: they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression (p. 152).

Cultural invasion by the invaders takes on the mask of superiority which fuels actions that allow them to impose colonial laws that deny culture and language. In order to survive in this atmosphere, the oppressed are given the only choice to aspire to the invaders' values and beliefs by consistently destructing their way of life (Freire, 1997). The message to emulate the invaders, but still not attain the status of power and control, seem palpable for survival for the Aboriginal Peoples.

Freire (1997) states that self-depreciation is one of the characteristics of the oppressed. When the oppressor has brainwashed the oppressed into a self-defeating negative image of themselves, it stops any form of mobilization to move forward. Freire also believed that the solution for the oppressed is through the struggle for their liberation. Behaviour of the oppressed is a prescribed behaviour with its own set of assumptions. The oppressed believe they are not capable and will defer to the oppressors for direction and knowledge. Change may begin when one realizes one's situation; this realization is necessary and a beginning step but more needs to occur to really create change, which will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. Change does not mean taking the attributes of the dominant culture but constructing and transforming oneself to believe one is truly free in one's thought; as Freire would coin as conscientization of the individual's situation.

This chapter will discuss the role of education as part of the colonization framework in the creation of the second class citizen. It will give an understanding of the formation of the historical and systemic barriers that become barricades for the Aboriginal inmate to overcome. This chapter will discuss how education can also become an empowerment tool for liberation. In figure 2 there is space available for a chance at liberation. The key is through education inside the federal prisons.

### **Education as a Tool for Oppression**

Education has been seen as one of the tools to oppress the subordinate group by the dominant culture. Educational theorists like Gibson (1986), Bourdieu (1987), Giroux (1983), Gramsci (1985), Bowles (1976), Ginitis (1976), and others have a critical outlook of how

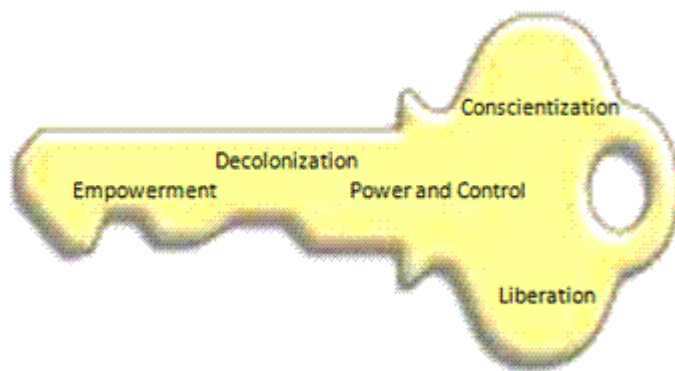
education has become a weapon for assimilation. Gibson claims that equality and justice are non-existent when it comes to gender and other cultures. Society is quick to blame individuals because of their race, gender, and socio-economic status instead of looking at the structure and delivery of education as problematic. The Aboriginal Peoples have lived with the stereotype of not being academically at par with other students (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Bowles and Ginitis (1976), in their book *Schooling in Capitalist America*, assert that school mirrors the hierarchical division of labour at work inscribed by society's economic base. School is a preparation for the work force through rules of attendance, punctuality, conformity and good behaviour. School provides students with certain forms of culture that are deemed important. This then becomes what the subordinate emulates. Bourdieu (1987) describes this as cultural capital (forms of knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that a person has, which give them a higher status in society) and states, schools are a perfect arena for cultural capital because it is geared to be an institution that presumes to be neutral in their practices. Ironically, according to Bowles and Ginitis (1976), it is in these institutions that the disadvantaged are taught to devalue their way of life:

The structure of social relations in education not only insures the student to the discipline of the workplace, but develops the types of personal demeanor, modes of self-presentation, self-image, and social class identifications which are the crucial ingredients of job adequacy. Specifically, the social relationships of education--the relationships between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, and students and students, and students and their work--replicate the hierarchical divisions of labour. (p.131)

Gramsci (1985) concurs that schools provide hidden agendas for the dominant class to birth subordinate groups. In his book, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, he goes further in detailing how the dominant culture, through their worldview, facilitates hegemony through subtle but pervasive forms of ideological control and manipulation that perpetuate an oppressive status quo. The worldview of the dominant is simply that social mobility is possible, democracy exists and happiness is possible for all when adopting the values of the ruling class. The subordinate group believes and internalizes this ideology to be the norm against their best interest and works to achieve those values, unaware that the only ones to

benefit from the dominant worldview is the dominant culture that rules. Gramsci (1985) states that transformation needs to occur in three different sites of struggle - the mind (consciousness), the intellect, and the state - in order for social mobility to occur. The state represents the political society, which preserves hegemonic beliefs through force and laws for the civil society to remain the status quo. He believed that intellect was not exclusive to the elite but encompassed all people and advocated that the working class use their intellect to become more cognizant of their situation and be active in creating a counter hegemony that would challenge the popular belief. The struggle must be on an individual level, and then communicated to other intellects, to form masses that share the same ideas and alternative way of thinking and being. He believed this would lead to a new consciousness of the civil society.

**Figure 3: Key to Liberation**



The colonization framework figure 2 does provide the opportunity for transformation. The key hole represents a glimpse into unlocking the mind inside the prison cells. The key represents prison education through the lens of critical theory. The weapon used to colonize can also be a tool for decolonization and liberation.

## **Education as a Tool for Liberation**

Freire (1997) makes a statement that education can be used as a tool to access freedom from oppression but only if changes are made in the system that is currently in place. He believed that individuals are capable of learning to examine critically their situation regardless of their ignorance or oppression. Education, for Freire, was to set one free. Awareness of the individual's situation, he proposed, would be the impetus for change. His personal participation in his crusade to teach the poor to read was seen as conspiring and he was sent to prison.

Smith (2005) describes intervention strategies applied by Maori in New Zealand that addressed oppression and exploitation of the subordinate group. The Kaupapa Maori educational interventions are known as a resistance approach to free the oppressed from exploitation and oppression. This new direction focused on the problems with the system and structure, not the individuals.

The current education system is still based on the European curriculum and still has the agenda for assimilation. Battiste (2004) states the current education system is oppressive and has resulted in fragmentation of Aboriginal family and teachings. She makes a plea for healing through education. Most authors on Aboriginal education claim that education should be a vehicle in making life changes. They also state that the existing curriculum does not work for the Aboriginal population. Aboriginal children are made to feel inferior about their culture and their identity (Brown, 2007). Hampton (1995), in his article "Towards a Redefinition of Indian Education," talks about defining and implementing an education that is focused on Aboriginal learners. He states that "Indian Education" may be categorized through five different approaches.

1. Traditional Indian Education - oral history, teaching stories, ceremonies, apprenticeships, learning games, formal instruction, tutoring, tag along teaching.
2. Schooling for Self-Determination - establishment of schools for native children.

3. Schooling for Assimilation - education is carried out by Anglos, using Anglo models.
4. Education by Indians - native people takes an active role in schooling of native children.
5. Indian Education Sui Generis - thing of its own kind. Structured by Indian culture, development of native methods, native structures, native content, and native personnel.

Hampton (1995) postulates that Indian people need to be self-defining and have their way of life respected. Smith (2003) states that when indigenous people are in educational crises that a development of a radical pedagogy (teaching approach for change) must be explored. Brown (2005) also believed that a shift in curriculum needs to happen. He stated that strengthening of identity and allowing emotions in education will re-connect students to optimize their capabilities of learning.

Aboriginal inmates need an opportunity to develop and regain their confidence and self-esteem in order to break patterns of behaviour that keep them physically, mentally, and emotionally locked up.

In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of the oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform (Freire, 1997, p. 49).

Education is a weapon that will provide the impetus for change in a group of individuals that have survived in hopeless and horrendous situations. Education is a way of giving voice to the oppressed, but also a way of making them the controlling agents in their own lives (Freire, 1997). There are many struggles and issues that haunt Aboriginal inmates in their pursuit for education.

## Discussion

An examination of the literature provided by critical theorists validates the importance of change in the individual which also needs to be adhered to when making inquiries of prison education that enhance the potential for emancipation from the prison system, a system which is entrenched in controlling the individual's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual space for the purpose of rehabilitation. Conscientization (Freire, 1997) of the individual's power inequality can be achieved through education and be a powerful tool for decolonization practices for the Aboriginal male and female inmates. Information and awareness of history and learning the language of the ruling class can trigger movement for freedom. Reading and writing is crucial in the institution. Requests and signatures are required for every privilege granted. Education can be empowering if it adheres to the individual's emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual needs. This can be achieved through the examination of the educational experiences of former Aboriginal male and female inmates in order to transform educational understanding as one of empowerment, not oppression.

The domestication of oppression has embodied the prison system (Figure 2). The notion of individuals who are considered "less than" and non-compliant to societal rules and regulation is implanted deeply in the cognition of the Aboriginal inmate. The indoctrination of these individuals, according to critical theorists, has a long history of premeditated planning and subtle implementation in order for the power to stay within the confines of the ruling class. This population is judged to represent a section of society who, because of their behaviour, must be locked away from the public until they conform and are able to function in society. As noted above by critical theorists, education can be a tool for oppression and a tool for liberation depending on who possesses the power to determine educational goals, policies, curriculum, and instruction. Education must be all-encompassing and give the individual power and freedom for personal thought. To have the freedom to explore and question knowledge without the boundaries of mainstream guidelines is empowering. For the Aboriginal inmates, freedom is searching and finding the key to unlock

the mind, emotions, spiritual, and physical dimensions of being a healthy human being (Figure 3).

I grew up believing that education would be a stimulus to heal the notion of a second class citizen. As a child, I subscribed to the hegemonic beliefs of the dominant western society that were prevalent in the educational system. Now I understand the difficulties that compound conscientization. Learning has proved to be a potent weapon in my own journey of freedom. It is not an easy path and constant reminders and literature alleviate my moments of surrender. I live my life through critical theory lenses. I strongly believe that learning the mainstream language will allow individuals introspection of their lot in life in order to choose their own destiny. It also allows for questioning of power relations or injustices that continue to keep Aboriginal Peoples as second class citizens. Smith (2005), Hampton (1995), and Brown (2005) propose changing the structure and system of education to allow Aboriginal Peoples to attain their full potential and achievement and start the process of self-knowledge. Structural and systemic changes are essential for individual consciousness. Gramsci (1985) postulates that we cannot know who we are, until we are equally free to make our own destiny.

The damage of mainstream education has been detrimental for the Aboriginal inmates in the federal prison system. Critical theory allows for introspection of the past in order to facilitate the deconstruction of the impact of colonization on the individual. The importance of the past educational experience is vital in acknowledging the harm. Self-knowledge depends in turn on gaining knowledge of the historical processes in which our identity is constructed (Gramsci, 1985). My first research question reflects the inquiry into the past. What was the nature and impact of the educational experiences of former Aboriginal male and female inmates before they went to prison? The politics of the prison need to be exposed to the public. The prison system is based on procedures and policies that dictate decisions on programming, visitations, phone calls, health issues, and parole. What are the guidelines for programming for Aboriginal inmates? What supports exist for the Aboriginal inmate? This was in the forefront of my thoughts for creating the second question. What are the barriers and opportunities for educational access and learning for the Aboriginal male and female

inmates in British Columbia's federal prisons? My last question, what elements are necessary to improve Aboriginal male and female inmates' attendance and completion of education programs in British Columbia's federal prisons, relates to Aboriginal inmates taking agency to create a learning environment of preference. Freire (1997), Gramsci (1985), Smith (2005), Hampton (1995), and Brown (2005) all advocate for radical transformation of educational systems in order for them to be more successful for Aboriginal Peoples.

## **Summary**

When examining the works of critical theorists, Gramsci and Foucault give us a general view on societal oppression but they are limited in speaking on behalf of the indigenous population. I am cognizant of their philosophical subject as being the dominant and the oppressed. They speak in terms of economical, educational, and social distinctions but they cannot speak on the reality of how it feels when your identity as a group of people has been destroyed. I appreciated the conceptual critique and positioning that they took regarding forms of inequality that exist in societies. As well, I commend the work of Foucault in providing an understanding of how control is established over individuals in the prison system. My research participants not only are the perceived outcasts of society, they are voiceless strangers to their own country.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

A qualitative research methodology allows the freedom to engage in relationships in a respectful manner. It also allows the opportunity to gather information and learn about protocol for a culture that is not my own. Building a working relationship with the Aboriginal communities strengthens knowledge and provides the contextual basis of past experiences and struggles for the Aboriginal Peoples. Prison systems have many guidelines and policies that need to be adhered to; this method also allows the time and the process to gain insights and find ways to work with the prison organization in order to gather necessary information. The importance of learning all the various programs in the prison system gave insight to the life of an offender in prison or “on the inside,” which is the phrase often used. I spent much time in my work learning the different aspects or contexts of offenders on parole and some of the restrictions applied to them once they are out in the communities.

L.T. Smith (2005) discusses the importance of qualitative research when working with indigenous groups and the need to be creative around the definition of this method. She advocates for a better understanding of indigenous ways of being and borrowing ideas to develop a culturally appropriate research method as illustrated in her quote:

Qualitative researchers, however, must be more than either travelers or cultural tourists. Qualitative research is an important tool for indigenous communities because it is the tool that seems most able to wage the battle of representation (Fine et al., 2000); to weave and unravel competing storylines (Bishop, 1998); to situate, place, and contextualize; to create spaces for decolonizing (Aldama, 2001, Tierny, 2000); to provide frameworks for hearing silence and listening to the voices of the silenced (LeCompte, 1993, L.T. Smith, 2001); to create spaces for dialogue across differences; to analyze and make sense of complex and shifting experiences, identities and realities; and to understand little and big changes that affect our lives (p. 103).

Aboriginal Peoples often have difficulties trusting and building research relationship with non-Aboriginals due to what was done to them, not for them.

“Research” is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up memories, and it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful (Linda Smith, 1999, p. 1).

L. Smith goes on to state that research has been a tool for colonization and exploitation of the indigenous groups all over the world. The importance of adopting and adapting indigenous research methodologies is vital when conducting research with indigenous peoples.

Indigenous scholars all over the world are creating ways of doing research that resonates with the richness of experiences and lifelong connections to better engage and understand history in order to make necessary changes on a macro level.

Indigenous research, from the perspective of indigenous researchers, should be collaborative, where power is shared between the researcher and the participants from the start of the project to the dissemination of the knowledge (Wilson, 2008, Rigney 2003). My qualitative research process focused on 20 interviews with former Aboriginal inmates. My background in counselling and working with Aboriginal individuals on parole was very beneficial for the qualitative interview process. This chapter discusses ethical considerations and practices that guided my research design, my experience in sharing power with the research participants through the interview and transcript verification processes, and it introduces the research participants.

My work experience reminded me of the lack of trust between Aboriginal parolees and CSC; therefore, I was particularly attentive to the process of introducing my research study and introducing myself to the research participants. My initial contact was very informal and the goal was to achieve a two-way dialogue. I shared my personal history and answered all questions put forth. It was important that the first meeting take place in a comfortable environment. I suggested several meeting places and asked the participants if they had a place that they would like to meet and I would bring the coffee and muffins. My enthusiasm for the project was evident, which I felt facilitated building rapport and establishing trust and a caring relationship. The process of rapport building is encouraging

the participants to communicate their fears and apprehension before the interview. My objective was to establish an atmosphere that would allow the participants' stories to emerge. I wanted to really have the opportunity to listen and hear their stories. Archibald (2008) discusses the power of indigenous life-experience stories and how they unfold with rich information. She also maintains that "storywork research has become a way of establishing and sustaining lasting friendships with deep caring and endless stories and talk" (p.25). This thought underlined my methodology. As well, the following work of Pidgeon and Cox (2002), Rigney (2003), and Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) was used as a framework when developing questions and interviewing participants.

When conducting research with Aboriginal Peoples, Pidgeon and Cox (2002) developed three key lessons to share practice and protocol that fall under the category of collaboration. The first lesson to share with the participants is the research process. The researcher must find terminology that respects the process and exchange. The researcher and the participant must share the power in the research process. This can be demonstrated from the onset of the research. For example, negotiating the interview time, the optimum atmosphere of the interview, and creating dialogue around the questions, as well as the participants having the power to eliminate questions that they feel they are not able to converse on. This ethical lesson also allows the researcher and the participants to establish comfort and mutual respect to create partnerships. The participants can be involved in all aspects of the research as well as benefit from the research if they choose. The second ethical lesson is the care principle. This lesson focuses on the researcher respecting the cultural beliefs and practices of Aboriginal Peoples from the start of the project to the finish. The researcher needs to be cognizant and sensitive to cultural diversity and differences. The third ethical lesson includes the guiding principles of the four "Rs," which were adopted from Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991): respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. These principles are crucial when working with the Aboriginal offenders from the prison setting. These individuals have not had many experiences where they are given equal power in a situation.

Indigenous researcher Lester Rigney (2007) collated seven “habits” to be cognizant of when conducting ethical research, in order to not repeat the history of exploitation with indigenous populations.

1. Involvement, consultation, negotiation, and free and informed consent are the foundation for research with indigenous peoples.
2. Communicate openly, honestly, and with mutual respect.
3. Benefits, outcomes, and agreement: the importance of the community having access to the research and having agreements on the results. The community must benefit from the research and not be disadvantaged. Make sure that the community is aware and part of presentation of the findings.
4. Benefits, recognition of the diversity and uniqueness of peoples as well as of individuals: appreciating and being cognizant of the diversity of indigenous peoples.
5. Researched communities should benefit from and not be disadvantaged by the research project. The research should not cost the community. The researcher should fund the research and gift individuals/community to show appreciation.
6. Study the local indigenous community you are seeking to research before embarking on research.
7. Demonstrate enthusiasm for your research project (p.1).

The importance of all seven considerations of doing ethical research has been ongoing from the concept of this project. My letter of introduction as well as my first phone call had the purpose of providing information about the research project to the potential research volunteers and answering any questions that they had. I assured the participants of anonymity as well as autonomy if they chose not to answer certain questions. I was able to walk through the process of the project and address concerns of the participants. For instance, one repeated concern was the affect that this would have with CSC. To reiterate, trust in the correctional system is non-existent, which was evident by some of personal stories of treatment by CSC employees. The other hurdle for some of the participants was

acknowledging the importance of their stories as a credible piece of literature. As a researcher, I felt it was important to share my personal information; my reasons for wanting to delve into this project and my history. Rigney's considerations are imperative and allow for mutual respect. The contributions of Pidgeon and Cox (2002), Rigney (2007), Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991), and Archibald (2008) are intertwined in this project.

## **Research Design**

Choosing the appropriate method to gather information allowed me to reflect on Shawn Wilson's literature on indigenous research methods. He discusses strategy of inquiry as part of methodology: "Methodology can be seen as providing the final destination in the research journey. Strategies of inquiry build upon a methodology to fill, how you will arrive at the research destination" (p. 39). To reiterate, a qualitative research methodology allows the freedom to engage in relationships in a respectful manner. One of the strategies of inquiry is to focus on the lived experiences of Aboriginal individuals who have been in federal prison in order to represent the silenced through a creative, respectful way that allows for their voices to be heard. This can be accomplished by an interview process. In order to understand the Aboriginal inmate's experience of elementary and secondary education, open-ended, evolving, and non-directional questions were designed. This method allows for deep respect and genuine behaviour through questioning methods and interviewing skills (Creswell, 1998). To explore lived experience gives participants a richer awareness of their history and releases power of the negative aspects. Giving voice to negative thoughts acts as a cathartic release of energy, and provides the opportunity to reflect on the impact of the situation from a safe distance. As the researcher, my role is to accommodate the participants in their exploration of their learning experience. Being cognizant of the risks involved in discussion of traumatic experience is a priority. Asking inmates to explore their life experience comes with an incredible responsibility and consequently has led to ongoing contact. Several of the participants have become my personal motivators, phoning to encourage and show their dedication and commitment to this research.

A non-judgmental approach and a focus on the individual story definitely help with rapport building. Kirkness and Barnhardt used the four Rs in their examination of post-secondary education. Their principles have been adapted by other scholars such as Pidgeon (2002). For the purpose of this study, the four Rs were adapted to gather pertinent information from Aboriginal male and female offenders about their education in and out of prison.

### **Respect for Aboriginal Cultural Integrity**

Recognizing the importance of cultural history and traditional ways of the Aboriginal Peoples is imperative. Working with a diverse Aboriginal population from prison allowed me the opportunity to learn of their cultural ways by connecting with their families and friends. My personal relationships with individuals of Aboriginal descent supplied literature and information as well as stories of the impact of European contact. The availability of the Elder for the participants and me established a respectful atmosphere. Most importantly, respecting historical experience helped establish a two-way working relationship built on shared dialogue.

### **Relevance to Aboriginal Perspectives and Experience**

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has made attempts to implement Aboriginal specific programs that address the numerous needs of the Aboriginal inmates. These programs were developed by CSC task forces, implemented, and staffed according to CSC policies and guidelines. Too often the justice system makes decisions in the best interest of others without consultation with the consumer. This research project emphasizes the relevance of the participants' lived experience through their involvement. The importance of collaboration with individuals in order to understand their educational experiences and how they would like to see changes happen in this area was a priority in this research project. The invitation letter and the introductory phone call provided the vehicle to launch the relevance of this study. More importantly, I stressed that the vital information the participant would provide would be essential for re-creating prison education for other

Aboriginal inmates. This last comment appeared to be the motivator for some individuals who reflected on their own lives and saw the importance of grade 12 in the community. This aspect will be further detailed in the analysis chapter.

### **Reciprocal Relationships**

Incarceration does not foster two-way dialogue. Interview experiences of these individuals can be defined as interrogation. The importance of open-ended questions allows for conversation and discussions that generate a storytelling atmosphere as well as build rapport. The participants were involved at different stages of the research to ensure authenticity of their words and their meanings. They were advisors starting from the interviewing process to the written portion of the research. Time was spent with participants looking over the questions and having some time for informal rapport building conversation, where I spent time sharing information about myself and my background. I asked if they were comfortable with the questions and was I forgetting any other questions related to the topic. They all had contact numbers to phone with comments or concerns. All were asked to review their answers once it was transcribed. Many stated they accepted what was transcribed. Several had moved and I was unable to get ahold of them.

### **Responsibility Through Participation**

My background in counselling provides the roadmap for the process of the interview. The need to be cognizant of the sensitivity around lived experience was foremost on my mind. I took time during the interview to empower the participants in regards to the benefits of their contribution to this research project to the Aboriginal inmates inside the prison. All participants had contact numbers to contact me with any concerns or comments. I also offered to help advocate for counselling if they felt that they needed or wanted it.

## Overview of the Interview Method

### Questions

Developing interview questions that are geared to a population that has trust issues and is coming from an atmosphere where survival and maintenance is the goal, was tasking. To capture the essence of lived experience on the topic of education, extensive time was spent on the language that was used in questioning. Conversational language was used to develop the questions. Wilson (2008) states that using big, academic wording is a way of belittling others; I was cognizant of his cautionary point when putting together the questions. My prior work experience with this population, coupled with being a registered clinical counsellor, were assets in developing the questions. It was necessary to compose questions that initiated conversation instead of emotionally charged questions that would trigger past experience and result in a “shut down.”

