ACCOUNTABILITY AND ABORIGINAL EDUCATION: AN EXPLORATION OF EDUCATORS’ EXPERIENCES

by

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Abstract

The government mandates accountability mechanisms, such as standardized testing, to ensure educational quality; however, more research is needed to determine how such measures affect educational equality. In Canada, differential achievement outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students has stimulated a public discourse on the need for educational change. This study investigates how accountability policies mandated by the British Columbia government affect elementary educators who have worked in schools with high Aboriginal students populations. Through narrative inquiry, the study explored how such policies influence classroom curriculum, practices and pedagogy; moreover, it explored how mandates from controlling forces shape educators’ professional identity. Poetic transcription was employed; in which participants’ words were used to create poetic compositions reflective of their experiences. This analysis technique provides the reader with a vast and rich exposure to the study data, which is intended to raise awareness of how such policies influence teachers’ and students’ lives. Through this process, educators’ experiences with competing job demands, limited professional autonomy, narrowed curriculum, and surveillance are shared; as well as, the marginalization of Aboriginal students within the current educational system. Educators express and understand these issues by constructing two chief guiding narratives that of the attentive teacher and the objective professional. These competing narratives bring about frustrations and create resistance to such accountability mechanisms and a demand for reform.
Preface

This research was granted approval by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board. It holds an Ethics Certificate from the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board with the Certificate Number H10-03370.
Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................................................. ii
Preface .................................................................................................................................................................................. iii
Table of Contents ....................................................................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgements ...................................................................................................................................................................... v
Prologue: My Standpoint ............................................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: Introduction .......................................................................................................................................................... 2
  First Nations Education in Canada ............................................................................................................................................. 3
  Achievement Gap ............................................................................................................................................................................. 5
  Standardized Testing in British Columbia Elementary Schools ................................................................................................. 9
  Legislation and Mandates ............................................................................................................................................................... 11
  Purpose of Study ............................................................................................................................................................................. 13
  Research Questions ....................................................................................................................................................................... 14

Chapter Two: Literature Review .................................................................................................................................................... 16
  Neoliberalism ................................................................................................................................................................................. 16
  Accountability: Keeping An Eye on the Classroom ..................................................................................................................... 20
  First Nations Education: Contemporary Policies and Actions ................................................................................................. 23
  Effects of High Stakes Testing in Classrooms ........................................................................................................................... 25

Chapter Three: Methodology ......................................................................................................................................................... 30
  Epistemological Perspective .......................................................................................................................................................... 30
  Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................................................................................. 31
  Methods ......................................................................................................................................................................................... 33
  Participants .................................................................................................................................................................................... 34
  Ethics .......................................................................................................................................................................................... 34
  Data Collection and Instrumentation ........................................................................................................................................ 35
  Data Analysis ................................................................................................................................................................................ 38
  Poetic transcription ..................................................................................................................................................................... 39

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis ............................................................................................................................................. 41
  Being Aboriginal in a Euro-centric System ................................................................................................................................. 44
  Being an Educator in an Accountability System ....................................................................................................................... 47
  Dealing with Standards, Mandates, and Success ......................................................................................................................... 52

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications ................................................................................................................................ 57
  Competing Narratives About Assessment and Aboriginal Student Success ............................................................................. 57
  Narrative Tensions: Conflict in Educational Practice .................................................................................................................. 62
  Source of Narrative Conflict: Beyond the Tension ....................................................................................................................... 72
  What Contributes to Success for Aboriginal Students ............................................................................................................ 73
  Limitations: Challenges in Recruitment .................................................................................................................................. 77
  Future Research ........................................................................................................................................................................... 79
  Concluding Thoughts ................................................................................................................................................................. 80

References ..................................................................................................................................................................................... 82
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Prologue: My Standpoint

At times, I have stopped and asked myself, *Why are you pursuing educational research?* Ultimately, I come to the conclusion that my experiences as a student and an educator have brought me here. As a child, my educational experiences began in a small rural school on the South Shore of Nova Scotia. Servicing primary to grade 5, the school was small in both size and numbers. Within the first year, it became evident that schooling was not for me as I fell behind my peers and lost interest in the lessons. I struggled through much of my elementary education; however, as my schooling continued I experienced more success.

Now I find myself at the graduate level and on the other side of the proverbial looking glass, I emphasize with students who struggle within the system. I believe that a learning environment focused on individual needs and learning styles would have benefitted me; these early experiences have shaped my perception of schooling. A singular definition of success and a standardized method of achieving it oppose my ideals of best practice, my guiding narrative as an educator.