Rigney (2007) discusses the concepts of historicizing, politicizing, and strategizing as a framework for theses and projects. He stated that we need to examine how the past affects the present in order to change the future. With this in mind, this project concentrated on the following questions to draw out the experience and the stories of the participants, in relation to prison education. The outcome of the following questions is to better understand the experience of the individual with prison education and how it can be improved to accommodate Aboriginal inmates to their benefit.

- Tell me about yourself? Where are you from? What is your Aboriginal ancestry?
- How long have you been out of prison?
- I would like to ask you a few questions about your past educational experience while growing up.
- What was the last grade you successfully (passed) completed? Where?
- How would you rate your elementary and high school education: poor, ok, or good? Why did you rate it.....?

- What were the major problems that you experienced in school?
- Take some time to think of your most successful school experience. Can you share that story?
- I would like to ask you about your educational experience while in prison. Did you participate in an educational program while in prison? If yes, please tell me about it. If no, please tell me the reasons why.
- How would you rate your education while in prison: poor, ok, or good? Why did you rate it.....?
- What has been your experience of prison education around access, participation, and support?
- Can you tell me a story of educational success that you experienced while in prison?
- Can you tell me a story of educational challenges that you experienced while in prison?
- What do you feel is necessary to improve the prison education program for Aboriginal success?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about prison education for Aboriginal inmates?

The aforementioned questions were meant to examine the educational story of the participant. For certain participants, topical sub questions and probes were interjected. Topical questions focus on more descriptive information of the individual's story. For instance, what is the subjective experience of this individual's life; what is the story that can be told from the detailed information (Creswell, 1998). I allowed participants to stray away from the question to position their answer. This helped me acquaint myself with the individual. Sub questions were also employed to allow for the flow of conversation and leave room for empathy and empowerment. I found it also validated and gave control to the participants and alleviated their anxiety and fear. These individuals have experienced interviews that consist of yes and no answers to stories that need contextual information for accurate assessments. By using topical and sub questions, my goal was to give participants

the autonomy to lead the stories and I observed that within the stories, the answers to the questions would materialize.

## **Recruitment/Consent**

The majority of the federal offenders serve only part of their time in prison and the rest under supervision in the community. They are supervised by CSC staff and have to adhere to certain conditions placed on them by the Parole Board of Canada (PBC; formerly known as the National Parole Board). Community corrections ensure gradual reintegration back into society for offenders. CSC realizes that transition from confinement to the outside world can be very difficult, but are in agreement that slow transition from confinement to freedom is more successful (CSC, 2001). The PBC has the authority to grant conditional release if they deem, through assessment and information gathered, that the offender is not a threat to the community. This release can be in the form of full parole or day parole.

Full parole is a form of conditional release that allows an offender to serve part of a prison sentence in the community monitored by CSC staff. Most offenders in the system (except those serving life sentences for murder) are able to apply for full parole after they have completed one-third of their sentence, or seven years, whichever is less (CSC, 2001). Offenders also have the opportunity to apply for day parole where they reside at a correctional facility or community residence until their warrant expiry date. Most federal inmates are automatically released after serving two-thirds of their sentence if they have not already been released on parole. This is called statutory release. The offender spends the remaining one-third of his sentence in the community (CSC, 2001). Offenders who are serving life sentences remain on parole for life and if they are not granted parole they remain incarcerated for life.

The participants in this research are Aboriginal inmates who are on parole or have finished with federal corrections. There are 10 male and 10 female participants. Eighteen individuals are from British Columbia and the other two are from Alberta. Seventeen of the individuals are located in transition homes in Kamloops, British Columbia. Two are from

Vancouver, and one is from Surrey, British Columbia. These participants have spent time in one or more federal prisons, have been out in the community for longer than 30 days, and are eligible to have some of their restrictions removed. The decision to not interview incarcerated individuals was based on the following:

- Interviewing prison inmates becomes a lengthy process due to CSC policy and guidelines;
- The opportunity a prisoner has for visitation or participating in a project is very limited; and
- The difficulty in building rapport with an interviewee in the prison system.

A letter of invitation was developed in consultation with a peer group and review of numerous research invitations. Invitations were given to the parole officers and the support workers of the John Howard Society to identify appropriate participants and present them with the invitation. It was important to point out that I am not an employee of CSC, but I retain a contract to provide counselling.

Individuals were identified through the Kamloops Parole Office. Five individuals were identified and asked to participate by their parole officers. The interview was strictly on a volunteer basis.

I consulted with an Elder from the Tk'emlúps Indian Band around cultural protocol and knowledge. Protocol in engaging with the Elder was followed with gift giving and offering of tobacco. The Elder offered to provide a prayer, smudge, or talk if requested by participants. Essential steps were taken to protect and respect the anonymity of the participants, for instance, the letter of consent was created, the offer to consult with an Elder for further information was extended, and the parole officer's personal assurance that CSC would not be involved at any stage of the study unless requested by the participant was given. I was also cognizant of my personal and professional ethical considerations at each step of the project. The awareness of Smith (1995), Rigney (2007), Archibald (2008), Brown

(1005), and other indigenous researchers' concerns and caution when doing research with Aboriginal individuals was on the forefront of any decisions I made. Information and consent was discussed explicitly to promote empowerment. Individuals in the correctional system have had many of their rights and privacy stripped away. They are subjected to an established set of structures and guidelines without consent (CSC, 2001). Ensuring voluntary consent presented dilemmas for several participants. The life history of these individuals did not foster trust (refer to literature review and data analysis chapters). Residential school, foster homes, addiction, and other issues made it difficult to trust in the process and goal of the research project for some of the participants. This was problematic in recruiting participants.

The need to assure participants that this project was independent of CSC and consent to participate would not reflect negatively in CSC was ongoing and at every stage of the project. As well, Freire (1997) cautions researchers about making participants in research objects of inquiry rather than part of the process of the project. The task was to gather information provided by the participants and examine the future implications that would benefit others still in prison, not to monitor the parole process or supply opinions of the individuals to CSC. When the individuals agreed to participate in the project, appointments were set up at the convenience of the participants. At the meetings the individuals were supplied with a contact number for additional information or any questions. The individuals were assured that they were not under any obligation to commit to participate and were encouraged to give this serious consideration.

The John Howard Society is the support and transition agency for individuals on parole. It has 65 offices across Canada and its goal is to provide various kinds of rehabilitative and re-integrative services to released prisoners. This Society also offers transitional homes for individuals who are on parole. All of these services are delivered under contract with the Correctional Service of Canada. Connecting with the John Howard Society was part of the research process of building rapport with staff and gathering information. The transition homes have many restrictions for visitors and professionals. My clearance to enter such homes came from the parole officer. Working in the natural setting

of the participant facilitated developing an accurate narrative of the experience (Creswell, 1998), as well as, according to some of the participants, a sense of comfort. This research took place in the various homes of the participants and the parole office. Twelve of the interviews were in a transition home in Kamloops. Two of the individuals were interviewed at the parole office and the other six were interviewed in their own homes. The six individuals lived in low income homes owned by the John Howard Society. The interviews took place in their living rooms. Four of the participants were female and the two males lived with their girlfriends who were in the other rooms during the interview. The effort of establishing comfort and security was placed on me, not the participant. All interviews took place in the months of June, July, and August of 2010. They were then given to a transcriber, which the participants were informed about. The transcriber agreed to confidentiality of the participants' interviews.

## **The Interview**

It was only natural that I supply the coffee and muffins and spend the first 30 minutes to one hour going over the questions, the consent form, and developing rapport. This was performed to alleviate nervousness, ensure confidentiality, and show respect. Three of the clients spent more time discussing their years as youth. My background in counselling helped to process tragic stories and opened opportunities to validate the strength and resilience of the individuals. This was done through establishing a safe environment for conversation, active listening, and prompting the story teller by use of silence and gestures. Some of the participants had difficulty with the interview being recorded. Two participants chose to have me record using paper and pen. This presented challenges in itself, since my strength in gathering information is done through conversation and a relationship connection. To write during a story seemed very disrespectful, yet at the same time, accurate information needed to be gathered and verified. The struggle in stopping and writing and catching up to the story was a process that took away from the essence of flow in the conversation.

All participants filled out the consent form and were informed that if there were questions that they were not comfortable answering, they would let me know. As well, the

tape recorder could be turned off at any time. All agreed to use their first name. Furthermore, I provided a list of counsellors available for personal counselling for participants if any psychological distress was experienced due to the sensitive issues being discussed. I also offered to advocate for any other wellness resources they felt they needed. Cultural ceremonies and the presence of an Elder was discussed. All clients stated that they were comfortable meeting without an Elder.

My commitment to contact participants and allow them to edit their transcripts brought forth unexpected complications. By the time the tapes were transcribed, three of the participants had moved away and five of the participants were not interested in reviewing their transcripts. The participants that did peruse their transcripts seemed very engaged and excited about the project. All twelve were given contact numbers and were assured that I would keep them updated. Eight months after the interviews I was contacted by a participant inquiring about this research. I assured him that it was in the process of being completed and that he would receive a copy.

## **Participants**

Shawn Wilson (2008) states that researchers need to be accountable to all relations, and choose carefully how data is gathered, analyzed, and presented. He makes strong arguments on the subject of respecting knowledge. The participants in this project committed their time and their stories, trusting me to accurately represent them. To reiterate, the time spent introducing the research project and answering questions, as well as sharing a muffin and coffee, facilitated comfort and positive interaction and was the invitation for friendship. In accordance with an indigenous research paradigm, Wilson (2008) states that relationship is paramount. I am only able to present the transcribed version of the interviews. It must be noted that my responsibility to the participants lays heavily on my conscious. My father, in his farewell to family and friends who would visit, would make a statement apologizing for any words that he might have said that had offended anyone because that was never his intention; it was ignorance on his part. I would like to give my apologies for any inaccurate representation due to transfer of information from voice to audio tape to written

structure. In order to acknowledge and show respect and gratitude, I would like the opportunity to introduce the participants of this research study. I will use numbers instead of first names due to a couple of individuals who wanted full anonymity. For some of the participants, the involvement of CSC in their life has perpetuated distrust.

Participant one is an adult male who is in his early 40s and has been out of prison for over one and a half years. He is from the Carrier Nation and is proud that he will be off parole soon. He spent his younger years in residential school and was subjected to physical and sexual abuse. He also attended school near his reserve and faced racial discrimination. This participant also comes from a dysfunctional family unit struggling with addiction and poverty. He disclosed the memories of hunger and stealing at a young age to keep himself and his siblings fed. He discussed the fact that he realized from a young age that he had difficulties comprehending school work. He finally dropped out of school after finishing grade seven, which was not successful. Participant one just recently was diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). He stated that he looked after his siblings on reserve until he found his partner, who was much older than him. He had three children and worked in a mill until his addictions monopolized his life. Participant one continues to be angry at his circumstances and his situation. He does plan to go back to his reserve to be with his children and his grandchildren and access resources that will help him cope with his FASD.

Participant two is an adult male in his 40s who has been out of prison for one year. He is from Fort St. James. He attended residential school where he was subjected to physical and sexual abuse. He later attended Catholic school on reserve and finally quit in grade five. His family was struggling with alcohol and drugs and he found school difficult. He felt he was not receiving any help and chose drugs and alcohol instead of school. Participant two partnered up with a young woman with similar issues and they had two boys who were removed from them for safety reasons. He claims that he and his partner worked hard for one year and were on the road to recovery and having their children back with them, but a tragedy claimed the lives of his two sons and since then his life has been painful and difficult. He states he has healthy moments but the guilt and shame overwhelm him and he

relapses. He is angry at his situation but was excited about being part of this research project to provide information that could benefit Aboriginal individuals who are in the prison setting.

Participant three is an adult male in his late 40s and from a reserve in northern British Columbia. He also attended residential school and was also subjected to physical and sexual abuse. He completed grade nine and ended up staying home to help his dad look after his siblings. By this time he was quite entrenched in the alcohol and drug lifestyle and did not go back for grade ten. Participant three is very determined to make life changes and break his negative pattern of behaviour.

Participant four is an adult male in his late 30s and is from Six Nations Reserve. He has been out of prison three months short of three years. He was adopted at six weeks old and was unaware of his Aboriginal background until later on in his life. Participant four started using drugs at the age of 12 and ended up suspended from school and never returned home. He successfully completed grade 10 at a young offender's facility. His life of crime started at a young age. He was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and was told he had dyslexia. Participant four had trouble recalling memories from his youth but does recall getting his GED later on in life when he had his first child. Participant four has three children that he has not seen for at least seven years. One of his goals is to reconnect with his children.

Participant five is an adult male in his late 20s from the Mi'kmaq Nation in St. John, New Brunswick. He has been out of prison for six months. He completed grade eight in middle school and did not go back. He did not like school and had difficulty making friends or socializing. He was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). His life of drugs started in grade five. Participant five recalled family problems that eventually led him to leave home at a very young age. At this point in his life he was already into the crime scene. Participant five identifies with being a criminal and exhibits little emotion on his situation and has difficulty with the concept of change being possible.

Participant six is an adult male in his early 40s from the Shuswap Nation and has been out of prison for six months. He was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder and has been struggling with addictions since his early teens. The last grade participant six completed was grade 10. His addiction and mental health issues became difficult and he did not return. He stated that he used drugs and alcohol as a means of self-medicating because his life seemed chaotic and disorganized. At the same time he was battling with ADHD. Participant six is not connected with his Aboriginal ancestry, but lives on a reserve with his girlfriend of many years.

Participant seven is an adult male in his early 40s and comes from Onion Lake Reserve in Ontario. He has been out of prison for four years. The last grade he completed was grade eight. Participant seven attended residential school and was subjected to physical and sexual abuse. He also attended an on-reserve school that was run by the church, and there he also faced similar abuse. Participant seven's addiction started at a very early age. He was told that at the age of two and a half, he had alcohol poured into his mouth by adults who were partying at his home. Apparently there are pictures of these incidents. His life of crime started at an early age and he partook in the revolving door syndrome for years in the prison circuit. He was strong and angry and became a very violent man inside and outside the walls of the prison. He spent the majority of his adult years in prison. He stated that he is not the angry man that he once was and credits counselling for his change. Participant seven has been working on family of origin issues for many years and recently went through his court case for the residential school abuse. He enjoys his freedom and the opportunities to experience life without alcohol and drugs. He is enrolled in an addictions diploma program and is enjoying going to school.

Participant eight is an adult male in his early 50s and comes from Alert Bay. He has been out of prison for two months. He attended residential school and was subjected to physical and sexual abuse. The last grade completed was grade seven. Participant eight is one of 17 children in his family and he grew up in a violent atmosphere. He was removed from his village and bounced from foster home to foster home. He was very violent as a child, and therefore did not last in one home for very long. Participant eight was diagnosed

with multiple mental health issues and he has struggled with addictions for most of his life. He has had many losses and seemed angry about his situation. In prison he sustained a brain injury and now has difficulties staying out of prison. Most of his life has been spent in an institutionalized setting and he claims that it's easier on the inside than out in the community. Participant eight is connected with his culture and has high respect for his teachings by the Elders.

Participant nine is an adult male in his late 40s and from the Gitksan Nation. He has been out of prison for six years. He has spent time in many prison settings from minimum, medium, to maximum security, all in British Columbia. The last grade participant nine completed was grade eight. Drugs, alcohol, and violence had him kicked out of school in grade nine. Participant nine was brought up by his grandparents, who led him to believe that they were his parents. He felt quite betrayed when he found out that his parents could not take care of him and that his grandparents had lied to him. Participant nine is a respected artist who nurtured his talent in jail and is able to sell his art and make a modest living. His art work is his therapy. He is doing well making necessary changes to break his pattern of behaviour that has led him to incarceration in the past. Participant nine says the impetus to change was his son, who is five years old.

Participant ten is an adult male in his late 40s from the Thompson Nation in British Columbia. He has been out of prison for nearly 10 years. He is the eldest of seven children. The last grade he completed was grade 10. He described himself as a shy young boy who did not have many friends and hung out with his family at school. He felt more comfortable with them due to racial discrimination by other students. He stated that he was invisible. He could not comprehend school work and due to his personality he did not ask for help. In grade 10 he still did not know how to read and write. He left school due to excessive drinking and lack of attendance. Participant ten is currently attending a community college doing life skill programming.

Participant eleven is an adult female who is in her mid-20s and is from the Bonaparte Reserve in British Columbia. She has been out of prison for five years. She completed

grade seven after three tries. She was pregnant and ended up serving federal time at the age of 15. She had her child in jail. Participant eleven struggled with neglect and lack of structure at home. Her father was a single dad who was battling his own addiction to alcohol and dealing with residential school issues. Participant eleven stated that she started using drugs and alcohol in grade five and her behaviour snowballed out of control from then on. She was constantly expelled or suspended from school but didn't care because she was unable to comprehend school work. She attended school off reserve and stated she faced racial discrimination from the students and teachers.

Participant twelve is an adult Métis female who is in her early 40s and has been out of prison for two years. She completed grade seven and left school due to drug and alcohol issues. The issues became paramount in her high school years and eventually led to her moving in with her boyfriend and getting pregnant. She seemed to be able to maintain this lifestyle for many years, until her husband died and she acquired an addiction and started crime to financially support her addiction and her three children. Participant twelve not only struggles with her addictions but stated she has problems with relationships and depression. Participant twelve recently started educating herself about the Métis culture.

Participant thirteen is an adult female in her early 40s from the Cree Nation and has been out of prison for two years. She has never lived on reserve. Her mother married a non-Aboriginal male and lost her rights and status. Participant thirteen completed grade seven and made several attempts at grade eight. Attending school was difficult for participant thirteen because she was shy and could not comprehend school work. She was too shy to ask for help and had low self-image and self-esteem. She faced racial discrimination from the students and teachers. At home she faced alcoholic parents who provided little or no structure. Her mom had attended residential school and did not discuss the subject. Participant thirteen got pregnant at 15 and never returned to school. She states that her first child was raised by her parents while she was in her full addiction. She started doing crime to support her addiction. She was finally caught and put into federal prison. Participant thirteen has managed to finish grade nine since she left prison.

Participant fourteen is an adult female who is in her early 30s and from a Métis settlement in Alberta. She has been out of prison for nine months. The last grade participant fourteen completed was grade seven. She did not go back due to racial issues and violence with her peer group. Participant fourteen labels herself as a “white Indian” and stated that she was not accepted in either the non-Aboriginal or the Aboriginal community. She recalled getting beaten up by native females and made fun of by the other girls in her school. This was also the time her addiction to drugs and alcohol started. Eventually she became pregnant and lived on the streets. Participant fourteen has two children (twins) who now live with their paternal grandparents.

Participant fifteen is an adult female who is in her early 30s and from the Chehalis Band in British Columbia. She has been out of prison for three years. The last grade participant fifteen completed was grade eight in a reserve school. Her struggles in school started when she was sexually abused by a teacher. Eventually she moved to town with her father, who was non-Aboriginal. He made her feel ashamed of her ancestry. She was light skinned and her father informed everyone that she was Italian. Her mother attended a residential school when she was younger, but did not talk about it. Participant fifteen stayed away from her reserve for years, getting involved with drugs, alcohol, and crime, and dealing with relationship issues on her own. She recalled that it was easier to pretend she was white because teachers treated Aboriginal students differently. Participant fifteen has a two year old daughter and is in school getting her accounting degree.

Participant sixteen is an adult female who is in her early 40s and is from the Mi'kmaq Nation in Nova Scotia. She has been out of prison for six years. The last grade she completed was grade nine in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Drugs, alcohol, attendance, and crime became reasons for participant sixteen to not further her schooling. She was also sexually abused by a family friend. Later on in her life she was diagnosed with ADHD. Participant sixteen stated that during her mid-20s she was constantly in trouble, in and out of prison and fighting addiction. Her cultural connection came from prison where she met an Elder who was fundamental in her healing journey. Participant sixteen has a full time job and commits

her free time to helping women who are recently out of prison transition back into communities.

Participant seventeen is an adult female in her mid-40s from the Lillooet Band in British Columbia. She has been out of prison for three months. Participant seventeen graduated from the work experience program in Kamloops Secondary School and has lived on the family ranch all her life, except for her time spent in prison. She has three children and this was the first time she had ever been involved with criminal activity. She has limited information about her Aboriginal ancestry but is interested in exploring and educating herself and her children on their ancestry. Participant seventeen has no history of addiction or violence in her past. The incident that led to incarceration appeared to be an isolated incident that was tragic.

Participant eighteen is an adult female in her late 20s and from the Chilcotin Nation in British Columbia. She has been out of prison for two months. The last grade she completed was grade eleven. Participant eighteen didn't finish her grade 12 because her family moved numerous times. She stated she never experienced racial discrimination until grade 11 and 12. Currently, participant eighteen is enrolled in a grade 12 curriculum to obtain her Dogwood Diploma.

Participant nineteen is an adult female in her 50s and from the Fort Ware Band in British Columbia. She has been out of prison for six years. The last grade participant nineteen completed was grade five in residential school. Due to the remoteness of her reserve, she stayed at home to help. Her addictions started at a young age. She has limited memories of her childhood. Participant nineteen currently lives on reserve with her family.

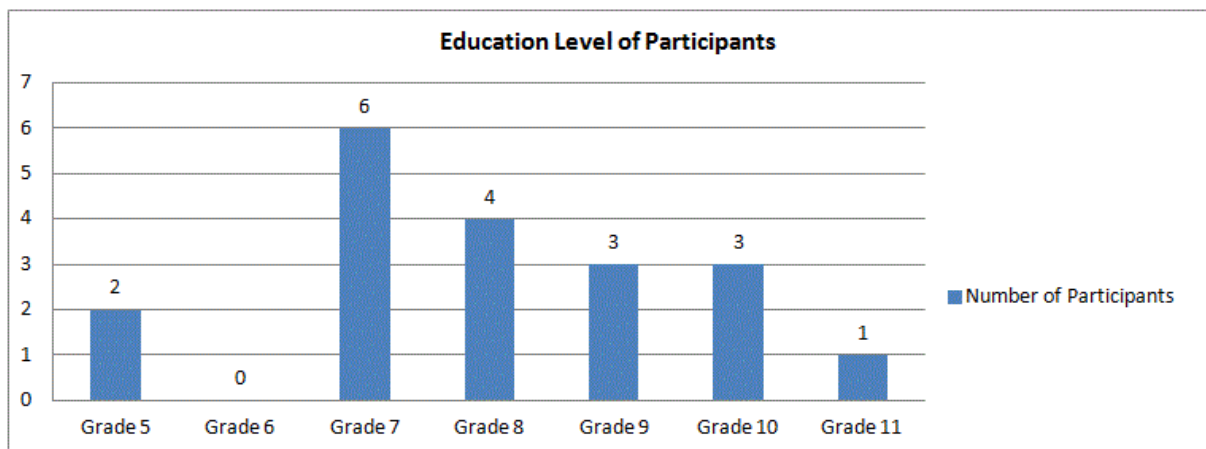
Participant twenty is an adult female in her late 20s from the Okanagan Nation in British Columbia. She has been out of prison for two years. The last grade she completed was grade nine. Participant twenty struggled with drugs and alcohol during her teen years. She stated that she ended up on the street doing crime to support her habit, and was involved in numerous violent relationships. She started getting her life together when she found out

she was pregnant with her son. She claimed that he saved her life. Participant twenty is attending hairdressing school.

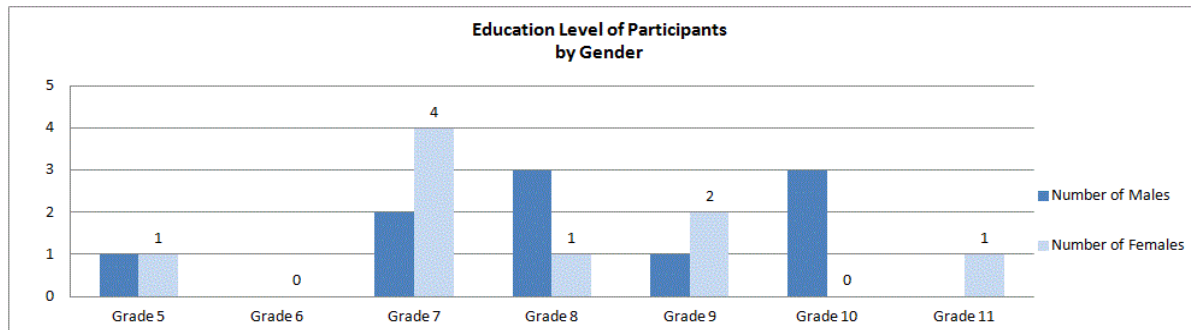
## Conclusion

From the above introduction, it is clear that participants in this project all had very negative experiences in school growing up and were unable to graduate. In reference to the project participants, it is noted that two interviewees completed grade five, one grade six, five grade seven, four grade eight, three grade nine, three grade 10, one grade 11 and one graduated from the work experience program (Figure 4 and 5). This individual specified that she graduated from the work experience program and not the regular high school program. Four of the participants are in their 20s, one is in his 30s, thirteen are in their 40s, and two are in their 50s. There were 10 Aboriginal males and 10 Aboriginal females. The importance of these individuals' contributions is also noted as crucial and significant in this study.

**Figure 4: Education Level of Participants**



**Figure 5: Education Level of Participants by Gender**



The taped interviews were transcribed and organized in the order of the interactions. As the interviews were completed the tape would be picked up for transcription. The task of connecting with individuals and ensuring accuracy became complex and difficult to complete. Many of the individuals were not interested in going over the transcribed interviews and several had moved and not left a forwarding address. I was able to meet with seven participants and all confirmed the accuracy of the interviews. There were several sentences that were not understood and participants had difficulty recalling what they had initially wanted to say. This did not prevent them from allowing their data to proceed to the analysis stage.

The data analysis process was long and complicated. Conducting a thematic content analysis and arranging the common ideas into thematic categories that aligned with the questions was time consuming. The essential details of stories from 20 participants needed to be represented with recognition of respect and authority, which is presented in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: Data Analysis

I am very cognizant of the monumental responsibility to represent the perspectives of individuals who have been silenced by their own shame and guilt. The clarity around the ethical dilemma of representation and privileged information is discussed throughout this analysis chapter. While the stories chronicled belong to the participants, the textual analysis is solely my voice. This includes the organizational structures, the ideas and words which were carefully mapped to summarize the project's implications on prison education for Aboriginal male and female inmates. My goal in organizing the participants' stories was to adopt a framework that would give the analysis clarity and incorporate the richness of the transcribed stories. This chapter will also concentrate on the educational anecdotes of the participants as it relates to the original study questions posed in the introductory chapter, in order to extrapolate emerging themes.

Lester-Irabinna Rigney's (2007) ideas to historicize, politicize, and strategize Indigenous research shaped the interview questions, and they were used for the analysis framework. The following three sections respond to the original three research questions posed in the introduction:

- What was the nature and impact of the educational experiences of former Aboriginal male and female inmates before they went to prison?
- What are the barriers and opportunities for educational access and learning for the Aboriginal male and female inmates in British Columbia's federal prisons?
- What elements are necessary to improve Aboriginal male and female inmates' attendance and completion of educational programs in British Columbia's federal prisons?

These three questions reflect the lived experience pertaining to the historical context of the research participants, the existing political landscape, which demonstrates the hurdles that exist in the federal prison system and are entrenched in policies around educational

programming, and future educational strategies that could improve education for future Aboriginal inmates based on suggestions from former Aboriginal inmates.

## **Historicize**

The significance of history forms a foundation for understanding lived experiences. It gives legitimacy and credibility to the narratives of the participants. The question of past experiences leaves residues that affect our everyday lives. These experiences shape reality for the Aboriginal inmates. In examining the stories of the participants, one of the emerging themes was their lack of ability to manage and regulate emotions and make informed decisions while growing up. This was due to internal and external struggles that these individuals faced on a daily basis, which eventually laid the groundwork for future endeavors and was a precursor to limit learning capacity. In a hostile environment that positions the individual as an outsider stripped of power and control, the focus on survival is paramount. The domino effect of colonization continues to cause havoc for Aboriginal inmates. Emotional competency is seen as essential for success in life (Goleman, 1995) and education (Brown, 2007).

Aboriginal men and women in this project articulated several themes that were common in their life stories. Many of the men and some of the women started fighting and using drugs and alcohol as a regular ritual in their youth. Their substance abuse was due to anger and rage, resulting from the experience of long-term trauma and a considerable degree of physical, sexual, mental, and emotional abuse. Family disruption was also identified as a common theme when recounting participants' educational past. Alcoholic parents, neglect, and poverty were identified as roadblocks for attending and completing school. Participants shared common experiences of residential school atrocities that left permanent scars, which formed the foundation of their "school experience." Participants also vocalized struggling with school work due to mental health issues and learning disabilities. Many echoed stories of confusion and lack of understanding of the curriculum content. Already at a disadvantage, the added issue of racial discrimination emerged in some stories. The "second-class" citizen

attitude and behaviour of other students and teachers towards the participants contributed to their futile efforts towards schooling and eventually to suspensions or quitting school.

## **Drugs and Alcohol**

“I was using, everyone around me was using” (First Nations male).

Anthropologists, historians, and First Nations narrators all state that alcohol was not indigenous to the First Peoples of Canada and arrived with the Europeans (Thatcher, 2004). Weatherford (2010), in his book *Indian Giver*, does note that intoxicants from plants were used sparingly by the Aboriginal Peoples in a religious context. The introduction of alcohol came from early fur traders as a tool for bargaining and trading. Over the centuries, alcohol became entrenched in Aboriginal communities, causing havoc with long term, devastating consequences. Aboriginal communities today are subjected to modern intoxicants and drugs, including marijuana, cocaine, and heroin. In some areas, solvent abuse has become a culprit in the child and youth population (Fournier and Crey, 1997).

The 1991 *Aboriginal Peoples Survey* found that 73% of Aboriginal persons on reserves and settlements stated that alcohol was a problem in their community and 59% felt that drug use was an issue (Statistic Canada, 1993). This does not account for urban Aboriginal individuals. Community health studies and needs assessment studies conducted by Thatcher (2004) stated that, when interviewed, community health workers, police, and human service workers and representatives from First Nations communities all agreed that alcohol and drug abuse were identified as one of the top three issues, and, in some instances, the number one health problem. The following participants' quotes emphasize how alcohol was a prevalent part of their daily life, starting in their childhood:

.... it was a normal way of life, even though we lived out in the nowhere, sometimes you needed a skidoo to get there in the winter times, we managed to get drunk all the time. I don't remember much of growing up (First Nations female).

When I was about two and a half years old, people were getting me drunk and thought it was really funny to see me drunk and I have pictures of that, my aunt has pictures. Everyone used to make me drunk when I was two and a half (First Nations male).

Many participants had in fact connected drugs and alcohol as being reasons for not completing their schooling:

I got into drugs and didn't attend, I just wanted to get drunk or high and eventually they kicked me out of school (First Nations male).

I was smoking a lot of pot and skipping school that finally I never went back (Métis female).

I can't hardly remember...but grade five, I spent like three years in it...grade seven...I got into drugs and alcohol and I was sniffing glue. I started out sniffing glue before I got into drugs and alcohol (First Nations male).

I can't really remember too much of elementary years. I know a couple, like grade four, I know was little bit I remember and high school I remember a little bit. I was pretty wrecked most of the time (First Nations male).

Family disruption due to alcohol and drugs was common for many of the men and women who would ultimately end up in jail. Basic necessities of life were rationed or simply not provided during school years. A First Nations man tells a story of being hungry and tired due to parties going on all night long. He would stay up and look after his siblings:

...those board heaters scared me, I was always scared that while everyone was partying that a fire would catch and kill us all. Everyone was drunk, so I stayed up making sure that didn't happen then I would get the kids ready for school and we were always hungry (First Nations male).

The spillage of home life into the education system was steadfast, a routine for this individual.

My parents were alcoholics and drunk when I went to school and they were drunk when I came back and no food. It was just causing me a huge downfall in my education area, in my life, at that time. I remember going to the store across from the school to steal something to eat and I got caught and then after school I got home and my mom and them were drunk and the cops brought me home. When the cops left and dad stoked up the fire stove and he said, hold my hand on the red hot stove and said, "Are you going to steal anymore?" And I said, "No," and from that day till today I never stole nothing. I just take (laughs) (First Nations male).

Alcohol permeated into multiple facets of the participants' lives, forcing the inevitable decisions to be made regarding school.

I was in grade 9 or 10, I don't remember it then, I think to grade 10, 'cause I was drinking too much at the time because my dad was drinking too much...I had to stay home because of my dad, look after him. He was pretty drunk quite a bit. I got into drinking alcohol, got into trouble for selling drugs at school and it seemed like it snowballed (First Nations male).

Like an abusive family or you know having alcoholic parents and my brothers having to raise me and yeah that was a bad scene altogether...After doing grade seven for the third time, I got pregnant and went to jail (First Nations female).

There were so many children in the home and there was a lot of alcohol in the home so that distracted me from going to school. I just didn't go to school and because I never went to school, welfare took me away and I still didn't attend, and a year and half later I got pregnant (First Nations female).

Large families and parents struggling with alcohol was the norm in some families, which fuelled the involvement of Child Welfare Services. Aboriginal children were removed from their parental homes and communities because of violence and abuse, placed in non-Aboriginal foster homes, denied their cultural ways, and made to feel inferior. Foster homes were sometimes abusive places where physical, verbal, and sexual abuse took place. Many interviewees felt they were treated as "second rate" in comparison to the biological children of the foster parents and exploited in many ways:

Yeah, like they removed the youngest ones. The older ones fended for themselves when they were in the house... We were all removed from the home because there was just, they couldn't, it's not they couldn't, it's just that my parents were chronic alcoholics and at points in their life where it became so bad that it controlled them and that's when welfare stepped in and said they were taking us kids. They took me away from my village and I started getting bounced from foster home to foster home so I never, when they did put me in school I was terrorizing other kids. I was just a little monster when I was in school (First Nations male).

Alcohol and drugs brought violence into family systems. The ritual of battle brought on by alcohol and drugs became one of normalcy. The children were spectators being schooled in the art of liberating their anger and rage through the use of physical power.

In my home setting, I would see that violence so I thought in my mind I was okay to harm another person. I didn't know any better at the time, right, and I think as I grew from the ages of 8 until 14 they, the social workers and counsellors in school, tried to tell me that this way was wrong. I didn't listen; I didn't trust them; that's the only life I knew. I started running away and basically living on the street (First Nations male).

My mom was always getting beaten up, I remember thinking I will never let a man hit me and guess what? All my relationship has become violent after a few drinks (Métis female).

The parents, occupied with day to day survival due to life issues or impacts from residential school upbringing, found difficulties in parenting and nurturing their children. Fournier and Crey (1997), in *Stolen From Our Embrace*, name the chapter on residential school as "Killing the Indian in the Child" to represent all that was lost in the area of emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual health and wellbeing.

My mom didn't know how to be there for us, she was always drinking because things happened to her in residential school. She didn't know how to show us that she loved us. She was always drunk and brought guys home that we had to hide from, horrible stuff happened (First Nations female).

My parents were always scared to come to school for parent teacher interviews, so they never showed up. I remember once they had to come for a meeting and they sat

there not saying anything, it was sad. My dad went to residential school and my mom went to a church run school on reserve (First Nations female).

Alcohol and drugs undeniably were contributing factors in the lockdown to future education, and yet, testimonies from the participants showed deeper hurt and pain and the use of intoxicants as a coping method.

## **Sexual Abuse**

It's always there, you know, they're those memories are never going to go away. Sometimes they're just thoughts that come through my mind and you know, it all depends on how well you can deal with them (First Nations male).

The reality for many of the participants was the everyday coping skills associated with sexual abuse. In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples reported that 39.4% respondents named sexual abuse as the most serious problem in communities, competing with alcohol and drug addictions. The trauma of sexual abuse is one of long time effect and lifelong scarring. People who were supposed to be in a trusting role subjected the participants in this project to sexual violation. It is interesting to note that disclosures of sexual abuse were reported from six of the males and four of the female participants. All six males stated that sexual abuse started in residential school at the same time as their addiction. One female participant discussed residential school sexual abuse.

I think that's what drove me to drugs and alcohol, being in that residential school. Horrible things happened, to everyone, to me, I still have a hard time talking about the sexual abuse that happened to me in there. I remember when I was an adult and I saw one of my abusers at the band hall, I was drunk and I went straight and sat on his lap and he freaked out. He kept yelling, "What are you doing?" I remember he would get me drinking before he made me do things. I said really loud, "Don't you like this anymore?" He ran out of the hall, I hate him so much (First Nations male).

Residential school was a place where abuse and cultural denial were acted out. The attempt in this environment was to take the Native out of these children. The experience of

residential school formulated the foundation of opinion and attitude about school for many. The treatment by the nuns and priests in school was permanently planted in the memories of these youngsters.

It's always there, you know, they're those memories are never going to go away. Sometimes they're just thoughts that come through my mind and you know, it all depends on how well you can deal with them now. Some days are bad and some days are good (First Nations male).

Staying drunk was the only way I could cope with the shame of all that happened to me in residential school. I know I wasn't the only boy being molested by the fathers. We all stayed quiet even though we knew what was happening. Everyone knew what was happening (First Nations male).

Judge Hogarth's (2001) term of "institutionalized pedophilia" correlates with the stories of all the residential school participants in this project. The government's attempt at assimilation through education turned into the formation of structures that were used as a stage for the personnel to act out their depraved, sexual fantasies on innocent, Aboriginal children. One of the female participants discloses sexual abuse in residential school.

He would give me red wine to drink, and then it would start, I hate wine but later on I drank it all the time to the point of black outs (First Nations female).

She later notes the disparity with learning:

I rate my education as poor. How do you learn stuff when you are always afraid? You walk in life in fear. You put your head down so you won't get noticed. I think I was empty, I don't remember anything that I learned. Maybe my letters, I don't have much memory of those times (First Nations female).

Education was at best marginalized; consequently, for some, transitioning to another school became another struggle.

The teachers were different. I found it more harder in public school than residential school. It was only one class in residential school...every subject in one class and one teacher. In public school we had different teachers for different subjects. The system was different, a lot of problems, a lot tougher in high school than residential school to do with work. I was so lost and so behind. They all knew I came from residential school so our education was poor compared to theirs (First Nations male).

Who could learn anything when you were always worried and scared? It was hard trying to figure out all the rules. I used to wonder what my parents were doing at home and what I would be doing if I was there (First Nations male).

I hated school. When I left residential school to go to the church run school I was getting sexual abused there too, so I quit school, I was drinking and doing drugs anyways and everyone in my house really didn't care if I went or not (First Nations male).

Residential school experience left imprints of education that formed roadblocks to learning generationally. For these individuals, survival became more of a priority than reading and writing.

### **Learning Disabilities and Mental Health Issues**

"I couldn't cope in school, I was stupid" (First Nations female).

The literature review in this thesis identifies learning disabilities and mental health issues as contributing factors challenging incarcerated individuals. Kirmayer, Cargo, and Simpson (2003) stressed the link between emotional and mental barriers as the consequence for internal blockage for inmates. In this project, the participants that I interviewed all shared stories of difficulties in comprehending the curriculum due to various learning roadblocks.

I was doing my work but I could never get a chance to learn how to write - handwrite. I tried handwriting when I went back in the prison system. I don't know whether, if something in my head didn't develop when my mom was drinking with me or whatever the case may be (First Nations male).

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/Effects (FAS/E) is a serious subject underpinning many of the offender management care, custody, and reintegration issues that CSC currently addresses (CSC, January 2001). The lost opportunity associated with learning was plagued with apathy and learned helplessness.

I didn't really know what they were talking about. I didn't understand what words meant, like big words. I got frustrated when I was young. I didn't know what they were talking about and I felt stupid and then I would get offended. They try to make you learn something really fast; my memory is not so good. I got to relearn everything all over all the time (First Nations male).

I know my mother was drinking when she was pregnant with me, I know because she was drinking all the time with the other babies. School was hard. I felt like a dumb Indian. I could not understand what they were teaching. I would have to repeat it so many times. The teachers got frustrated with me (First Nations female).

I didn't understand anything so I spent time sleeping. I remember getting kicked out of class for not paying attention and I would go outside the class where my desk was and sleep until the school bell rang. No one cared (First Nations male).

I was so shy; I didn't ask a lot of questions. I was invisible. I couldn't understand what was happening, couldn't understand what I was reading or how to write with my sentences in there, wasn't making any sense (First Nations male).

The estimated prevalence rate of FAS/E among Aboriginal inmates is difficult to accurately diagnose due to many other internal and external hardships associated with this population. As well, screening and assessing is, at best, lengthy and comprehensive and involves interviewing or knowledge of maternal drinking history. Only two of the participants in this project followed through in their adulthood to obtain testing. In both cases, FAS/E was diagnosed and recommendations were made. Some of the participants who struggled with reading comprehension reported diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):

I have ADD and never could stay focused on any of the work (First Nations male). I'd actually go play in the school yard. I just wouldn't go in the school 'cause I didn't understand. I would get kicked out of the classroom for goofing around and

not listening and I think it had a lot to do with not understanding what I was told to do (First Nations female).

I was in a special ed class. It was a special ed class for learning disabilities. Later on in life I was diagnosed with ADHD so that explains a lot (Métis female).

Do you think I could sit still, I hated school, I didn't understand anything and it was boring. It wasn't long before I started skipping, I think around grade six or seven that I started going to smoke dope instead of school (First Nations female).

There was pressure to try and make you learn something so fast, like I used to never do that, my memory's not great. I have to relearn everything. That's probably why I didn't like school. There was tests done by the University of British Columbia, the one in Vancouver, and my nurse said the reason I can't learn is because of all the drugs I did and the abuse that happened to me. She said my mind wanders every time I get distracted. So they were supposed to put me on Ritalin but they never did (First Nations male).

Three of the participants who had been diagnosed with ADD/ADHD and for whom Ritalin had been recommended, stated that their parents did not follow through. It was noted that many of the participants did not get assessments done until they were incarcerated. Some just believed they were not academically inclined and made decisions in their life according to lack of information about the learning effects of ADD/ADHD.

The last grade that I completed was grade seven, but I kind of started to fall back when I was in grade two. I didn't quite grasp the information, so they stuck me back in a grade one and they started all over again. So by the time I got to grade seven, that's when I started gaining an attitude and I kind of started rebelling a lot, spending less time at school and more time out. I think they just pushed me ahead like I never got a piece of paper saying you passed grade eight, you know it was just like, okay, you are in grade nine. I was so far behind in taking in the information I just didn't really want to be there, I kind of gave up on the whole because it made me feel stupid. They kept pushing me forward because of my age. Then when we moved to Calgary they did the same thing and I got moved to grade 10. Finally, I gave up and never went back. School was not a positive experience (Métis female).

Over the past decade there has been an increase in the number of offenders suffering from mental health disorders upon admission to federal penitentiaries and community

residential facilities, and in those who return to custody within two years of their release (CSC, 2006). The challenge around orienting the education system and struggles with mental health issues resulted in the obstruction of learning.

I was diagnosed with schizophrenia after I did some provincial time, I think I was 19, I knew something wasn't right with me. I was hearing voices and always felt anxious. I sometimes still hear the voices, they don't really like anyone. It was hard in school, I was the "wacko" in school (First Nations male).

Two of the participants disclosed their diagnoses and both had come to terms with their mental illness. Neither was diagnosed in school, but they were diagnosed prior to being sentenced.

I was diagnosed with bi-polar in 2001, but I'm pretty sure I've had it longer than that. I was a troubled child so-called. Anger problems, just doing a lot of stupid stuff, lighting fires in the house, stealing, just troubled. No reason for it, just the way I was I guess (First Nations male).

For this individual, school curriculum was easy, but he had difficulties regulating his emotions and behaviours. The use of drugs for self-medication at an early age masked his mental illness.

I started not attending school, smoking more drugs. I would rather get high than go to school. I was about 13 years old when I got into drugs. I was kind of like an outcast in high school because I was, you know, a drug addict. I'd hang out in the smokers' pit and smoke a joint or snort some lines of blow and 'cause I was doing the blow everyone thought, oh my god, he is a bad kid. He is already into the hard drugs (First Nations male).

The undiagnosed silent learning disabilities and mental health issues complicated learning for the participants in this project. The lack of resources and knowledge of their mental

health issues formed stringent values and opinions about education that seem to have cemented future academic endeavors.

## **Identity**

“I looked white so I pretended to be white” (First Nations female).

The incorporation of European ideology fostered an uneven playing field for Aboriginal students. The learning landscape was foreign and difficult for these youngsters to maneuver around, which resulted in apathy. The blatant disregard to the impact of assimilation seemed to go unnoticed by mainstream society and government; instead promotion of further deconstruction of the Aboriginal identity continued. All but one individual recounted stories of racial discrimination in school.

Well, I grew up kind of like...in the school where white people are racist and they are always fighting. Fighting the white people and getting in trouble with the principal and getting kicked out, in and out, in and out, all the way through until I was completely away from that school, that was my life. When I was seven years old a grade 12 student...tried to fight me because I was Indian. I was a deadly scrapper from when I was a little tyke, and I went crazy on him (First Nations male).

...a lot of racial problems in that school. It was in town and there was a special class, modified class for us Indians. It was like the white kids always made remarks to us and the East Indians (Métis female).

Being Aboriginal for some was connected with shame and hurt. The stereotypes amplified in the classrooms and playgrounds by colonial literature on Aboriginal Peoples further stamped the label of inferior on some of the participants, thus creating a two tier system of treatment and schooling.

I was too small to run away from school. The school we were at, it was like all the natives in the back and the white people up front, and it was like that all the way

through until I went to grade eight class. In grade eight I was with retarded kids, they were brothers and they were in with us too (First Nations male).

For some who were lighter skinned, lies of ancestry made life easier and school survival possible.

I would just tell people that I was Italian and nobody would know any way. I was pretty white compared to my step brothers and sisters, but they didn't live with me. I didn't know much about being native until I was older with Holy Cow the Elder in prison. She was great (First Nations female).

When my mom and dad got together she denied being native. Out of all the sisters, she is very white and all my aunties and uncles are dark skinned. My mom was always teased in the family, she was the odd ball. So my dad didn't really know she was native. When I went to live with him, he tried to convince me that my mom was not native. He told me she was Chinese, go figure. I wasn't allowed to tell anyone any different (First Nations female).

For others, abuse on reserve and a chaotic lifestyle negated any Aboriginal cultural connection. Few children escaped with their cultural identity intact from the horrors of assimilation.

I wanted to get away from the reserve so bad. I remember thinking when I grow up I will go somewhere far away from these drunks and never look back. I hated being Indian and what it represented. When I look back I feel sorry for my family. When I hear about how Indians are supposed to be so spiritual and work together and look after one another, what a joke. You should see my reserve - there are crack shacks all over the place, abuse going on, nothing changes (First Nations female).

The embedded stereotyped literature about the Aboriginal Peoples, often written by non- Aboriginal writers, sanctioned the slow elimination of cultural practices and values.

I never learned anything about my culture. I took native studies in school, and it was filled with native students. We all learned about how to be native. I don't remember

what the class was about, just about different reserves. I never lived on reserve. I just knew it wasn't great to be Indian (First Nations male).

The majority of the respondents stated that learning about their heritage was not a priority in any of the schools they attended. The deconstruction of their identity was already in the assimilationist agenda of the dominant race through the development of educational institutions. The experiences of the participants' formative years seem to leave lingering foundations of insecurities and shame.

The internal struggles of the participants in this project have a strong correlation with performance in school. From the testimonials of the participants in this project, their historic experience of school further entrenched their powerlessness and confirmed their inferiority. The continuation of the mainstream ideology transferred over into the federal prison system for the Aboriginal inmates. The challenges faced in the community by the project participants around education were disguised in systemic structures and politics of distraction in the federal prison. The lack of cultural understanding, the challenges around accessing programs, and limited resources to overcome barriers continued to plague the Aboriginal inmate inside the prison. Foucault (1975) claims that the role of the prison is to maintain the agenda of the second class citizens through deprivation of liberty (refer to chapter 3). Control and power in the prisons require compliance without resistance. The project participants all acknowledge the written rules and guidelines of the prison, and are quite aware of the power differentiation between the staff and the inmates. Jackson (2002), in his book *Justice Behind the Wall*, refers to this relationship as the keeper and the kept. The project participants acknowledge the powerlessness in their relationship with the staff. CSC, in their mission statement, establishes the foundation for power and control by the staff<sup>6</sup>. The act of confinement privileges the staff to make necessary decisions about the individual

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<sup>6</sup> The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), as part of the criminal justice system and respecting the rule of law, contributes to public safety by actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens, while exercising reasonable, safe, secure and humane control.

in order that they become law abiding citizens and assimilate into mainstream society. The prospect for Aboriginal inmates to heal and strengthen their cultural identity is not part of the CSC's goals. The struggles for most not only exist outside the prison walls but also on the inside.

## **Politicize**

This section of the paper highlights the difficulties and positive programmatic approaches that were experienced by the project participants in relation to educational provisions in federal prisons. The majority of the participants' experiences speak to the hardship around racial undertones, the frustration around prison education, accessing resources, lack of support, and the limited understanding of Aboriginal needs. The minimum effort by CSC to intervene and implement solutions that would help dissipate the frustrations can be surmised by the growing statistics of Aboriginal inmates in the federal prisons. It is vital to expose the hardships that Aboriginal inmates encounter inside the walls of the prison in order for CSC to take policy and programmatic action to improve the plight of the Aboriginal inmate. In order to make significant changes, external political pressure and support from Canadian society, Aboriginal political groups, and Aboriginal community groups are needed. To date, the federal political landscape has supported an assimilationist agenda and does not recognize or value the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the Aboriginal culture for the Aboriginal inmates' education. The issues discussed in this section need to be taken up in political arenas within Canadian society and within CSC.

During the initial meeting to plan for the interview, I found the participants wanted to share more of their history in the prison setting and their frustration with the institutions. This helped with rapport building and developing a safe environment for conversation. I was able to take some general notes during the non-recorded time and was given permission to use that information. The growing pains of institutions are clearly defined by the experience of the participants. The incongruence between policy and lived experience fuelled participants into storytelling.

## Racial Issues

Many stories were shared about racial discrimination, marginalized care, and the con code (rules and regulations among inmates) that must be adhered to at all times if one does not want to experience severe repercussions from other inmates.

There's always people saying that there is no racism but it's there and in a prison setting it's more relevant there because people really don't care who hears them because what's somebody going to do about it. No one is going to do anything about it. The mission statement in prison, especially for native people, doesn't mean anything and you're treated differently in there, like you're a lower class person when you're in prison, only because you're native, you're just not in the higher scale that the other people are in who probably have done worse crimes than you. You're just looked at differently all because you're native (First Nations male).

There is a definite line between us natives and the white people. Yeah, the first thing you do is find your people, for protection. The guards treat you pretty bad and call you names, like "chief," but there is more of us, if they see us in the yard in a big group they break it up. We all know what they think of us, other inmates and the guards (First Nations male).

It's like back in school, you are Indian so you don't matter. The white girls look at you like you are some kind of drunk, thinking they are better than you. If it wasn't for the Elder I don't know what I would do. She helped me and others. She even helped some white girls (First Nations female).

The acknowledgement that treatment from the prison was very similar to that of the outside community validated their position of powerlessness in comparison to non-Aboriginal inmates. The atmosphere of despair and apathy for some echoed in their stories.

I just wanted to do my time in peace and get it over. I didn't want any problems. Whatever they wanted, I just jumped through all their hoops. They knew I was Indian so that was a problem. Just have to stay out of trouble, stick with your own kind (First Nations male).

## **Mixed Reaction to Prison Education**

For some project participants, the experience of the prison education programs was frustrating at all levels, including access, support, and curriculum. For others, it was significant to acknowledge the effort put forth by CSC to deliver services inside the prison as well as to be aware of the challenges that exist on the inside pertaining to educational programs.

Project participants were very vocal when sharing their prison education experiences to which they had mixed reactions to; although there were more negative experience than positive. Most federal prisons give their inmates a basic daily wage if they are attending programs or working. According to the participants, some institutions base this on individual behaviour, others on time spent and others just give a fixed amount. School for some represented an easy way to earn their wage.

You could do cleaning or work in the kitchen or sit in the classroom and get the same money. I would just sit in class and waste time, lots of time. You need money for the canteen and other things, if family isn't sending you money then you need to make money (First Nations male).

I knew I was there only to get through the day. I got paid \$5 a day to sit and visit with people. I didn't know what was going on. When the teacher would come around, I would just put my head down and pretend to be reading. It was better than programs where you had to sit and share stories of your crime, it's all so fake (First Nations female).

People couldn't read kindergarten books and stuff like that. It was frustrating for them. Some of them, like a couple of them, were alright, but some of them, like, they didn't care. They were just there to get a pay cheque and that was it. It was like, whatever, this made it hard for the rest of us who wanted to learn (First Nations male).

Most shared stories of frustrations around accessing schooling, as well as other programs. All 20 did receive an initial SCAT (the School and College Ability Test) and CAAT (Canadian Adult Achievement Test) assessment to show grade level placement.

When you first go in, they make you do a thing called SCAT testing to see what educational, or what grade level you're at and when I did the test I think I was at grade one level. I just laughed, like I knew I didn't know much, like I couldn't read or write so it was to be expected (First Nations male).

I did some upgrading, I guess, or something like that. When you go in they give you that test, the CAAT test. Yeah, and they said it was bad so I went to school to do a little upgrading and they said, "You don't need to be here," so I went to work even though they said my test showed my grade being low (First Nations male).

A couple of the participants commented on the link between accessing Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs to self-motivation and personal interest. The tolerance for the procedures of enrollment can be a deterrent and consequently many show disinterest.

The school program was there if somebody wanted to do it. It was open to anybody who wanted an education. Not too many people seemed interested. I applied and within two weeks, I was in. It was that easy. I had a lot of time and I thought I might as well do something (First Nations male).

One respondent shares her situation on how the institution, due to her age, prioritized and accommodated schooling.

So you know, it was new, for all of the staff too. I was a minor who was raised to the federal court and then charged as an adult at the age of 15; like it was a learning curve for everyone. There was like a lot of waiting and a lot of requesting things or whatever because they were not sure what to do or where I was going to go. They knew that because I was a minor that school was mandatory. They started me in school; I was the first federal inmate in the youth prison. I did so well that they didn't transfer me when I was 18, 'cause I was doing my schooling and was actually doing well (First Nations female).

For most, the school registration paper work and process seemed intimidating and not user friendly.

The problem was you had to go through your IPO's, institutional parole officer, I guess they call them that. The parole officers and then it goes through your treatment

team plan. It goes through a whole series of people to get you to be ok. You have to find a whole bunch of guys to tell them that you are safe, that you won't fight or you won't stab somebody or do anything like that. You have to be cleared before anything is done (First Nations male).

After the pre-test that showed us where we were at, then it gets put through sentence management to be allowed to go to school. Then they put you on list if approved. When a spot opens you attend. If the sentence management deem it important or they might push you into another direction because they figure you need something else; it's tough. If you are really illiterate it's even tougher. It gets embarrassing (Métis female).

You have to actually do a whole bunch of paper work that has to be filled out. You have to put in that you want to go to school then you have to get it cleared from your primary worker and then your case load management and then it goes in front of the warden. These are the people that decide whether you get to go in or you don't (Métis female).

For a couple of the participants, emotional barriers were too strong to overcome. The lack of self-esteem obstructed the path to learning.

I know I should have asked people to help fill out the forms, but I didn't want people thinking I was stupid. This was like being with nuns in residential school. They couldn't care if I knew how to read and write, I just tried to be invisible (First Nations female).

I was quite shy about where I was and what I was doing, embarrassed, so I didn't know how to go about doing all the stuff like enrolling. There was no guidance about school. You have to chase people down. There is so much distraction and you have to see this person or that and having low self-esteem I couldn't make it to those doors (First Nations female).

I'd go to school about once a month and ask if they knew where abouts they were with my application. The first two months I had to fill it out three times because they had not received it. They kept telling me they had not received it. Then they would tell me that my primary worker had not signed it. You have to track down the primary worker, get them to sign it, go to health care and health care has to sign it. Health care sends it to the program and that program has to sign it. So it goes from all these different area heads. So you're at complete wits' end; you are not knowing where it's actually been to. So unless you actually take this paper, and take it right directly to the person and then to sign it right in front of you and take it to the next

one, you are pretty much screwed, you gotta wait until it goes through the system (First Nations female).

The majority of the participants discussed frustration with the system. The confusion around process and protocol seemed for some to be a lesson in endurance and persistence. A First Nations male commented on the time that the registration process takes: “This isn’t the normal wait of two or three weeks, sometimes you’re waiting up to two or three months, I guess because we have nothing better to do.”

After the paperwork is completed, the participants continue to engage in the art of waiting and being patient. “It takes a while to get into school. The wait list is pretty big. I kept getting shipped out of places so I didn’t have a chance to stay and go to school,” explains a Métis male participant.

I waited for my name to come up for school and then they decided to transfer me to the healing lodge, so I had to start the process all over again. I was only in there for six months and I knew if I didn’t get in there right away, I wouldn’t be able to get this done. I got in after a few months and they moved me, I think I attended two classes (First Nations female).

Others who showed motivation seemed to be caught in the battle of “red tape.” According to the participants, conditional mandatory programs are a higher priority than school. Mandatory programs are compulsory for early release.

I couldn’t really get into school, because I needed to complete my institutional plan, which was mandatory. I did all the programs that were mandatory, then waited for the school (First Nations male).

I finally got into school and was there for two weeks and I had to leave to do a program that came up and was mandatory. They just take you out of school whenever a mandated program that’s part of your institutional plan comes up. So I did it all then waited to get into school. There is a lot of time, a lot of waiting (First Nations male).

I received a four year sentence but because I was on accelerated parole I wasn't in there long enough to actually get into school. I had mandatory programs that I had to take in order for me to be released. There is such a huge wait list for getting into school that they try to get people that were getting released sooner in there faster. When I finally finished all the mandatory programs, I applied to go to school. That would have been in August, and I don't think I got into school until March or April and then I was released in July. There is only so many seats available. I never did finish my classes because I was out, what a waste (Métis female).

There was consensus around the structure of the classroom in prisons. Most described the setting as a miniature classroom with guards manning the door.

There was always a guard watching. Even in a classroom at the school. At the school also, like, it was always a guard sitting there with, an armed guard and there was other guards standing with rifles and shotguns by the door so their presence was always there and some of them, once in awhile, the older guards would be more, kind of, pushing you to keep doing what you were doing. The older guards didn't like seeing younger people in prison so it was important. They were always encouraging, not too many of them, but some. The younger guards, they were different (First Nations male).

One of the positive comments mentioned by the respondents was the small classrooms; the average seating to be around 15. "It was nice walking into a classroom that didn't have 30 people in it, it wasn't intimidating," stated a First Nations female. Many of the participants were keen for the small number in each class. "The average number of students would range from 5 to 15," informed a First Nations male. "It was nice having small classes, we all knew each other," commented a Métis female. The scope of various attitudes toward prison school was worthy of note. For some, the appreciation of support was clearly defined:

I guess the best part was the teachers. Some of them, some of the women that used to come in, were excited for you. They came in because they want to help, but in the same time their intentions were to make a difference for the next person. Those are the teachers that were successful and stayed the longest. We sometimes had tutors come in for one on ones to help read and to help understand a sentence or just that tutoring helped out; that extra boost of confidence (First Nations male).

My teacher, he was great. He would start the day off with a joke. You know he was, I mean of course you have to have structure in your classroom, right? But he was pretty laid back as a teacher. I mean, he [taught] up in Inuvik, places and stuff like that, like he'd retired as a teacher in the public or whatever school system. But then, he kind of went into the jail systems because he believes everybody deserves a second chance. So he was pretty cool. You could go to him and [he] didn't make you feel less than, or, you know how sometimes you get very embarrassed if you don't know things, certain things and he would just say it's okay. You know, but he, and he would sit there if it took an hour to explain a simple step, he would take that time with you, to explain it to you, till you fully understood it. So he was a great teacher (Métis female).

The genuine caring from instructors was a trait that was identified as important in the learning process, however, the majority of the participants described scenes of boredom and frustration.

I was with that one teacher, realizing that, some, you know, someone that is supposed to know what they are doing and to help you work through it. She didn't have a clue what she was doing and she was very snobbish and really looked down her nose at the women that were in the system. I quit after a while (First Nations female).

The teachers didn't try to spend some time to figure out your problems in English and math. It must have been hard for them because so many of us were like harsh drug heads, cocaine users and speed. There were so many of us and not enough of them. Like one person for so many students. Once in a while a tutor would come in but it was like they would spend time with one person for so long and then time was up (First Nations male).

She was digging into my personal history when it wasn't really necessary. If she focused more on what we need to learn instead of where we came from or what we did, then I figure the class would have been a lot better. She was so judgemental, you know, with her I just felt she thought that because I was in prison that I was tainted or something (First Nations female).

Sometimes teachers would help, not all the time. I remember this one time, this guy, the teacher told him to read, every day there was a reading and everybody had to, like, unbelievable, like some of the things that teachers said, like embarrassed the hell right out of the person. They made sure you knew you were less than (First Nations male).

Difficulties in the classroom resulted in individuals seeking help from each other:

Yeah, I helped, yeah, 'cause I'm very good in math. Like, unbelievable in math and like I helped everybody. Not everybody, but quite a few people. Teach them how to do certain stuff, like fractions and stuff like that. The teacher sat there reading a magazine, he was just putting in his time (First Nations male).

This was a common occurrence for many of the participants. Some of the respondents discussed the interactive learning with peers as somewhat helpful and indicative of services on the inside. Positive experiences in the classroom for many were rare. Communication and relationships between inmates were defined as strained and affected learning as stated in many of the descriptors by the participants.

It's hard to explain, because you're in a classroom with women, especially in a larger prison, there's a lot of conflict and women, it's really hard to sit in a classroom if you don't get along with them. Or sit in a classroom and sit in between two people that don't get along. There is bickering and arguing and swearing and cursing and name calling and fighting. If there was a fight that broke out the whole jail would get locked down. The teachers usually have a red button that they can push if things get out of hand (Métis female).

Some of the guys were there to get a pay cheque and that was it. You always had to keep an eye on them because they could start something. These guys were the tough guys. They just sat there killing time, looking for a fight. The guards all knew who was serious and who wasn't (First Nations male).

The structure of the classroom, most agreed, could be stressful. This depended on the students in class and the attitude of the instructors. Lack of extra supports was also a common complaint in the process of learning.

### **Psycho-social Programs**

Most of the participants didn't mind taking the mandatory psycho-social programs like drug and alcohol prevention, relapse, cognition skills, anger management, and violent offender groups. "I guess my goal was to keep busy in there to make time go fast," remarked a First Nations male. For some, the programs were the first time they had the opportunity to

look at their crime cycle and contributing factors for being locked up. A few commented on the awareness that they attained through those mandatory programs.

It seemed like it was really beneficial for me to go through all the programs because it helped me in the long run to see the pattern in my life from infant to adult stage. It made it pretty clear to me to look back at it now and learn all the stuff that happened to me. I became so much more aware of myself and how I behaved. My parole officer worked hard for me. She was really good (First Nations male).

A First Nations female relates her story of advocating for programs in order to apply for parole.

The only reason we got substance abuse management and emotions management was because we were applying for parole and we told them that this is what we're going for and we kind of had to have it underneath our belts if we were going to get parole. We waited around doing nothing basically. So a bunch of us kept harassing our workers and telling them about their policy and finally they did get us a teacher. She was great and I learned a lot about myself (First Nations female).

### **Other Learning Resources**

According to the project participants, federal prisons not only deliver programs for rehabilitation, but also have educational tools available to them. For instance, libraries are situated for the use of inmates. Interestingly, the majority felt that the library was sufficient. None had concerns about lack of literature or access to the library. It was a non-issue. The availability of computers and computer knowledge were also not a priority or concern when discussing resources. One individual commented on updating the computers, along with obtaining computer classes.

### **Aboriginal Provisions**

Limited and inappropriate Aboriginal programming appeared to be one area of CSC that generated conversation. Some of the participants acknowledged the effort put into the

developing of Aboriginal programs by CSC, but the majority recognized the token gesture shown by CSC as a lack of understanding. Both male and female participants agreed that CSC prison education lacked Aboriginal content in their curriculum. However all recognized the attempt by CSC to establish a separate branch, dedicated to Aboriginal inmates, to evaluate, develop, and implement programs that are Aboriginal specific in the hopes of addressing the recidivism crisis faced by this group.

There wasn't anything in the school, I knew about the sweat lodge and I knew I could talk to Elders. They also had the Native Brotherhood. They had drum groups. Like I really wanted to get some sort of concept of what native culture is, what it meant. What does the healing circle mean? What does the talk with Elders mean? What does the sweat lodge mean? What do the medicines mean? Why do we pray? Like, I wanted to know history, our history (First Nations male).

I learned about the Aboriginal culture outside the education program. We had Elders that we could talk to and there was sweat lodges that we could participate in. There was a program called The Spirit of Your Warrior that really hit the nail for me. It was hard facing all the truths about myself (First Nations male).

It was interesting to note that many stories described the emotional and mental contributions Elders made by their existence in the prisons. The gravitational pull of the Elders on the inmates was monumental for some of the participants on their road to wellness.

In Bowden we had this one Elder and he was really good. He use to teach us by example and what I mean by that is he got paid to do some kind of ceremony thing and they gave him a thousand dollars. He had some people with him on the path and he took enough money out to pay for everybody's lunch and put a little bit of gas in his vehicle and he took nine hundred dollars and went and gave it to the women's shelter. Some inmates would go see him 'cause they'd have no smokes and he would buy tobacco out on the street and bring it in and give them smokes when they came to see him. Everyone liked to be with him. I really liked to talk to him. All I knew about being Indian was all the negative stuff. He was a kind, gentle man (First Nations male).

Well, out of the lot of years coming and going from in and out of the institutions I never really got to the truth of things. Never really told anybody that I was sexually abused as a kid or you know I rolled through it and told people what I thought they wanted to hear in order to get the hell out, right. They had this one Elder brought in

from Saskatchewan to run The Spirit of Your Warrior plus we had our own Aboriginal Elder in the institution that supported us through the program. It changed my life; she was phenomenal, you couldn't hide anything from this Elder, so when it got to the point where she seen I wasn't pushing any farther, she pushed a little harder, got through all the trauma and we did a sweat to get rid of all the stuff that we brought up and healing circles and talking circles. She was great (Métis female).

The hunger for identity and culture were evident in the shared stories of the participants. For some, the indoctrination of shame subjected on them from birth eliminated any sense of Aboriginal identity.

I just never really got in touch with that part of my heritage. My grandfather only spoke Cree so I didn't really talk to him because I was, I guess you could say, I was embarrassed for being a white Indian. You know, I had a hard time accepting who I was a person growing up. I don't think of myself as native. I'm blood native but I guess white Indian. The natives hated me because I was white and the white's hated me because I had native blood. I just hated everyone equally. So did I participate in the Aboriginal programs, no, I had no interest (First Nations female).

The residential school really tried to make us white, and if you didn't follow the rules you paid dearly. When I went to prison they tried to get me to do things because I was native, but in my community we didn't do those things. They think that we all are the same. My reserve is so messed up, everyone is screwed up and drunks. I don't think we know how things were before the white man came. I would like to know about how the Indians got ripped off, maybe someday (First Nations female).

The construction of healing lodges was also seen as a demonstration of addressing Aboriginal specific needs.

The healing lodge in Saskatchewan is all Aboriginal, so everything we did everyday was surrounded by all the native ways. All the workers there were referred to as our brothers and sisters and the Elders were grandparents. Every morning we did a sharing circle before the whole day began; we smudged. It was mandatory that we had to be in the sweat lodge by 8:15. I felt so much better being there than in the white setting. It was so comfortable and there was so many different programs that you could go through...we were out in the wilderness and it was so nice...The only thing is that you have to be deemed minimum security to go in there. There is no

fence or guards, everyone just wants to be there because it's healing (First Nations female).

The initiative taken by CSC's Aboriginal branch appear to take into consideration special circumstances of Aboriginal inmates. Some of the project respondents, who were casualties of the revolving prison door syndrome, comment on the positive changes in CSC to meet the needs of Aboriginal inmates.

Things have changed since the first time I went in. We have Elders in most federal prisons and they even have programs like The Spirit of Your Warrior. They didn't have this program back then, it came later... The Native Brotherhood back then was kind of like, it's hard to explain, just a group of people who pretty well, all the natives stuck together for a reason. So that if something happened then, you know, we had a big number of native people who were willing to help each other out. That's how the Brotherhood started. Now they help advocate for lots of things (First Nations male).

Most participants agreed that CSC is attempting to implement programs that are Aboriginal focused but state the struggle is, at best, marginalized.

Sometimes they don't get it, it's like you know they make you go to the sweat but it's not the right reason. Lots of people don't respect it and they let lots of white people in it. Like a tourist attraction instead of a spiritual ceremony. It's our way of life and they don't take it seriously (First Nations male).

The provisions established by CSC appear to be addressing rehabilitation, although according to the project participants, the road to understanding the plight of Aboriginal inmates is at the infancy stage. The lack of awareness of the multiple levels of effect from colonization continues to inflict the federal prison system in regards to Aboriginal inmates. The experience of the participants' voiced concerns centers around the rules and regulations of CSC that hinder access, effectiveness, and substance of the Aboriginal and ABE programs. The lack of collaboration from the users of this program is transparent. It is apparent from the words of the participants that input from the consumers of these programs

is desperately needed to identify the problems and potential of the prison educational programs. The need to school CSC must come from Aboriginal Peoples and communities. More importantly CSC leadership and decision-makers must listen to and learn from a key constituent group, Aboriginal inmates. The importance of Aboriginal inmates taking agency by vocalizing their unique needs, sharing their stories of struggle, and giving suggestions for changing prison education needs to be viewed as an example of politicization which raises awareness about systemic changes that need to be address. By participating in this research project, the participants also demonstrated steps towards self-determination not only for personal gain but for other Aboriginal inmates in the federal prison system.

## **Strategize**

The importance of historicizing participants' elementary and secondary school experiences, and exposing the barriers that are placed on the Aboriginal inmate through prison policies and attitudes, provides the foundation for this research project. Personal history illustrates problem areas for introspection. Politicizing the provisions inside the walls gives an understanding of mobility for transformation and areas of focus. The heart of this undertaking to strategize centers on the last question: What elements are necessary to improve Aboriginal male and female inmates' attendance and completion of education programs in British Columbia's federal prisons?

The significance of allowing the voices of Aboriginal offenders on parole is vital to this project. I have always believed that in order for transformation to transpire in the prison system for Aboriginal offenders, they must be included in the process. Many indigenous researchers (Archibald, 2008; Brown, 2005; Rigney, 2007; Smith, 2005; Wilson, 2008) mention that participants may engage in a process of decolonization through their involvement with research where they can reflect, tell stories of their experiences, and recommend solutions to problems. I provided the atmosphere and opportunity for the project participants to brainstorm strategies that they would like to see implemented in regards to improving prison education for the Aboriginal inmate. For the project participants, this was

a unique chance for them to participate in a way that would improve future service delivery in institutions that had, in the past, silenced them. As expressed by Freire (1997), individuals must become control agents in their life (Chapter Three) as an element towards liberation. Allowing the participants to voice their thoughts gives meaning and truth to the research study.

I think a lot of it has to do with how native offenders are taught in prison and I think they have more understanding about native beliefs and spirituality in the prison system and in the education part of it. There could be a lot of doors that could open within universities and different institutions that already, that have a native university like in Saskatoon, they got a university for native people. They could actually have something going through the internet for, in the institutions around to teach native people in the institutions and I think they should have it more accessible for native people to go to school while they are in prison. Some of them don't go to school based on what they are told there, you know, like nobody really cares if they are there. They're just there to do their time and that's it. So nobody tells them what they should do or how they should do something and you know when you get the SCAT testing, you're pretty well told, "Well, you know what, you don't have a very high grade level so you're not that bright to be begin with." So when a person has that mentality you kind of don't feel wanting to do anything with it. So I think they should have a bigger understanding of it (First Nations male).

Project participants recommended practical, attainable possibilities they felt would augment the existing prison education for Aboriginal inmates. The issues and strategies take place around access, support, curriculum, and cultural content.

### **Access to Education**

When given the opportunity to brainstorm around improving prison education to better suit the needs of Aboriginal inmates, the participants revealed numerous pragmatic solutions. One of the major criticisms was the difficulty in getting into school while in prison. The participants all agreed about the importance of education on the inside as well as out in the community.

Everything you do when you walk through the doors is fill this paper out, you need to request this, you need to request that. You need to be able to read the report on the request; paperwork is endless, kill a forest for paperwork in jail, right. So you need to know how to read and write. When you get out, you need to know how to read and write. You gotta read a newspaper to find a job. You gonna be able to find a job, well you gotta be able to read that job application and fill everything out there. Education is essential. Being literate is essential (Métis female).

I think stereotyping needs to kind of go out the door. We're not bad people 'cause we went to jail. We just made bad mistakes. Everyone deserves a second chance. That second chance is education. To have some piece of paper I can be proud of even though I never finished high school. I can go back and improve my reading and writing ability. I managed inside in jail, but here on the outside, wow, you need to be schooled (First Nations female).

Education is very important. They don't teach native people about what life really is out there. They don't have nothing in there where you know, in place, where, to show how to do banking or how to use the internet or internet banking, they don't really teach you anything that could help you out there. We need to learn to read and write, like I was always helping people fill out applications or forms for anything they wanted to do because they couldn't do it. School should be mandatory (First Nations male).

A lot revolves around putting in requests. If you wanted to just go see the Elder you have to put in a request, if you want a phone call, you have to put in a request and then you get the request back and two or three days later and sometimes the days are past before they even return the request form and the day is past when that meeting was supposed to happen. I put in a request to see the nurse and then I got my request back and then the day, when they referred me to a different person, the day went by before I got my request back. What it boils down to is you still need an education and some form of education. I mean if it's a lower level of schooling. Grade seven or eight at least they will teach you to read and write. You even need that just to get a waitress job on the outside (First Nations female).

The message from participants is that education needs to be compulsory, and without the ability to read and write, time on the inside is protracted: "Cause there is nothing to do in prison if you don't go to programs or school. School actually kept me out of trouble a lot of time in prison," commented a First Nations male. Another First Nations male agreed that the opportunity for education enhanced his life and triggered ongoing motivation to further his schooling in the community: "It's nice to know that you completed something that would help you on the outside. When I got out, I knew I had a couple of classes to go until I was

done so I made sure I finished that. I went to street school to finish my schooling.” The message that education should be a mandated program, and should be a priority to CSC was articulated strongly by many of the participants. The reality of waiting for a seat or approval to attend school generated frustration.

I think school should be available to anyone who wants it. There should be more seats available. It should be just mandatory. They can have different classes, like, offer classes at different times, morning, afternoon, and even evening classes. You should go straight to a schoolroom and you fill out a form and they the instructors decide, not your institutional parole officer, not the warden. That has nothing to do, you are not working with them, you’re working with the teacher (Métis female).

Prison education sucks, it does. The space availability, there’s, you know, you have to. The wait list is so huge. It’s so long you have to wait and wait and wait. I think they need bigger classrooms, more teachers. I really do, because it’s not fair to pick and choose who deserves an education. Everyone deserves an education. Everyone deserves a second chance (Métis female).

Creating more efficiency would ameliorate prison education and thus more individuals would be able to gain access and utilize the opportunity. The participants all advocate for simple solutions that can be implemented to assist in making prison education more user friendly. Collaboration from CSC staff has the potential to alleviate frustration and apathy.

## **Support**

Support in the system can involve physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual support. The project participants did not comment much on the physical structure/facility of the school, which was very similar to schools on the outside, apart from the doors being manned with guards. The acceptance of captivity was demonstrated by the lack of ranting about the physical arrangement. To reiterate, the participants all felt the library was sufficient for their usage, however, they suggested upgrading the computers: “The computers are so old and slow, they really need to get updated” (First Nations male).

All project participants concurred that extra instructional supports in the classroom were essential.

If we could get one tutor for every five or six native people or Aboriginals, whatever, and that's it, because then they'll have individual time for each person to try to accomplish, make them accomplish something because if you go in to a, let's say, a school that I came from down there, the way it was set up, they only had one teacher and that was it. For me, one-on-one, I think that would work good because I know this person is going to help me whether I need it or not (First Nations male).

It was hard getting help because the teacher couldn't be there all the time, just for you, there were other students that needed to be taken care of. It would be good to have another helper. Sometimes we did and sometimes we would find someone who was doing well and ask them. Most of the time I would just sit there (First Nations male).

Sometimes we had tutors come in for one-on-one to help to read and to help to understand a sentence or just that tutoring helped out or gave you that boost of confidence. It wasn't often. They need more of tutoring or help in the classroom. When someone gives you a boost in confidence, it's saying, yeah, you're doing great and it's saying, yeah, you are a good boy or a good girl. Imagine hearing that when you were growing up and when it's coming from a teacher that has heart, that knows the system, that's coming in and says, good boy. I remember hearing that, hey, good boy. That just lifts a person up rather than pushing them down (First Nations male).

Not only would having extra instructional supports in the classroom benefit individuals academically, but the praise and perks that come with academic accomplishments promotes self-esteem and confidence. Emotional support for many inmates is a foreign concept. Institutionalized upbringing, through residential school and foster homes, did not provide a nurturing, caring environment. For a few of the participants, counselling was important.

You really need counselling when you are in there. It's great to go to school, but things happen and most of us don't have it to keep going. I mean, for me, I give up fast or think I can't make it; yeah it would be good to have counselling (First Nations male).

I like some of the programs because it was like talking about things that we have a hard time controlling, like anger and my rage. The programs did help but we all have

bad history and how do we learn, no one is going to stand up for you. I would be just wasting my time if I didn't have friends who told me I could do it. My parents went to residential school, they didn't care if we went or not. Definitely counselling needs to be there (First Nations female).

For the project participants, working through mental and emotional blocks regarding school brought forth much needed dialogue. Many reflected on past success that they attributed to certain teachers. "It really depends on the teacher...if they are into it, then I am. But some just come in there and really don't care." Project participants recall teachers who offered positive experiences in prison as one of the main factors for their positive accomplishments.

I guess the best part was the teachers. Some of them, some of the women that used to come in, not just the guys, some of the women, you can tell their intentions. They came in because they want to help, but in the same time, their intentions were to make a difference for the next person. Those are the teachers that were successful and stayed the longest. That had heart, let's face it, a person can be read no matter how much education they have (First Nations male).

Caring and connection emerged as foremost when identifying teacher characteristics needed in class.

I think when a teacher takes the time to actually show you and teach you, like the one-on-one really helps quite a bit. If you have a problem, that they show you that it's not a problem for you to go up to them and ask them. I think that's important to have that, to show that, you know, you're willing to teach them as long as somebody wants to learn. They need to be approachable and show they really care (First Nations male).

You really need teachers who actually believe that we deserve second chances. So many are there, just like us, killing time, getting paid for sitting around. You need someone who knows us and like believes in us and doesn't get scared of the prison or the inmates. I've had all kinds, the ones that stay and make it good are the ones that show they care and can connect at our level (First Nations male).

The solution some of the participants suggested was having Aboriginal instructors that understand the Aboriginal ways.

I think what would make a big difference is having native people come in and teach a program for native people. I think that would make a very big difference of how a person would learn from somebody. If you take a white person and put him in the classroom full of native people, there is not going to be any respect for that person that's trying to teach the course. Or if you put a native person in there to teach the course to a bunch of native people then they already have one thing in common. They're native (First Nations male).

I have a lot of Aboriginal friends that had been in residential schools and stuff like that, and there was a lot of apprehensions around school teachings. I think if they were being taught by a native teacher it may ease them into the system a little more easily. We have a lot of fears and I think because the native teacher has the same history it makes it easier to open your ears to learn and be comfortable (Métis female).

I think it would be good or whatever with a native instructor that knows what he or she's talking about, right, and being able to offer a lot more culture and stuff, for some people. Or just having the knowledge of it, and you know, lived through it, on a day-to-day basis and not, you know, just sort of getting paid to go in there and act like they know what they're talking about (First Nations female).

A few participants took it one step further and recommended that not only must the instructors be Aboriginal, but they should have gone through the prison system themselves and turned their lives around. "We need heroes that show us that it can be done," stated a First Nations male.

In an ideal situation would be someone that came through the system that's gone to school and gone to university and is back to them, hey it works. Going back to grass roots. People that have been there, done that and turned their lives around and came out and been successful members of the community again; that want to turn around and give back and want to help (First Nations female).

We really need teachers who are like us. Like our school teacher came from a proper family, mom and dad, brothers, you know. It's one thing to grow up with abuse that happens on reserve but it's totally different to have a teacher that, you know, sits there and judges you and knows nothing about you. I say more teachers and more

teachers that been through the system at least one native teacher that's been through it (First Nations female).

You need instructors that have walked the same path as you. If you know that someone has similar struggles and they are native, but has changed their life, then you feel more relaxed. You feel more hopeful, feel like they understand you because they are native and have gone through the system (First Nations female).

The importance of an Aboriginal instructor who has similar lived experience was echoed as a necessity by many of the participants. Most reiterated the need for connection with instructors that understood the plight of the Aboriginal Peoples. Another important consideration was improved cultural content in curriculum.

### **Cultural Content/Curriculum**

The lack of Aboriginal content was noted by many participants. The importance of allowing Aboriginal culture into prison education was deemed as another significant element in need of enhancing.

I think a lot of it would be, a lot of these younger native people and they go into prison now and they don't know really who they are. They don't know native culture. They don't know what their family tree is. They don't have roots when they come to prison and I think that being taught in prison really opens a person's eyes on where they came from, who they are, and I think that's what makes a difference in their own identity and where they came from. There's a lot of times when being young when you go into prison, you're kind of, you're lost kind of, you don't, because of all the stuff that's happened. Like, the things that's happened in my life, I was, I was told, being a native person was, I was being, I was dirty, I was a dirty Indian, I was a savage and that being an Indian was like being a devil or, you know, like Satan. I shouldn't be that kind of a person. I should become a productive member of society and become like the way white people live out there. So I think if there was programs in place there for native people I think what would benefit them is if they were educated more on their native culture and their native beliefs. And to have maybe a classroom setting based on native culture and things like that so that a person would be able to learn in their own way on their own educational skills or how far they can go education-wise 'cause other than that, it's hard to sometime understand somebody who, like I'll say if they have a French accent. Some of these older native guys don't have a clue what some of them would be saying. So I think that would make a big difference too, if they had more native people inside these institutions to teach younger native people about their own culture and their way of

life and how they can benefit from it and show that they, other people, can benefit from them down the road (First Nations male).

Right now, I'd say they don't have any sort of Aboriginal education set up in prison that I came from but I think that if they set up with something like Aboriginal educational program for Aboriginal people that are there and maybe have some sort of insight for not only for myself but for any native, or Aboriginal that go there. Maybe you could have some sort of Aboriginal educational set up where they learn about different cultures and how they would look at their own culture or themselves as a person (First Nations male).

Statements like the above were frequent among the participants. History of the Aboriginal Peoples was another essential component in healing and learning that was articulated.

I think a lot of it has to do with, I don't know, you got kids that have lived on reserves and what not, and there's certain, they get used to certain ways of teachings, right, and I know there's been a lot of abuse and stuff like that throughout the histories, and people that have gone through residential school, well, they probably need something more than, you know, what's already there (Métis female).

When you have horrible things happen in school, it's like, you know, really hard to do anything. If you had, like, something that makes you feel good about who, about who you are then it's easier. We need to get back doing things our way, but it's hard because they don't know our way, and they think they know but they don't (First Nations male).

Some participants agreed that the institutions are ignorant and not sensitive to the historical trauma of the effects of colonization. Education around the histories and atrocities done to the Aboriginal Peoples must become a priority.

Well, it starts with the staff. You have to do a lot of work with the staff because when I was there, I had long hair and I was told to cut my hair before the parole board, because I didn't, they think that looking like a savage was going to hinder my getting parole, and that's coming from staff. Sometimes the ignorance makes me so angry, we don't get a fair chance (First Nations male).

Of course if these people who work in jails started learning about us as people then maybe they might understand and not think all the time that all we are, are drunks and fight all the time. We have a lot of shame and I don't understand since we, my

people, didn't do anything wrong. We need to think of a good way of teaching every worker about us, that would be a start (First Nations female).

A shift in attitude, some believed, would be a start in leveling the playing field for Aboriginal inmates in reference to achievement. One participant voiced her concern regarding the attitude of the staff: "They have to take it seriously and not just believe the stereotype, they all need to change what they think about us" (First Nations female).

In addition to educating the prison staff of the impact of colonization on the Aboriginal inmate, the participants also recommended more knowledge on the plight of the Aboriginal Peoples. Some suggested implementing an exclusive Aboriginal classroom for an ideal learning environment. This would encompass comfort level and belonging, as well as mainstream knowledge. Involving the community, Elders, and other influential Aboriginal individuals was communicated as important.

I myself have really not followed any of my ancestry, right, so I don't really know. But, what I would like to see, would be more availability, you know, maybe some set structured classes for strictly Aboriginal people. You know, maybe to have some teachings in there with, your native ancestry to learn from your own people with your own people (Métis female).

The learning is all different, like a lot of people that grew up on a reserve are totally different than what people would be through growing up on Hastings. That usually life on reserves is totally different than some of the experience that come off reserve; for example, residential school, like children of residential schools. There is so much hang-ups we have to do with school that how can we learn in a normal classroom. It didn't work before and it's not working now (First Nations female).

Because lots of us are, I don't know, for myself, like I said, it was hard for me to be in that place, the prison, and hard to talk to people, but once I was around Aboriginal people in the healing lodge I seemed a little better. More comfortable, yeah, when there was people there that are, you know, my level or that same thing has happened with them as it is with me, then we can learn from each other. Where they're not scared to ask for help, 'cause I found out I was scared to ask for help and I was going to get in shit from when I was up in the regular prison. They were always grumpy

but in the lodge they were always helpful and never judged you (First Nations female).

There is a lot of places, like villages, out in the bush. They're not urban Indians or anything. They're having a pretty hard time to learn once they move into town. Some people don't speak English. They speak their language. It would good for those Indians to have their own classroom to learn how to make it in the white world (First Nations male).

Not only would an all Aboriginal classroom offer familiarity and comfort, one participant commented on the class being an impetus for learning one's identity.

Some Aboriginals enjoy that hustle and bustle of school and there is some other natives that don't enjoy that and don't want to part of anything native. So in some ways having a classroom for all natives might be ok. Yes, in that time of spending over here within your culture and your people you can gather information, you can learn as much as you can, geared towards, hey, re-integrating back into not just any society but into a community. Maybe learn to be who you are (First Nations male).

Several of the participants conveyed concerns of segregation that they experienced in the past and the fear that a classroom for only Aboriginal inmates might become a re-creation of segregation of the past.

I think natives shouldn't get special treatment, when they separate us from regular population it's like when I was young and they thought we were not good enough to be like the rest and we just sat around doing nothing in the native class. It would probably be the same (First Nations female).

Another participant believed the concept of an exclusive Aboriginal class was significant in progress, but felt segregation would cause more turmoil.

Inmates already think we have it so good, it's a gang mentality in here. Inside is all about the code, and how to keep out of trouble, if you can learn something that's good, but I don't know if they would be serious (First Nations male).

The fear of racism appears to have been embedded deep within some of the participants. The struggle to believe in a just system for a couple of project participants illustrated the deep emotional betrayal of trust in life.

It was evident from the project participants that the importance of Elder participation in prison education symbolized respect for their ways. All agreed having Elders involved in the classroom would be beneficial in the learning process.

I think that with Aboriginals, I feel more comfortable around our own kind, with the Elders, somebody around. I feel more comfortable, more happy, I feel more freedom around the Elders, you know. I think when an Elder is in the room that people feel more comfortable and maybe try harder (First Nations male).

I think if you had an Elder in the classroom, it would be beneficial because native people, it doesn't matter how young or how old, were always raised to respect our Elders. It's just that way, maybe it would stop some of the fights in the classroom from the natives, I know I would be more into listening (First Nations male).

Several disclosed the therapeutic aspect of having an Elder in their life.

You need an Elder in the classroom; it changes everything. Out of the lot of years coming and going, from in and out of the institutions, I never really got to the truth of things. Never really told anybody that I was sexually abused as a kid or, you know, I rolled through it and told people what I thought they wanted to hear in order to get the hell out, right. They had this one Elder brought in from Saskatchewan to run some programs to do with us, plus we had our one Aboriginal Elder in the institution that supported us through the program. You couldn't hide anything from this Elder, so when it got to the point where I wasn't pushing any farther, she pushed a little harder, got through all the trauma and we did sweat to get rid of all the stuff that we had brought up and healing circles and talking circles. The Elders know how to get rid of stuff that keeps you in prison. Just having someone in the classroom, then you can talk to them anytime if you are having problems (First Nations female).

The best part was if you couldn't do anything that day, you knew that you could just go and talk to the Elder. I know if you had an Elder in the room then people would actually do some work and also they could go and talk to an Elder if they felt they weren't as good as the rest of people in the room because they can't understand the work (First Nations male).

It was evident from the discussion that Elders symbolized emotional safety and pseudo parental presence that for some was foreign, but attractive. For several of the participants, the lack of knowledge of the Aboriginal way and the shame correlated with being Aboriginal generated confusion and loss. There was an agreement that curriculum needs to transform in order to counteract the negative persona of cultural identity portrayed by society and consequently internalized by the individual. The reparation of Aboriginal history needs to be chronicled accurately, and ceremonies need to be inserted into the existing structure.

They should have, 'cause a lot of the girls come in, even men for that matter, they're losing their traditional ways. They don't have it there; that's why they're in the trouble they're in. So they should have maybe a special education class for the Aboriginals that show them what their past was, what the traditions are, and introduce them to some of their spirituality, healing, or origins (First Nations female).

Maybe you could have some sort of Aboriginal educational program set up where they learn about different cultures and how they would look at themselves as a person, like who they are. I think it would be a huge asset to any Aboriginal that goes there 'cause, like I say, it's going to be helping them try to achieve and learn about their cultures. Because some people, Aboriginal people, do different things so maybe they can learn the main part of the whole way, you know, healing in itself (First Nations male).

I think for resources, you need to look at their background, each individual that comes in there. There's different nations that come in there, so you could look at each individual has different ways of singing and drumming and maybe they could find different ways and means of picking up on their culture. Find something that we all share in common; singing and drumming, smudge, feather (First Nations male).

Ceremonies were identified as a way of instilling identity and respect in a resilient culture. Smudging in the mornings to start the day and learning as a cohort was expressed by some as an ideal learning environment.

When I was in the healing lodge, every morning we did a sharing circle before the whole day began; we smudged. It was mandatory that we had to be, we had to be in the sweat or the smudge lodge by 8:15 am and if not it could be a charge, yeah, a charge towards you. Everyone attended and then it became like part of what you did

because you were Indian. They should have that in the classrooms in the prison for Aboriginal people. It's who we are (First Nations female).

I didn't much care about my traditions until I got to prison. I started talking to Elders and you know, umm, I started wanting more. The sweat lodge was where I got this vision of an eagle. All I remember was the eagles. I seen them going inside the lodge there and then they weren't there but I could still hear them. It seemed like it was just letting me know that there's a spirit out there, spirit tell you that there is a Creator out there. Um-hmmm, I heard other people praying so I got my ideas to start praying, it helped me. They should have it so you pray to the Creator at the beginning of the day or class, whichever (First Nations male).

First Nations People in a lot of the prison systems right now are from back there, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and their teachings are the sweat lodge, drumming, singing. I think for me personally, you know, when you come into the classroom that they would be, A: you have a smudge, B: a talking circle and then carry on with your day of learning. Like at the end of the day you know I think it would be good to reflect on how you are feeling and what was good about the day. So, another talking circle at the end of the day (First Nations male).

Integrating cultural routine in the class, most affirmed, was idyllic in the learning process. For one participant, ceremonies represented a way of life for his people. The belief in the Creator and the ancestors gave his life meaning.

You know, a lot of First Nations People that are in the system, they wander around lost. Their spirit doesn't walk with them, right, and that's important thing with, like, the teachers, the Elders. They say when you pray you ask the Creator and the ancestors to have your spirit walking beside you and you draw a sacred circle around you so negativity doesn't affect you. If you are irritated and frustrated all the time and you're angry all the time, that the spirit is not beside you because if your spirit is beside you, you can find peace within and you can be humble. When you leave the prison system, you ask your spirit to come with you. You do not leave that spirit behind cold steel, because you will keep going back (First Nations male).

The importance placed on spirituality in the prison for this particular individual signified a definitive answer to disrupt the pattern of incarceration. The notion of taking that spirit when you leave prison, I feel, is the fundamental key to unlocking the mind, hence the title of this research project. Making space to incorporate prayers in the classroom would require minimal effort from CSC.

Participants also were in agreement around the amalgamation of Aboriginal specific programs to accommodate basic life programs in preparation for living on the outside. Prison education should take more responsibility for teaching necessary skills that will empower individuals with confidence to challenge recidivism.

I think I would do it like, do the history part of it first on the roots of the Aboriginal Peoples' background or native ancestry, native history, and spiritual beliefs. I'd then go into the educational part of it, you know, you're going to do grade one to grade twelve or whatever, and then the life skills part, so when you get out you have piece of paper that says you do have grade twelve and you have the skills to be able to live on the outside (First Nations male).

There is no reason why they, CSC, can't get different programs to maybe break up the regular school. Like how to get a job, interviews, how to do one. Some of us have been inside for a long time, like, maybe have a day dedicated to employment, it's better if it was part of school learning, you know what I mean. None of us have a grip on how to make it work on the outside (First Nations male).

The various learning styles and approaches surfaced as another factor in need of changing. For some, learning styles correlated with positive results.

Hands on because I can read it but you can read something as much as you want. If you don't understand it, you don't understand it, no matter how many times you read it. So, if someone sits you down and says this is how you do it and show you and is there to coach you while you are doing it, then you are going to get it (Métis female).

I need to be able to do it and watch it. If somebody showed me something it's like, okay, do it this way. I mean one day I couldn't get, I was trying to show my nephew how to tie a tie, and I couldn't get it. I had to go on the internet and see it happen, yeah for me, I'm a hands on. I need to be shown (First Nations female).

For me, one-on-one, I think that would work good because I won't try to accomplish something because I know that this person is going to help me whether I need it or not. To have that happen would be great and I could even pass a course (First Nations male).

The optimum learning environment should cater to the numerous ways of learning to augment the existing delivery approach of computers and independent learning.

The effort put forth by the participants to cultivate an ideal learning situation for Aboriginal inmates encompasses the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements. Interestingly, all participants agreed with the existing content of the Adult Basic Education/literacy courses. All agreed on the importance of learning mainstream language. Participants also felt that Aboriginal culture had to have a central place in prison educational programs. Interjecting all suggestions into prison education will only improve and strengthen CSC's core values.

## Findings

The sections organized around key concepts of historicize, politicize, and strategize emphasize the inadequacies of the federal prison as experienced by the project participants. The findings or themes generated from the participants can be turned into possibilities that are the key to educational liberation (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Emergent Themes Identified by the Project Participants**



The ideal educational program that addresses Aboriginal supports, educates CSC about Aboriginal justice perspectives, incorporates Aboriginal culture, mandates that education be compulsory, and strives to have transformative curriculum has the capacity to transform an individual.

## **Aboriginal Supports for Empowerment**

The importance of support in the classroom seems to echo from each participant. Extra supports that Aboriginal inmates can connect with help to cushion the historical barriers. Emotional support was also a request by some due to emotional hardship encountered growing up. Supports by Elders and Aboriginal teachers appear to be associated with comfort and empowerment.

## **Decolonizing and Educating CSC on Aboriginal Perspectives and Issues**

The project participants concurred on the limited understanding of Aboriginal Peoples and perspectives. Some had difficulties around their own identity and cultural knowledge and appealed for Aboriginal teachings from Elders. A focus on decolonizing the prison through educating employees on Aboriginal history and related issues due to colonization is a start for understanding. A different perspective on criminal behaviour must be considered and accepted as credible information.

## **Education as Mandatory: Regaining Personal Power and Control**

Designating education as mandatory can eliminate access issues that were encountered from many of the project participants. Mandated programs receive priority over other institutional programs and therefore impart the message of importance to education. It is evident from all project participants that they believe in the significance of education in and out of prison. To offer the opportunity for furthering the inmate's education without challenges of paper work and availability of seat gives incentive to rise above past negative experience of education and the prospect of regaining power and control over personal issues.

## **Incorporation of Culture (Conscientization)**

The importance of incorporating culture into the classroom was significant to the project participants. The visibility of Elders for some provided comfort and for some of the participants learning about Aboriginal culture gave them an understanding of who they are. Bringing the richness of the Aboriginal culture into the classroom allows for uniqueness and distinctiveness of the Aboriginal inmate and acts as a force towards conscientization. If inmates begin to see how Aboriginal culture can enhance education, and also begin to understand the forces and impact of colonization that has occurred through assimilationist goals of education, they are en route to conscientization and intellectual liberation.

## **Transformative Curriculum for Liberation**

The data analysis and findings demands change in the curriculum to accommodate the uniqueness of the Aboriginal inmates. The project participants concurred on the importance of having an Aboriginal specific classroom that can focus on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspect of learning, which are important components of transformative curriculum. The additional supports and cultural atmosphere empowers the inmates to alter their perception of learning. The power of a transformative curriculum can be an impetus to liberation.

## **Summary**

The narratives of the participants proffer information for serious consideration. The stories of educational history are couched with sadness and resiliency. The challenges these individuals endured growing up determined their attitude and opinion of the mainstream education system. Stories of drug and alcohol abuse, residential school, and sexual abuse was a reality for most of the project participants. For some, the struggles around learning disability and mental health concerns were significant factors; problems that they experienced while enrolled their elementary and high school education before they were incarcerated. To add to the intensity of these issues, the project participants related stories of

racial discrimination and lack of cultural identity. It was evident that during this time, their focus was on basic need and survival in a society that was unforgiving for Aboriginal Peoples. Ironically, this survival skill set was essential in the maze of the federal prison organization. The obstacles faced by Aboriginal inmates inside the prison appeared to take the form of policies and initiatives that suggested alternative strategies but failed to demonstrate results. The project participants shared stories of continued racism and limited understanding of Aboriginal perspectives. The division between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal inmates for some of the project participants was noted as part of the prison atmosphere. Frustration at the lack of access to resources and support for Aboriginal inmates was clearly defined as problematic. The indifference to the participants' cultural and educational background was a common practise as echoed by stories of prison programs by the participants. It was evident from the testimonies in the data analysis that the challenges inside the federal prisons did not address healing for the Aboriginal inmate.

The contributions by the participants in the strategy section of this chapter give hope for transformation of the prison education. The response from some of the participants around access is to change policy and make education mandatory. All realize the importance of high school education in the community for employability and consequently staying out of prison. The project participants noted that extra learning supports are essential in the classroom. As well, some agreed that having Aboriginal instructors who had healed from prison experience would be extremely beneficial because the instructors would know the prison's historical, political, and educational contextual issues. The need for heroes was a strong message by several of the participants. To reiterate, the project participants felt a strong need for Aboriginal teachings for their own use, as well as for staff of CSC. The necessity for Elders to be more visible in the classroom and share some cultural teachings was also part of the wish list of the participants. A request to have an Aboriginal specific curriculum seemed to be at the top of their list. The emergent themes generated by the interviews reveal creative solutions to the needs of the Aboriginal inmates. After all, they are the experts on enhancing.

## **Chapter 6: An Aboriginal Educational Framework**

The data analysis provides a foundation for transforming Prison Education for Aboriginal inmates. The project participants told stories of historical trauma, abuse, addiction, learning disabilities, racial issues, and loss of cultural identity as barriers to the mainstream education system. They discussed frustrations around support, access, and racial issues related to education in Federal prisons. As well, the participants provided suggestions for five key components that they felt would transform prison education. The analysis of their contributions must consider the impact of the educational experiences, barriers and opportunities for educational access and learning, and elements necessary to improve attendance and completion of education. It is important to recognize that all project participants agreed that education is vital for enhancing their situation and life. Transforming prison education to better serve the Aboriginal inmates can be a key to unlock the deadbolt to their freedom. The solution stems from the stories of the project participants. I firmly believe that it is my personal duty and responsibility to respectfully present the understandings that I have learned from their stories in a way that is beneficial for others. The former Aboriginal inmates' personal lived stories were told in the spirit of helping others, which I honour.

The idea of the Aboriginal Educational Framework (AEF) emerged as a structure that would allow a holistic approach to learning. This would take into consideration a healing component to respond to the historical trauma of the Aboriginal inmates and create a shift in delivering education that is Aboriginal specific. In this chapter, I build on the data and analysis from the previous chapters to provide a foundation for transforming Prison Education for Aboriginal Inmates. The development of an Aboriginal Educational Framework (AEF) reflects the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal inmates and these are:

- Emotional Literacy and healing;
- Emancipatory approaches to curriculum and pedagogy; and
- Five key components for transforming prison education

The first section of this chapter will highlight the significance of emotions in the spectrum of healing. An explanation of the role emotions play in learning and healing is discussed in the emotional literacy segment. Next, is a discussion on the values and characteristics of emotional literacy and how it is part of the AEF, followed by a presentation about the borrowed principles of Brown's (2007) emotional competency curriculum and how it corresponds to healing for the Aboriginal inmate. The emotional literacy and healing section concludes with a discussion on elements of healing that are also borrowed from Brown's work on strengthening of the learning identity and its significance as it relates to the Aboriginal inmates. The second section, emancipatory approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, is based on the theoretical framework (chapter 3) of this paper. The importance of education was echoed by all participants of this research project. This section responds to the barriers that exist in the prison education program that halts learning for the Aboriginal inmate. Lastly, a section on the five components that were identified as transforming prison education and the relationship to AEF is considered. The five components construct the key to liberatory education.

### **Emotional Literacy and Healing**

Accessing learning was difficult for many of the project participants due to emotional barriers. For some, the challenge in regulating negative emotions was time consuming. The project participants collectively reported on family of origin issues stemming from childhood as obstacles in regards to education. The opportunities that allow positive social interaction with peers and teachers, for most, did not exist. All felt the racial undertones and the unwelcoming atmosphere in the classroom. " I just stayed in a chair outside the classroom" (First Nations female). Some of the participants requested more counselling in order to heal from the various emotional struggles they routinely faced growing up. The effects of colonization, and the agenda for assimilation contributed to family break- down in the Aboriginal communities. As noted by the project participants, school was not a priority when issues of addiction, abuse, poverty, and health became the challenge. Goleman (1995) points out that imprints of horror can last a life time.

Traumatic memories in childhood, such as being chronically ignored, deprived of attention or tenderness by one's parents, abandonment or loss, or social rejection leaves their imprint on emotional brain creating distortions, tears, rage and intimate relationship problems later in life (p. 212).

Waldram (1997) reiterates the significant role childhood trauma has had on incarcerated Aboriginal inmates. He further states that self-identity can be compromised as a result of long-term abuse. Project participants narrated many experiences of physical, sexual, mental, and spiritual abuse. One of the project participants shared stories of trauma, shame and anger. For this inmate, his cultural identity was lost in the institution shuffle, of residential school to foster-care and finally moving to the prison system. The inmate stated:

I was always angry, angry at my grandparents, at the world. I was a terror; I didn't know how to handle my anger, I just wanted to get high so I wouldn't feel that way. At school all I wanted to do was to fight, you know, because you know what they think about you (First Nations male).

The possibility of allowing emotion to surface without explosion can be developed in an Aboriginal Educational Framework by incorporating curriculum that focuses on emotional literacy recognition, and processing. The careful attention given to this process requires the understanding of the impact of colonization for the Aboriginal Peoples and the sensitivity surrounding the years of hurt and pain that are camouflaged in anger, depression, and addiction. "I just hated school, I couldn't do it, it was easier to skip" (Métis female). The necessity of allowing emotion into the Aboriginal Educational Framework could have monumental rewards. Understanding and being able to control emotions benefits the individual in being able to understand what he or she is feeling, and discussing techniques that assist in identifying positive sentiment can trigger healing. Part of the learning is to recognize and name various emotions and how it relates to them; then to explore healthier ways of expressing and processing negative emotions without hurting themselves or anyone else.

The suppression of emotion had an intense negative impact on the research participants. Some of them were able to correlate lack of emotion and personal experience as being connected with years of trauma and abuse leaving individuals numb and nursing addictions as a weapon for pain. In his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman (1995) suggests that our deepest feelings, our passions, and our longings are essential guides in facing predicaments and tasks. Goleman (1995) believes our emotions are crucial in our survival as human beings. He states:

But while our emotions have been guides in the evolutionary long run, the new realities civilization presents have arisen with such rapidity that the slow march of evolution cannot keep up. Indeed, the first laws and proclamations of ethics- the code of Hammurabi, the Ten Commandments of the Hebrew, the Edicts of Emperor Ashoka- can be read as attempts to harness, subdue, and domesticate emotional life, (p. 5).

Duran (2006) holds the view that trauma is passed from generation to generation. When trauma is not dealt with in previous generations, it has to be dealt with in subsequent generations. Duran believes that unresolved trauma becomes more severe each time it is passed on to the next generation. The inclusion of Aboriginal instructors, Elders and Aboriginal focused curriculum can address negative emotional barriers and have a transformative role in raising Aboriginal inmates consciousness and new forms of knowledge and learning.

### **Value and Characteristics of Emotional Literacy and Healing**

Emotional healing is an ongoing lifelong endeavour. As already stated, emotion has a strong correlation to learning. The participants relayed stories of survival as youngsters, trying to manoeuvre in the harsh realities of their circumstances.

How do you learn stuff when you are always afraid? You walk in life in fear. You put your head down so you won't get noticed. I think I was empty, I don't remember anything that I learned (First Nations female).

The first step to learning is to begin the healing journey, which can be introduced and inserted in the classroom. " It's great to go to school, but things happen and most of us don't have it to keep going. I mean for me I give up fast or think I can't make it" (First Nations male). The project participants all struggled in elementary and high school. Only one graduated from the work experience class. Brown's (2007) research shows the importance of introducing emotion into the school curriculum. He also draws attention to the importance of emotion:

1. Allowing emotions and values into the classroom is essential to holistic learning as well as the decolonization process, and therefore, is necessary to create a healthy classroom environment.
2. Recent developments in affective neuroscience upholds the Aboriginal world view that thinking and feeling are not only connected, but that emotion plays the major role in the functioning of mind and memory.
3. Emerging European philosophy that affect is more essential to the process of learning than has been previously thought is reviewed. (p. 32)

The above concepts are central in the development of the AEF. The limited mainstream educational experience of the participants opens the door for creativity and alternatives. Goleman (1995) further supports the importance of emotions by introducing the report from the National Centre for Clinical Infant Programs that identifies a correlation between school success and emotional and social measures. The report lists seven attributes associated with student success: confidence, curiosity, intentionality, self-control, relatedness, capacity to communicate, cooperativeness. These attributes are taught in school and homes but for the Aboriginal inmate, the impact of colonization made this challenging. The AEF is able to also adopt that literature to examine creative ways of introducing those attributes.

Introducing ways of acknowledging and addressing various emotions is vital for growth and learning in the school curriculum. Emotional literacy should be a component of the AEF in the prison system for the personal growth of Aboriginal inmates and a key to

emotional healing. The aforementioned scholars focus on emotional development from the infancy stage to classroom learning. All associate school success to emotional competency. The effect of colonization left families and communities disjointed, which was confirmed by the project participant's stories surrounding factors associated with emotional development. The seven attributes mentioned above require trust and confidence of the school system to foster emotional competency. For the Aboriginal inmates, the school system was an arena for failure and it did not address emotional competency. The project participants verbalized stories of abuse, injustice, and loss of childhood.

I got into drugs and alcohol, I barely ate. I don't remember nothing 'bout school. In residential school there was a lot of sexual and physical abuse. I think they drove me to drugs and alcohol and sniffing glue, I don't remember my elementary years (First Nations male).

They also shared stories of failure in the mainstream educational system: "I stayed invisible and they liked it that way, the teachers," disclosed a First Nations female. The importance of developing a curriculum that is designed to start in the formative years triggers other attributes associated with emotional and social measures. The incorporation of activities that are designed to enhance confidence, elicit curiosity, feel important, show self control, engage with others, increase communication, and cooperate is necessary for the personal growth of individuals and may be a key to activate learning for the Aboriginal inmate. Mainstream education for the Aboriginal inmate has compromised his or her emotional development through discriminating practices of assimilation, such as the disregard for Aboriginal culture. The AEF can adopt and adapt the above ideas about emotional competency in order to meet the emotional needs of the Aboriginal adult inmate

Currently, the academic education system in prisons is based on the correspondence model of learning methods. The goal of these classes is to prepare the inmate to take the official GED<sup>7</sup> tests. There is one instructor to support 12 to 15 students who are all at different grade levels and courses. The instructors are in attendance to help individuals when

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<sup>7</sup> The official high school diploma equivalent, general educational diploma (G.E.D.)

and if they are having difficulties. Using Brown's (2007) research on emotional competency requires a more of an experiential and discussion oriented model of learning. The implementation of AEF would incorporate group work, with the instructors taking on the facilitating role. This framework would entail a major change in the existing Adult Basic Education program by creating an Aboriginal specific classroom focused on Aboriginal knowledge and culture. The project participants promoted the idea of an Aboriginal specific classroom as an ideal learning environment. "You don't have to be ashamed or afraid because you all are natives, you are not going to look stupid" (First Nations male). The incorporation of Elders and cultural practices such as smudging, drumming, and teaching in a circle are ideas that the project participants felt could enhance a learning environment. Activities such as making drums, storytelling, and group activities are valuable teaching methods that can disrupt the existing learning methods that project participants state are not working. These examples of Aboriginal learning methods are significant in the development of the seven attributes associated with school success mentioned above. In the next section, I will demonstrate how the AEF emotional competent curriculum fits into Brown's six basic principles and these are: the ability to identify emotions, the ability to communicate emotions, the creation of positive values, understanding emotional feedback, emotional skill development and emotional healing.

### **Principle One: The Ability to Identify Emotions**

Individuals need to be able to identify their emotional state. They need to be able to be aware of how an emotion is connected with a particular experience and be able to correlate it with learning. This can be achieved through teaching different emotions and through storytelling. According to Brown, if the students are unable to identify their emotions, then they are emotionally unaware and they may mask their true feelings. Masking feelings usually leads to frustration, anger or violence. This result is very apparent in the prison population. The project participants relayed stories of frustration at not being able to understand assignments and responding by disrupting the classroom or showing apathy: "After awhile, you just feel stupid because you don't understand, so I just sat there" (First Nations female). As a counsellor for former Aboriginal inmates, I have noticed the

difficulties that these individuals have discussing their feelings; they seem comfortable with expressing how angry they are by using expletive vocabulary. Many are not aware of the different emotions or are not able to name some of the emotions they feel. When developing a curriculum for learning, a module for identifying and learning about emotions should be interjected in the content curriculum. Many Aboriginal inmates have a history of emotional masking. The majority have learned to mask their emotion for protection from mainstream society. " You are Indian so you don't matter"(First Nations female). The myths perpetuated by mainstream society require a non-reactive persona to hide vulnerability. For some this was learned from years of hurt, pain and disappointment. Masking emotion in the Federal prison system is a survival skill that is essential for continued existence. The incorporation of principle one as part of curriculum allows for the inmates to be able to study this subject in a safe environment without jeopardizing personal safety.

### **Principle Two: The Ability to Communicate Emotions**

Students not only have to identify what they feel but be able to find the vocabulary to describe what they feel.

I just wouldn't go in the school cause, I didn't understand. I would get kicked out of the classroom for goofing around and not listening and I think it had a lot to do with not understanding what I was told to do (First Nations female).

In Brown's (2007) work, he emphasizes information by Goleman (1995) and Fiumara (2000) stating that colonization of emotion has resulted in emotional immaturity and illiteracy. "Affective incompetence is a destructive social force that can sabotage even the most enlightened of cultural enterprises" (p. 85). Goleman (1995) discusses the value of emotional literacy programs in schools. He found it to be a great value for these programs in emotional and social competence, which also influenced the ability to learn. He gives credit to five components of the emotional literacy programs for this success (p. 283-284).

1. Emotional Self Awareness
  - Improvement in recognizing and naming own emotions
  - Better able to understand the causes of feelings
  - Recognizing the difference between feelings and actions
2. Managing Emotions
  - Better frustration tolerance and anger management
  - Fewer verbal put-downs, fights and classroom disruptions
  - Better able to express anger appropriately, without fighting
  - Fewer suspensions and expulsions
  - More positive feelings about self, school and family
  - Better at handling stress
  - Less loneliness and social anxiety
3. Harnessing Emotions Productively
  - More responsible
  - Better able to focus on the task at hand and pay attention
  - Less impulsive; more self-control
  - Improved scores on achievement tests
4. Empathy: Reading Emotions
  - Better able to take another person's perspective
  - Improved empathy and sensitivity to other's feelings
  - Better at listening to others
5. Handling Relationship
  - Increased ability to analyze and understand relationships
  - Better at resolving conflicts and negotiating disagreements
  - Better at solving problems in relationships
  - More assertive and skilled at communicating
  - More popular and outgoing; friendly and involved with peers
  - More sought out by peers
  - More concerned and considerate
  - More pro-social and harmonious in groups

- More sharing, cooperation and helpfulness
- More democratic.

The goal to achieve emotional awareness, manage emotions, harness it, show empathy and have healthy relationships will be critical in the development of the AEF.

The emotional literacy program seems to have merit based on elementary and high school literature. The testimonies of the project participants' educational history confirms that emotional literacy has been eliminated from their lives and the process of communicating how one feels is exhibited in out of control behaviours.

They are so in their shell and you know they don't know how to get out of it. They don't know how to you say, look, I'm seriously hurting; I've got a lot of hurt and pain and, you know, grief, and you know, the anger and the rage (First Nations male).

The lack of confidence and the inability to discuss feelings challenged some project participants. The Aboriginal Educational Framework would encompass the emotional literacy components noted above, alongside the medicine wheel<sup>8</sup> as different ways of communicating various emotions. The visibility of an Elder inside the classroom would signify safety and comfort for teaching.

### **Principle Three: The Creation of Positive Values**

Many of the participants conveyed that the consistent message they received in school portrayed Aboriginal Peoples as second class citizens. The implication is that the mainstream ideology is far more superior than their own.

I was too small to run away from school. The school we were at, it was like all the Natives in the back and the white people up front, and it was like that all the way

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<sup>8</sup> Medicine wheel can work on the physical, mental, spiritual, emotional model for healing

through until I went to grade eight class. In grade eight I was with retarded kids, they were brothers and they were in with us too (First Nations male).

Aboriginal societies teach values, as a method of facilitating the affective development of the child rather than teaching directly about emotions (Cajete, 1997; Deloria, 1995; Stubben, 2001). “Values are taught as a method of structuring emotions in a positive direction- both individually as emotional competency and socially as moral competence,” maintains Brown (2007, p. 87). The opportunities for the Aboriginal inmates to learn Aboriginal values were compromised by the agenda for assimilation. Again, this can be implemented in the AEF by involving the Elders in the classroom and allowing them to give personal stories, cultural ceremonies, and teachings.

#### **Principle Four: Understanding Emotional Feedback**

According to Brown (2007), there are two processes when understanding emotional feedback: evaluative and regulative. Evaluative processes allow students to assess patterns of energy in response to environmental data. Regulative processes resolve affective dissonance and provide constructive methods to regulate and negotiate experience while releasing the appropriate level of energy to move toward the actualization of potential (p. 89-90). Evaluating and regulating emotions are difficult processes for the Aboriginal inmates in the prison system. Many of them are there because they lack the skills in the evaluative process to reflect, interpret, appraise, and respond to emotion. In the regulative process, the skill of facilitation, inhibition, coping, and managing emotion to resolve a situation is very limited and, for many, a constant struggle. In developing a curriculum, it is important to go through emotional feedback evaluation on a regular basis. For example, ask students how they feel about a subject, and ask solicit their input for any changes. This can be done orally or via a paper evaluation (numbered feedback, on a scale of 1 to 10) about how they feel at each point until they become familiar and comfortable with the feedback procedure.

## **Principle Five: Emotional Skill Development**

The major focus of this principle is to be able to change a negative emotional state to a positive one. It is the act of being able to manage emotional states. Correctional Service of Canada (CSC, 2001) has made attempts at providing programs, such as conflict resolution, anger management, communication skills, drug and alcohol treatment programs, but has failed to show success with the Aboriginal incarcerated population. These programs do not access Elders or use cultural ceremonies to accommodate and better service the Aboriginal inmates.

At times I just want to rip it up, and all the stuff about being dumb and stupid just keeps at me. Like you want to put your hand up, but feel stupid if you do, it's easier to, like make a big scene and get kicked out. (First Nations female).

The ability to cope and process negative emotions must be strongly linked to the classroom. The AEF would incorporate emotional skill development as part of English, history, and math for understanding and learning. The emotions these courses would illicit could become learning moments of emotional management. The use of sweat lodges, ceremonies, and Elders in the classroom would provide the opportunity needed to process emotional and academic classroom content.

## **Principle Six: Emotional Healing**

Emotional healing in the prison system can be facilitated through mentorship from Elders, which some of the project participants recommended. Elders in the classroom can provide the emotional healing that is needed in the learning process. They provide comfort levels and cultural knowledge to the healing process. The belief is that emotions contribute tremendously to the health of individuals and their ability to learn. Duran (2006) draws attention to healing the "soul wound" of Aboriginal Peoples. He believes in community involvement and the implementation of cultural ceremonies in healing the soul wound of the Aboriginal peoples. A young female relates her experience in a healing lodge.

They had this one Elder brought in from Saskatchewan to run the Spirit of Your Warrior plus we had our own Aboriginal Elder in the institution that supported us through the program. It changed my life; she was phenomenal, you couldn't hide anything from this Elder, so when it got to the point where she seen I wasn't pushing any farther, she pushed a little harder, got through all the trauma and we did a sweat to get rid of all the stuff that we brought up and healing circles and talking circles. She was great (Metis Female).

The AEF would be best suited inside healing lodges for comfort and safety specifically when dealing with highly charged emotional issues.

The Healing Lodge in Saskatchewan is all Aboriginal, so everything we did everyday was surrounded by all the Native ways. All the workers there were referred to as our brothers and sisters and the Elders were grandparents. Every morning we did a sharing circle before the whole day began; we smudged. It was mandatory that we had to be in the sweat lodge by 8:15. I felt so much better being there than in the white setting. It was so comfortable and there was so many different programs that you could go through...we were out in the wilderness and it was so nice....The only thing is that you have to be deemed minimum security to go in there. There is no fence or guards, everyone just wants to be there because it's healing (First Nations Female).

The six principles of emotional competency can be developed and implemented in the prison educational system and healing lodges to accommodate the needs of the Aboriginal inmates. The shift to an emotionally relevant curriculum has many benefits. The project participants shared many stories related to frustration inside the prison. For instance, reading, writing and understanding the paperwork that one needs to fill out in order to participate in programs or just to contact family would be made easier if the inmate is able to communicate the appropriate expression without it turning into anger or apathy; he or she is able to adjust his or her emotion in order to accomplish the task. The importance of small success in the prison can trigger confidence and self-esteem. As well, having a cultural foundation gives the Aboriginal inmate a sense of a collective support: "having an Elder around makes it easier, you know, feels like there is someone with you" (First Nations male). The AEF promotes the six principles as an impetus to healing. The knowledge and experience of the

six principles have a direct connection to Brown's concept of strengthening of identity and the development of the key to emotional healing.

### **Strengthening Learning Identity and The Key to Emotional Healing**

The Aboriginal educational framework's concentration on emotions as a component to assist in liberation, is one that is essential in prison education. The momentum for learning is enhanced, when the hurt and pain of historical experiences are processed and understood.

There's a lot of times when being young when you go into prison, you're kind of, you're lost kind of, you don't, because of all the stuff that's happened. Like, the things that's happened in my life, I was, I was told, being a Native person was, I was being, I was dirty, I was a dirty Indian, I was a savage and that being an Indian was like being a devil or, you know, like Satan. I shouldn't be that kind of a person. I should become a productive member of society and become like the way white people live out there. So I think if there was programs in place there for Native people I think what would benefit them is if they were educated more on their Native culture and their Native beliefs. And to have maybe a classroom setting based on Native culture and things like that so that a person would be able to learn in their own way on their own educational skills or how far they can go education wise (First Nations male).

Brown's (2007) principles promotes learning, emotional development, and healing in Aboriginal communities and educational settings. In addition to building emotional competency in the curriculum, there is a need to strengthen one's learning identity. Learning identity according to Brown (2007) has six elements that are associated with the medicine wheel.

1. **Physical awareness:** Curriculum activities that have the right amount of challenge, and are creative and measurable, will strengthen learning identity, including any type of physical activity that includes measurements, such as numbers of miles or number of push ups. Any measurable change in physical well-being will strengthen learning identity (p. 132). The Federal prisons have

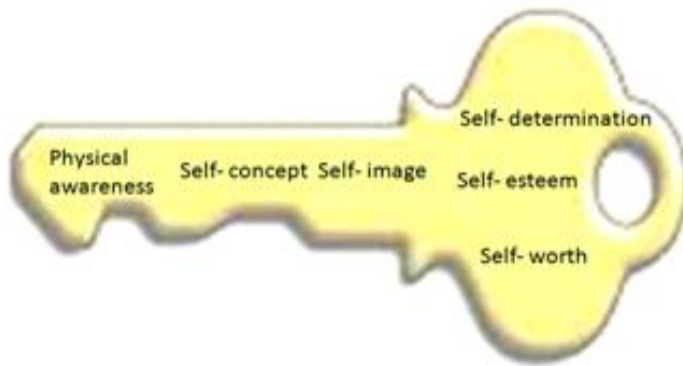
areas dedicated to physical activity, such as gated compound for walking, gymnasiums for working out and sports. This can be activated as part of physical education as part of curriculum.

2. **Self-concept:** Memory techniques have been very successful in strengthening self-concept. The process of memory techniques allows students to learn increasingly long lists of objects and concepts. When students recognize that they can memorize a long list of items through memory techniques, then their self-concept begins to strengthen (p. 134). Learning to drum and sing is a tool that can give practice to memory.
3. **Self-image:** Personal meaning is grounded in values and culture; the greater the clarity of the students' cultural connection and self-image the greater their ability to learn (p. 136). Incorporating cultural teachings in the classroom, will support this element, as well trigger the journey for identity.
4. **Self-esteem:** Affirmation of students' knowledge, identity, culture, and values can increase self-acceptance and may reduce judgmental feelings toward others (p. 10). This element is crucial due to the difficulty that many Aboriginal inmates have accepting positives in their lives. The importance of nurturing, and positively acknowledging contributions by the inmates, must become a priority and intertwined throughout the curriculum. A few of the participants discussed the lack of positive acknowledgement from the adults in their life. Some had difficulties accepting compliments. "She told me my story was powerful, I don't get that" (First Nations female). Others just hungered for positive feedback. "I just wanted someone to say good job, like a pat on the back, it means so much more" (First Nations male).
5. **Self-determination:** Self-determination is strengthened in the will and by providing experiences in the curriculum that strengthen the will in accordance with these principles (p. 143). The importance of providing ongoing support, and constant encouragement to the Aboriginal inmate is vital. The lack of follow through because of historical barriers is very common. A constant reminder and creative ways of implementing learning should be available to maintain motivation.

6. **Self-worth:** Self-worth can be said to be the sum total of the five aforementioned building blocks of learning identity, physical awareness, self-image, self-esteem, and self-determination (p. 143). This element is also ongoing, and requires support from inside the prison as well as the community. The investment into these individuals, must demonstrate long term consistent commitment by CSC staff, and the individuals community.

These elements form the basis for emotional health. The AEF will adopt Brown's (2007) elements to strengthening self-identity for the Aboriginal inmate (Figure 7). Strengthening of self-identity would become vital in the AEF and included in the teaching approach. The importance of nurturing and positively acknowledging contributions by the inmates would become a priority and intertwined throughout the curriculum

**Figure 7: Key to Emotional Healing**



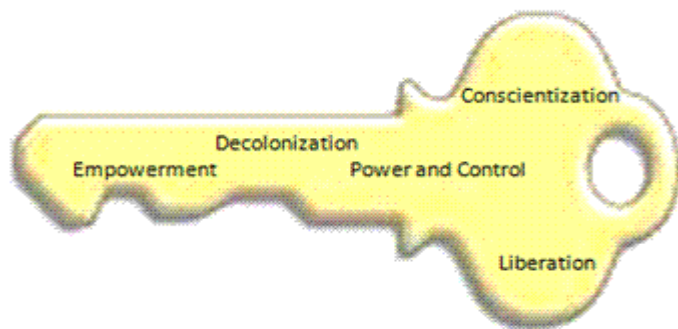
Brown's (2005) six principles identifies emotional healing through teaching concrete skills in order to strengthen the six elements associated with the learning identity. The benefits of an emotionally competent program has the ability to transmit self back into the individual. To let go years of oppression and replace that with cultural identity is powerful. The hope is that, through this curriculum, healing will transpire and change will be triggered

in the Aboriginal inmate. The AEF is reliant on emotional healing as one of the key factors to change and transformation.

### **Emancipatory Approaches to Curriculum and Pedagogy**

The AEF can adopt and adapt the above ideas about emotional competency in order to meet the emotional needs of the Aboriginal adult inmate. The Aboriginal Educational Framework's theoretical perspective is related to liberation through education (Figure 8). Education has the ability to recuperate losses due to colonization (Chapter 3) but must make room for an alternative approach.

**Figure 8: The Key to Liberation**



Another key issue for the project participants involved the priority they gave to prison education. Currently, it is considered a non-mandatory program by CSC; project participants commented on the value of making education essential. The project participants discussed the importance of being aware of the impact of colonization and appreciation of Aboriginal perspective and knowledge for not only themselves, but also for the staff and contractors of CSC. The notion of “knowledge is power,” as stated by Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626), can generate the environment for strategic visioning and an understanding from both CSC and the communities. Collaboration and sharing information is essential for comprehension on both sides. Freire (1997) maintains, in his theories of antidiological and dialogical action, the importance of transparency when communicating with the oppressed,

“the revolutionary process is eminently educational in character. Thus the road to revolution involves openness to the people, not imperviousness to them; it involves communion with the people, not mistrust” (p. 138). He posits the idea of recognizing that antidialogical action is part of the dominant society’s goal of conquest and oppression. Withholding information gives power to the dominant. Transparency is fundamental for growth of individuals and communities. Some of the project participants seem uninformed and unaware of the role of colonization and personal circumstances. Some internalized the shame and blame, which was confirmed through many of the CSC programs. The constant reminder of the individual immoral act was designed to further increase their alienation and passivity and keep inmates oppressed. The participants voiced the CSC knowledge of their crime cycle and their criminal behaviour verbatim. Steven Biko (1978) quotes, “The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed,” in regards to his/her people. This power can be witnessed in the narrative of the project participants. “They are there to help you think differently, I don’t want to be another drunk on the reserve” (First Nations male). The indoctrination of mainstream ideology becomes the key factor for release. Normalizing myths created by the oppressor, without the prospect of another reality, widens the gap to retrieve self-identity.

The internalization of the myths perpetuated by the dominant group has been entrenched deeply into the inmates’ psyche. They are in prison as a repercussion of their “bad behaviour”. Michel Foucault (1975) details the techniques of indoctrination of the prisoners to accentuate their lot in life. This can be accomplished by the use of observation, normalizing judgement, and examination (Foucault 1975). Control over people can be achieved by observing them. He claimed by keeping knowledge and power from the prisoners, acceptance of their situation becomes the norm. Examination allows individuals to be notified of their weakness and subsequently categorized into slots, in essence to assimilate societal norms and values. Foucault (1975) believed that knowledge is an instrument of power. Few of the participants praised CSC for their efforts in rehabilitation. They concluded that it was easier to passively accept the dogma of the justice system. If they followed the rules and regulations, their tour of punishment would go smoother. To reiterate, Gramsci’s (1985) transformation needs to occur in three different sites of struggle which is,

the mind, the intellect, and the state in order for social mobility to occur. The findings from this research confirm the importance of an education as a beginning, in order to break free from the state and in turn influence the small victory of movement in the structure of Federal prison educational program. Most of the participants have negative self-image, limited mainstream education, and a lack of cultural identity. All agreed that acquiring education would be an impetus to disrupting their pattern of incarceration. The power associated with cultural identity and cultural knowledge for some would unlock some of the emotional barriers that linger from colonization. For some, the cultural aspect provided safety and belonging. This project relied on the painful stories of the participants, the telling of which, for some, was very difficult. The act of being a participant was in itself empowering and cathartic.

Freire's (1997) notion of cultural invasion speaks to the isolation and lack of cultural identity identified by the project participants.

For cultural invasion to succeed, it is essential that those invaded become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority. Since everything has its opposite, if those who are invaded consider themselves inferior, they must necessarily recognize the superiority of the invaders. The values of the latter thereby become the pattern for the former. The more invasion is accentuated and those invaded are alienated from the spirit of their own culture and from themselves, the more the latter want to be like the invaders: to walk like them, dress like them, talk like them (p. 153).

For these project participants, the experiment of assimilation by the dominant group failed and the implementation of behaviour modification tools appears to have been futile; failure to accommodate and immerse into the dominant society was, in essence, exchanged for loss of cultural identity. The confusion around identity was a common denominator for the project participants. The gruelling effort to take on traits of the dominant society, at all levels, became ineffective for the participants and had devastating statistical impact on the Federal prison as it relates to the Aboriginal population. Most participants agreed about the necessity for education to be designed to accommodate Aboriginal culture as well deliver content that does not dictate dominant values. The ability to articulate that message becomes the beginning stage of conscientization.

Liberatory education (Freire 1997) asserts that learners must continually confront and disrupt prevailing mythologies and be cognizant of their oppression. Sharing stories and participating in the process of research hopefully generated awareness for the participants about their situation as they reflected on their life history. At some level, this, in turn, will initiate action and elicit the motivation for cultural identity, which will provide impetus to obstruct the revolving door in the prison system for the participants. The challenge in establishing liberatory education is the fear it creates for CSC. According to the participants, the existing programs are designed to inform the individual about recognizing right from wrong. There is no room for discussion and the literature applied to vocational programs relies on mainstream ideology of crime.

According to Freire (1997), the oppressors would not view liberatory education to be beneficial to them; therefore, this type of education would not be an institutional priority. Currently, the Adult Basic Education program does not come close to meeting the needs of the Aboriginal offenders: “I just go because it’s money, you sit there and don’t understand anything” (First Nations male). Others criticized the difficulty around being accepted in the classroom, “...it’s ridiculous how long you have to wait, and all of the people involved. They only have certain amount of seats, and if they are filled, you are out of luck” (First Nation female). Improving prison education does not seem to be a priority for CSC, yet CSC claims to be strategically planning for vocational educational programs that would benefit the Aboriginal inmates (discussed in Chapter Two). This pertains to the development of the Corrections Continuum Model developed in 2003 which is yet to be implemented and is predicted to be activated maybe in the next five years. Michael Jackson (2002), author of *Justice Behind the Wall*, reveals the gap between policy and practice. His personal experience of advocating for prisoners in the prisons and narratives from inmates strongly suggest the limited understanding that exists in society about prisons and incidents within the walls. Transparency of testimonies and dialoguing among all levels of the justice system is vital in order for transformation to occur. The question that needs to be posed is regarding the level of commitment and priority placed on Aboriginal offenders by CSC, not just in policy, but in practice.

Freire (1997) makes a strong recommendation for cooperation and dialogue to launch the momentum of liberation. He advocates for solidarity and unification of the oppressed. The awareness and conscientization of historical context and common experience can theoretically act as an impetus for organizing the people. All project participants agreed that modifying the existing structure of prison education was imperative and the hope that their participation in this research project demonstrates agency for change. Solidarity and unification was also demonstrated by the events following the 1983 spiritual fast (in Chapter One), which resulted in the acknowledgement of Aboriginal spirituality in the prison system. The AEF would be committed to the above theoretical approach to education as another key component for change. The project participants' strategies of change in the prison system is a stand for acknowledging Aboriginal ways and incorporating the components into the AEF is empowering and a chance to take control of their own learning.

### **Five Components for Transforming Prison Education**

The final consideration in the AEF is the emerging themes for change that was provided by the project participants in the data analysis (chapter 5). The five components encompass the emotional healing, as well, they validate an emancipatory approach to learning. The contributions from the participants spotlight factors that would enhance prison education for the Aboriginal inmates. The five identified themes are illustrated in Figure 9.

**Figure 9: The Key to Liberatory Education**



All of the above requests are in response to the lived experience of Aboriginal male and female inmates in relation to mainstream and prison education. In the interview process, the participants offered realistic de-colonizing strategies that the AEF can commit to and promote as another key to Liberatory education.

### **Aboriginal Supports for Empowerment**

The Aboriginal Educational Framework also calls for a creative teaching pedagogy and relies on methods that create trust and comfort. From participants' historic testimony, it was revealed that instructors who established a caring connection seemed to be the ones that were imprinted in the memories of the project participants as helpful. The delivery of the curriculum requires an Aboriginal cultural environment that encourages learning for the Aboriginal inmate. According to the project participants, it is essential to have Aboriginal Elders and Aboriginal instructors in the classroom. The need for support and emotional connection in the classroom was espoused by many of the participants. A few of the project participants felt that Aboriginal instructors would develop trusting learning relationships with them. Some suggested that having Elders in the classroom would ease their insecurities. The implementation of Aboriginal instructors and Elders is fundamental in the emotional healing piece. The six principles of Emotional Competency rely on establishing a comfortable atmosphere and a trusting relationship.

### **Decolonizing and Educating CSC on Aboriginal Perspectives and Issues**

The importance of acknowledging the impact of colonization from CSC staff and Aboriginal inmates is the theoretical framework that is essential in the creation of an alternative prison educational program. Awareness and appreciation for the Aboriginal ways must be assimilated into the teachings for staff and inmates. This can be accomplished through collaboration from Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal agencies.

## **Education as Mandatory**

The project participants all agreed on the importance of acquiring mainstream education and necessitate priority by placing it as a mandatory program. The AEF would insist that all Aboriginal inmates entering the federal prison system be automatically eligible for the education program if they have not completed grade 12. The past education experiences of the project participants does not foster motivation for mainstream learning. The AEF would provide the opportunity to be introduced to an alternative learning structure and mode.

## **Incorporation of Culture (Conscientization)**

The heart of the Aboriginal Educational Framework is the incorporation of culture. The project participants all made numerous suggestions on their wish list for the classroom. As already mentioned, all felt the inclusion of Aboriginal instructors and extra Aboriginal supports would enhance the motivation to learn. The visibility of Elders in the classroom was deemed vital for respect, comfort, and safety of the learning atmosphere. The teaching of Aboriginal ways would strengthen the inmates cultural identity and give impetus for change. Participants felt allowing the richness of ceremonies, songs, and stories into the classroom would help elicit positive feelings and thoughts.

Many of the participants discussed the importance of having an Aboriginal specific program. The richness of an Aboriginal specific program that draws attention to emotional development has the potential to heal and launch the process of liberation by eliminating the perpetuated racial myths and mainstream agenda of assimilation. The acknowledgment and implementation of an Aboriginal specific program as part of the AEF would validate the importance of the Aboriginal way by CSC and the Aboriginal inmates. The comfort and trust that participants felt would be initiated by this program has the ability to strengthen the learning identity. The information gathered from the project participants illustrates a quest for cultural identity and the enthusiasm for acquiring skills that will increase opportunities beyond the gated walls.

## **Transformative Curriculum for Liberation**

The project participants all advocated for a transformative curriculum. The existing prison education program has not been successful in relation to attendance and completion by the Aboriginal inmates. The AEF would encompass a transformative curriculum focused on the history and culture of the Aboriginal inmate. The focus on principles for emotional healing and elements for strengthening the learning identity as discussed earlier in this chapter can also be a catalyst to liberation.

## **Summary**

The Aboriginal Educational Framework has the capacity to transform prison education by applying the information shared from the stories of project participants involved in this research. Firstly, developing an emotional competency healing model to strengthen the learning identity is imperative. Secondly, the AEF operates on the theoretical perspective that education is the key to liberation and must consider the historical experiences of the inmates, the political atmosphere of the Federal prison and recommendations expressed by the participants of this research. Finally, the five components for improving prison education: Aboriginal support, educate CSC on Aboriginal perspectives on justice, incorporation of culture, making education mandatory and a transformative curriculum have the capability to enrich the lives of Aboriginal inmates by acting as part of a mechanism for change. Each major consideration: emotional literacy and healing, an emancipatory approach to curriculum and pedagogy and the five components for transforming prison education has the power to generate change on its own. It is only when all three considerations are addressed together that transformation occurs. The colonization framework in chapter three (Figure 2) illustrates how colonization through oppression and the agenda for assimilation is secured strongly through cultural invasion, power and control, and self-depreciation. All of these colonization strategies immobilize the Aboriginal inmate and continue the status quo of oppression. The lock is tightly fastened and requires the following three keys to loosen its hold on Aboriginal inmates: emotional healing, liberation, and liberatory education. The key to emotional healing responds to the historical trauma

caused by the impact of colonization. The strengthening of the individual's physical awareness, self-concept, self-image, self-determination, self-esteem, and self-worth is the beginning of the healing, and learning journey. The key to liberation requires a strong shift in understanding and appreciating the Aboriginal ways. The concepts focus on empowerment, decolonization, regaining power and control, and conscientization and liberation through education. These steps are crucial for breaking old patterns of behaviour. The key to liberatory education is making the prison education transform to meet the needs of the Aboriginal inmate. The suggestions of the project participants identify gaps in prison education and solutions such as Aboriginal supports, educating CSC on Aboriginal perspective on justice, incorporation of culture, making education a mandatory program and implementing a transformative curriculum. The AEF incorporates all three keys to release the secured lock and free the individuals.

The implementation of the AEF requires modification and adjustment in CSC. This would entail change in the employment practices to ensure the hiring of Aboriginal facilitators, and Elders to promote Aboriginal ways inside the walls of the prison setting. A request to the Human Resource Department to make allowances around their hiring practice to allow Aboriginal instructors in the prison classrooms, as well as, instructors who have past experience of the Federal system and are on their healing journey is a hurdle that requires conversation. Policy changes in CSC to make prison education a mandatory program is another battleground. The constant challenges are not new to the Aboriginal Peoples. This framework is not soliciting the disposal of the existing programs; however, the Aboriginal Educational Framework has the potential to be a transformative force for improving prison education for Aboriginal inmates.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

Elders will tell you, when you leave the prison system, okay, you ask your spirit to come with you, right. You do not leave that spirit behind cold steel, okay, because you'll end up going back and back. (First Nations male)

This research project focused on prison education as the venue for change. The contributions from the Aboriginal inmates recommended creative solutions that were validated by their educational history in and out of prison. The following research questions provided the focal point of this project:

- What was the nature and impact of the educational experiences of former Aboriginal male and female inmates before they went to prison?
- What are the barriers and opportunities to educational access and learning for the Aboriginal male and female inmates in British Columbia's federal prisons?
- What elements are necessary to improve Aboriginal male and female inmates' attendance and completion of education programs in British Columbia's federal prisons?

The three questions explore the historical experience of education, the politics surrounding prison education, and strategies that can improve education for the Aboriginal inmates. The voice of the project participants spoke to their experience of education in and out of prison, highlighted the difficulties of their personal situations and offered their suggestions for an ideal learning environment. The data analysis in the previous chapter shaped the solutions for improving prison education using the symbol of keys as a way to open the Colonization Framework (Figure 2), which subsequently begins the transformation process of the Aboriginal inmate. This chapter concentrates on the findings from the above questions that includes healing from past traumas through emotional literacy development (key to emotional Healing), an emancipatory approach to pedagogy and curriculum (key to

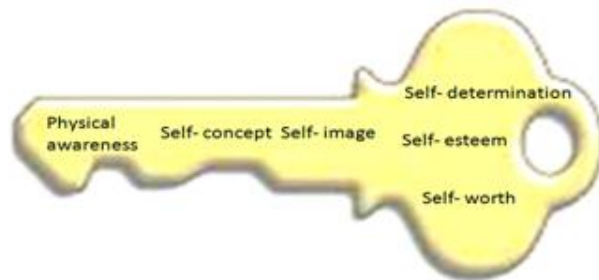
liberation) and five components that will transform prison education to meet the needs of the Aboriginal inmates in regards to education (key to liberatory Education). Together these three keys open and unlock the elements and principles within the Colonization Framework. This chapter will also discuss the strengths and limitations, future research, and the significance and contributions of this project.

### **Key Systemic Issues: The Healing of Past Traumas**

The history of the project participants in relation to mainstream education has been misunderstood and undervalued. The constant barrage of challenges associated with colonization left deep scars and resulted in incarceration. The stories of struggle in attempting mainstream education instilled failure and apathy. The project participants all shared similar negative experiences in the mainstream education system. Out of twenty participants, two completed grade five, one grade six, five grade seven, four grade eight, three grade nine, three grade ten, one grade eleven, and one graduated in the work experience program. The low levels of grade completion were associated with numerous issues, such as drugs and alcohol, residential school, poverty, sexual abuse, physical abuse, learning disabilities, mental health issues, and racial issues. All recalled stories of hurt, pain, and anger ruling their lives and they had limited to no supports. It was evident that for the former Aboriginal inmates, school was not their priority.

The development of the Aboriginal Educational Framework was in response to the above testimonies of former Aboriginal inmates. The AEF concentrates on healing by initiating an emotionally competent curriculum that teaches emotional development and strengthens the learning identity through the Key to Emotional Healing (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10: The Key to Emotional Healing**



The above Key to Emotional Healing focuses on strengthening learning identity by emphasizing activities about physical awareness, self-concept, self-determination, self-esteem, and self-worth. The AEF spotlights healing as an integral part of learning.

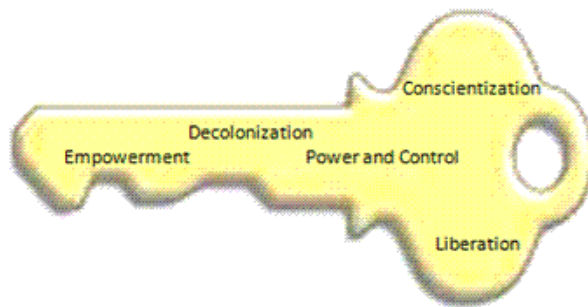
### **Key Prison Issues: An Emancipatory Approach to Pedagogy and Curriculum**

The struggles continued for the project participants inside the walls of the prison in the form of frustrations around the power and control of the institution and the failure to provide services to assist in enhancing their life. The continued lack of understanding of the Aboriginal inmate and the marginalized attempts at Aboriginal programs can be seen in the overwhelming statistics of the federal prison system in relation to Aboriginal inmates. The participants felt that the lack of priority given to academic education programs needed to change. All agreed that making education mandatory and changing CSC's approach to education would be a step in a positive direction.

Another component of the AEF is the emancipatory approach to curriculum and pedagogy shown as a Key to Liberation (Figure 11). The removal of systemic barriers results in alternative ways of delivering education, which in turn can be used as a tool for liberation. The AEF is committed to designing learning activities and literature in collaboration with the Aboriginal inmates, Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal agencies. The outcomes AEF focus on empowerment, decolonizing prison education, regaining power and control, attaining conscientization and achieving liberation for the Aboriginal inmate. A

shift to Aboriginal perspectives and the removal of approaches that result in second-class citizenry create space for opportunity and further learning for the Aboriginal inmate.

**Figure 11: The Key to Liberation**



### **Key Solutions: Transforming Prison Education**

Several themes for improving prison education emerged from the voices of the 20 former Aboriginal inmates. The historical and systemic barriers around education generated the foundation of the strategies, which aimed to lessen these barriers. To reiterate, the main areas of modification highlighted by the project participants refer to improving the prison education system through the Key to Liberatory Education (Figure 12) in regards to increasing access to educational programs by making education mandatory, providing Aboriginal learning support, and including culture in the curriculum. Furthermore, the participants felt it was important to learn about the history of Aboriginal Peoples, to educate CSC staff on Aboriginal perspectives of justice, and to develop a transforming curriculum.

**Figure 12: The Key to Liberatory Education**



From the information supplied by the participants, an understanding and appreciation for Aboriginal culture should be a priority. The current practice in CSC, most felt, is only an attempt at a marginalized effort to address the overwhelming incarceration rates and issues experienced by federal Aboriginal inmates. An awareness and comprehension of the Aboriginal ways would diminish barriers for implementing the participants' recommendations and give opportunity for the Aboriginal Educational Framework to enter the prison classroom.

## **Supports**

Policy changes in attaining more support for Aboriginal inmates should be implemented. It was apparent from the words of the project participants that having more one-to-one time with a teacher or tutor would be a motivator for education. The extra help and time echoed by the participants would benefit and assist in learning and understanding curriculum. Many of the participants had learning disabilities and mental health issues that hindered their learning. Again, extra learning supports would be advantageous in providing that encouragement to maintain the learner's motivation.

Some of the project participants requested Aboriginal instructors. Others stated that they would like to see Aboriginal instructors that have experienced prison life. From the analysis, it was apparent that CSC does need Aboriginal employee representation at all levels. The project participants acknowledged the lack of Aboriginal CSC employees in the system. A

change in the hiring policy to include community and Elders in the hiring practice may be the solution, as opposed to mainstream hiring practices that are marketed on the government websites and that do not include Aboriginal representation. According to Chris Hans, an Aboriginal parole officer (discussion from December 21, 2011), Elders are usually identified by the First Nations communities in surrounding areas, however potential Aboriginal employees must adhere to CSC policies around hiring. Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) is a First Nation governed public post-secondary institution. NVIT's focus is on educational programs and services that address Aboriginal perspectives. The importance of having Elders available for staff and students gives the campus uniqueness and distinctiveness. The AEF could utilize resources from this institution for implementation and content development

The statement, “We need heroes,” resonated with many participants. The prospect of instructors that identify and are knowledgeable of prison life gives an individual hope of freedom. The project participants requested that educational supports come from former Aboriginal inmates who have attained freedom from prison and who are on their healing journey. In response, CSC Human Resources need to make changes to the requirement of criminal record checks. Exceptions and policies need to be developed in order to appease this finding and request.

### **Mandatory Education**

The Adult Basic Education program was difficult to access for many of the project participants, which caused them great frustration and resulted in apathy and disinterest. The participants acknowledged the importance of literacy in and out of prison and proposed that education become a mandatory program for inmates who do not have grade 12. This would lessen the dissatisfaction about educational access experienced by the project participants. A plea for policy changes was issued.

## **Incorporating Culture**

Many of the project participants stated that they would like to see culture incorporated into prison education. The use of ceremonies, drumming, and stories should be part of the curriculum. They asked for Aboriginal content to enhance their knowledge of the historical impact of colonization. Most wanted the presence of an Elder in the classroom. The memory of participant 13 enters again, promoting healing lodges. She tells the story of the federal prison system as a foreign landscape filled with failure, until her transfer to the healing lodge where she was reacquainted with her cultural identity. She equated her healing journey to the familiarity of the Aboriginal staff and feeling of comfort. Yvonne Johnson (1998) tells a heroic life story that reinforces the need for healing lodges and cultural teachings as a salutary experience for all involved in the justice system. The domino effect of colonization not only determined the future of the Aboriginal Peoples, but the dominant ideology can be seen in the practice of CSC as it relates to Aboriginal inmates. Establishing more healing lodges can send the message of understanding by the Correctional Service of Canada. The AEF promotes healing lodges as an ideal place for implementing education specific to Aboriginal inmates.

## **Transforming Curriculum**

Project participants emphasized the need to make substantial changes to the curriculum of the Adult Basic Education program that they experienced. They enquired about strategies that would facilitate learning. Brown's (2007) scholarship on emotional competency and his Emotional Competency Curriculum is a core part of the transformational curriculum that was presented in Chapter Six. The theory supporting this approach can be adapted to adults enrolled in a prison educational program. The key components of the AEF focus on emotional development through learning how to identify and communicate emotions, understanding emotional feedback, creating positive values, being able to turn negative emotion into positive, and thus acquiring emotional healing. This process will strengthen the learning identity and motivate the inmates to unlock their mind and realize their potential. The AEF has its underpinnings based on emancipatory pedagogies and the

recommendations from the project participants. This framework has the ability to transform prison education for Aboriginal inmates.

### **Educating CSC on Aboriginal Perspectives**

Ross (1996), in his comparison of western and Aboriginal traditional perception of solutions in law, describes third party western intervention being provided by professionals who have learned about the law and criminal behaviour, whereas in the Aboriginal traditional way, the role of the third party is to understand the relationship between offender and victim, community, and Creator in order to regulate the process, teach values, and role model (Chapter Two). The difference between the two approaches is glaringly oppositional. A movement toward understanding an Aboriginal traditional way in response to crime should become a CSC priority. The lack of respect for Aboriginal culture and ways was noted by many of the project participants. Many of the participants commented on the limited Aboriginal content in the prison setting. The voices of the project participants highlight the struggles of the Aboriginal inmates in their attempt to acculturate to systemic rules in the prisons. Attempts at making the federal prison setting “Aboriginal friendly,” from the perspectives of the project participants have failed. The call for educating the prison system on Aboriginal history according to the different Aboriginal nations is essential in the Correctional Service of Canada. Project participants discussed this topic as part of the Adult Basic Education curriculum. They shared their desire for learning more about Aboriginal ways as taught by community members and Elders. Duran (2006) and Ross (1996) both emphasize the need to understand Aboriginal Peoples’ historical context in order to make a paradigm shift when implementing and strategizing programs for Aboriginal Peoples. This will be an ongoing dilemma for CSC. Acceptance of traditional Aboriginal ways in many respects is as difficult as accepting western thoughts for the Aboriginal People

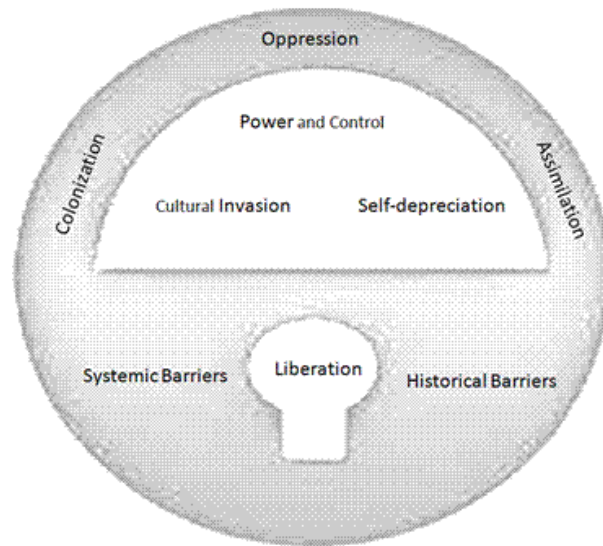
### **Discussion**

As I reflect on my interaction with the project participants, I am humbled at the resiliency and strength of their stories, especially the daily challenges they face attempting to

transition back into mainstream society. Freedom from the prisons doesn't necessarily equal freedom from one's personal difficulties, and yet, some of the participants in this project do realize the true agenda of rehabilitation and the importance of education as a tool for liberation. Asking your spirit to walk out with you assumes a connection with who you are. An emancipatory task for some Aboriginal Peoples is a colossal challenge, when their efforts have been directed to basic survival skills that they may not have acquired, particularly in education. Walking out with your spirit has underpinnings of peace and hope. The hypocrisy of finding peace and hope in the federal prison system seems incongruent to the lives of Aboriginal federal inmates, even though the opportunity for reflection and personal growth presents itself in the form of time; time from mainstream life to connect with one's spirit. The occasion to push the Aboriginal agenda of change has been activated by the increasing incarceration rates of Aboriginal inmates, and to take full advantage of this dilemma is the result of this research project, which suggests an alternative way of delivering education, as recommended by former Aboriginal inmates.

The three keys developed from the data analysis, the key to emotional healing, and the key to liberation, and the key to Liberatory education, illustrate the solution to unlocking the colonization framework (Figure 13). The keyhole provides the space for entry into locked opportunities. The key to emotional healing has the potential to unfasten the historical barriers and the key to Liberatory education responds directly to systemic barriers. When the two are unlocked, the emergence of the key to liberation is activated. The AEF incorporates all three keys as tools to build a relationship with the individual's spirit and provide agency to leave the prison life.

**Figure 13: Framework of Colonization**



### **Strengths and Limitations of the Research**

This research project offers an opportunity to transform the existing prison education program to better accommodate the needs of Aboriginal inmates in the federal prison system. Its strength is based on the platform of lived experience by the 20 project participants who were recently released from federal prison. This is the first research project in British Columbia to address prison education from the perspective of former Aboriginal inmates. The impact of colonization and the emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental difficulties and abuses that they experienced are told through their stories. Their early educational experiences show these difficulties and the failure of the educational system to deal effectively with children who live with trauma. This project responds to those challenges with a development of an Aboriginal Educational Framework that encompasses an emotional competency curriculum that has potential for healing and impetus for learning, and incorporates Aboriginal culture and knowledge taught by Aboriginal instructors and Elders, which can take place in the federal prison setting.

The Emotional Competency Curriculum's strength lies in the flexibility of adapting Brown's (2007) model to adults in the prison setting. This model can also be adjusted to accommodate Aboriginal students in other learning institutions. It has the ability to address emotional gaps that were not nurtured growing up and the power to heal the historical hurt and pain.

The additions to enhance the existing Adult Basic Education program (ABE) are essentially cost effective in terms of interjecting more engagement from Elders, securing more learning supports, adding historical Aboriginal content to the curriculum, as well as sensitizing CSC staff to Aboriginal culture and establishing an Aboriginal specific education program. The cost to house a federal inmate is approximately \$250.00 per day. The cost for the ABE Program is approximately \$21.00 per person, per day (Chapter One). With the growing statistics in the federal system as it relates to Aboriginal inmates, it would only make sense to implement new strategies that the consumers of the program consider lacking.

As simple as it sounds, I am cognizant of the monumental shift this would entail in the form of policy and practice. The suggestions by the project participants are, at this time, merely a wish list. The division of power within the system, as noted by Michael Jackson (2002), is entrenched and difficult, but not impossible, to penetrate, as demonstrated by the 1983 hunger strike that resulted in allowing Elders and sweat lodges to be incorporated into prisons. The difficulty is around policies of distraction which are disguised in initiatives and strategies that fail to be developed and implemented. The limited understanding of the Aboriginal Peoples by prison staff and governmental prison policy makers still plagues the rights of Aboriginal inmates to retain their cultural teaching and access programs that endorse their uniqueness and historical impact. One of the limitations of this project is the challenge that CSC will encounter in implementing policy change and shifting attitudes in relation to Aboriginal inmates. The current research and prison programs are developed by professionals who are employed by the CSC Research Branch and are considered experts in the justice system. Collaboration with these researchers was not sought out, and therefore, their views on developing and implementing programs were not included in my study. As well, other perspectives, such as those of prison staff or federal prison policy makers, were

not included in this thesis, which could have provided a fuller contextual picture of prison education.

## **Future Research**

My research project gives impetus for future research in effective learning programs for Aboriginal inmates. The Aboriginal inmates as well as CSC staff should comprise the main source of information about effective educational programs. An evaluation of healing lodges as an alternative for programming needs to be initiated, developed, and implemented. The Corrections Continuum Care model was initiated and developed in 2003 to address program delivery for Aboriginal inmates, but it is yet to be implemented. Without advocacy and pressure to recognize the importance of unique transforming programs, it will continue to remain in the development stage. The Aboriginal Educational Framework has the ability to find space in the Corrections Continuum Model as it relates to education. It also is able to function in the advocacy role because of the richness of the stories from the project participants that inform CSC the necessary changes needed to battle the overwhelming statistics. The AEF demonstrates the innovative strategies that are supplied by the project participants as credible literature for future consideration. The recognition of emotion as integral in the learning process and the construction of the AEF can trigger research that can be applied in all programming for Aboriginal inmates. The AEF requires CSC to make an appeal for future research on educating staff on Aboriginal perspectives by Aboriginal Peoples. The AEF can trigger collaboration from communities, learning institutions and Aboriginal agencies to become more involved in the federal prisons in more of a supportive role to the Aboriginal inmates.

## **Significance and Contribution**

This research project has been an incredible journey for me. I have encountered 20 individuals who will forever be imprinted in my mind and whom I am proud to call friends. The phone calls from the few who have consistently reminded me of my responsibility of

representing their voice and the gentle nudge of encouragement at making sure I have their latest address to mail them the final thesis puts a smile on my face. Their stories will remain in my memories and will guide my future interaction in regards to CSC clients.

During this project I lost my biggest fan, my father, who believed that education was the answer to freedom. It saddens me that he was not able to see the end result of this research project, but his essence is embedded throughout this thesis because I am my father's daughter. I held on to the key to emotional healing to strengthen my self-esteem, self-worth and self-determination to carry on my father's teachings and passion for transformation in the education sector and the belief that possibilities are numerous and the battle is ongoing.

The power of mainstream education in and out of prison has been reiterated in all the chapters. The contribution of the project participants speaks to the reality of their situation and generates awareness for CSC and the outside communities. The testimonies of the project participants validate the literature review, endorse change in the Adult Basic Education program, and promote the Aboriginal inmates as important contributors to programs. CSC must acknowledge the expertise of the Aboriginal former inmates and give credence to the resurgence of an Aboriginal specific education program that will aid in the deterrent process of rehabilitation.

The importance of liberating the prison system and society of stereotypical beliefs about the Aboriginal Peoples must become a priority. This can be achieved through the voices of the affected. Craig Proulx (2003) seeks alternatives to the existing legal/justice system he deems "is philosophically and procedurally alien to the Peoples" (p. 372). He promotes Aboriginal self-determination and self-government in the justice system. Proulx (2003) makes a powerful comment around progress determined by decolonizing the mind of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Peoples. The message speaks loud and clear from this research project. The time has come for accessing information from the lived Aboriginal experience. The other day, I had lunch with a young Mohawk father who had travelled from Ottawa to inquire about his little girl who was apprehended from her mother (personal communication December 9, 2011). He was frustrated with the system and their reaction to

him. He then voiced that the agency was not prepared for an Indian that could speak their language and knew his rights. The strength and confidence in his voice validated the importance of my research project. The implication of acquiring mainstream language, which caters to the Aboriginal inmates' learning realm, has the power to strengthen their voice.

The lived experiences of the project participants and their stories has validated some harsh realities of the federal prison system, as well as exposed some gaps that need transforming. Education in the prison system needs to be creative and innovative in an attempt to trigger the healing journey through enhancing cultural identity, literacy, and emotional competence. Chapter Six concentrates on an education program centered on the above as an alternative in the prison educational system for Aboriginal individuals to gain educational skills that would prepare them for mainstream society. Unless we disrupt the prescribed way of offering education and make space for another way of delivering culturally relevant education to the Aboriginal inmates, the struggles of this population will continue. For instance, making education a mandatory program and opening more seats seems to be a simple request. Incorporating cultural practice and more learning engagement from Elders in the classroom is a start for developing cultural understandings for both inmates and staff of CSC. Providing holistic learning supports to contend with personal and systemic issues could be important contributing factors for unlocking the prison gates and walking out with your spirit. In order to accommodate the solutions offered by the project participants, the priorities for educational change must start with Aboriginal perspectives. Researchers like Jackson (2002), Proulx (2003), Waldram (1997), Ross (1996), and many others need to continue to point out the obvious misuse of power and discrimination that is practised in the justice system. "It is considered a sign of success when the western world, through one of its institutions, pauses even momentarily to consider an alternative possibility" (L.T. Smith, 2005, p.103).

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