So here I am, questioning how just standardized assessments are and how they impact what happens in the classroom. Interested in the educational and social justice, I am concerned on how these devices are being used to determine Aboriginal student success. Previous cultural and educational injustices exacted on Aboriginal peoples warrant a close investigation on schooling practices. I hope to provide in the following pages a thoughtful investigation to improve the equity of multicultural education in our nation.
Chapter One: Introduction

How to ensure student success has always been of central concern for educational leaders and researchers. The focus on student achievement is also evident in the media, which reports educational outcomes, compares these outcomes, and tells stories of schooling success and failures. Such stories perpetuate a grand narrative in which grades and test scores define academic success, students consist of achievers and under-achievers, and schools are easily comparative. This grand narrative influences society’s perception of schooling and educational values.

Society entrusts teachers and administrators with educating children, in turn, accountability procedures, such as standardized tests, are set in place to ensure the public of educational quality. The results of such testing can be grouped according to student sub-populations to make comparisons; these comparisons illustrate a difference in performance known as an achievement gap. The rhetoric surrounding the gap characterizes the lower performing group as deficient, under-performing or needing additional attention. In British Columbia, Aboriginal students are often categorized as such a group on the provincially mandated, Foundation Skills Assessment.

The following study examines how elementary educators perceive and experience the current accountability practices, namely the Foundation Skills Assessment and the Aboriginal education initiative known as the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement. While differential student performance has been used, particularly in the United States, as a justification for large-scale testing and educational reform, there is a need to investigate how these practices actually influence classroom practices. To comprehend present educational conditions, it is beneficial to better understand the historical roots of Aboriginal education in Canada.
First Nations Education in Canada

Colonial education has been physically, spiritual, and mentally destructive to the Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Before European settlers, Aboriginals had their own traditional ways of educating their youth. Instead of being restricted to a single teacher within a classroom, the community as a whole shared the responsibility of children’s education (Neegan, 2005). Elders and community members shared their experiences and knowledge with the younger generations. Learning was a process that occurred through participating in daily activities with adults, each skill taught through a variety of contexts and experiences. Community and family members worked together offering children guidance by teaching through example.

Residential schooling ushered in a new era of cultural assimilation of the Aboriginal peoples. In the 1840’s, the government in partnership with the Protestant and Catholic churches began controlling Aboriginal education through residential schools, with Aboriginal students forced to attend by law. Children were forcibly removed from their families if they did not volunteer to attend; by relocating them to the schools, the government could literally remove the child from the influence of the Aboriginal community. These complexes held a religious agenda of making the children Christian, to facilitate this goal the use of native languages or practice traditional customs was prohibited. As Neegan (2005) notes, “The message sent by the dominant whites, via residential schooling, to Aboriginal children was that they should be ashamed of their language and that their culture was inferior to European culture” (p. 7). These schools became sites of abuse, hardship, and cultural genocide; upon returning to their communities many of the children could no longer speak their language or communicate with community members.

Today, many of the Aboriginal languages in Canada are threatened by extinction. This
symbolizes a threat to the Aboriginal communities, an obstacle to passing along their worldviews and ways of knowing to future generations.

Although the last residential school closed in 1996, Canadian education remains rooted in its colonial beginnings. Wotherspoon and Schissel (1998) explain that contemporary policies and practices continue to marginalize the Aboriginal student “by failing to incorporate Aboriginal viewpoints and personnel into curriculum construction and schooling processes” (p. 4). As curriculum and large-scale testing are uniform across the province, there is a misleading assumption that the standardization process is “culturally sensitive to the nuances within Aboriginal epistemologies and that each individual teacher is capable of tailoring his or her pedagogy to circumvent any linguistic and cultural bias inherent in the standardized curricula” (Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir, & Muir, 2010, p. 341). The legitimacy of curricula content is controversial, as are the use of tests themselves.

Within Canadian classrooms, grades and testing have become paramount to the definition of student success, the higher the grades the greater the achievement. Tests used to examine student achievement have been criticized as western cultural artifacts that reflect the colonial mindset; these measures are incongruent with traditional First Nations education and continue to marginalize Aboriginal learners (Berger, Epp, & Moller, 2006; Stairs and Bernhard, 2002). Testing can impact grades, tracking, and graduation, but its value and legitimacy is a cultural construct perpetuated by those in educational power. Schooling continues to be Euro-Canadian institution because of “unchallenged assumptions about how education occurs, how systems are organized, and whose knowledge counts” (Vergee, 2003, p. 13). This study questions the assumption that the tests and the scores they produce are important to Aboriginal student success in Canadian schools. First, a closer analysis of Aboriginal performance on such measures is
Achievement Gap

When test data is clustered into student groups according to grade, gender, or ethnicity; there is an opportunity to compare the performance between these groups. Since not all groups will perform same and it’s unlikely they will have the same mean average on the test, a difference between group scores will appear illustrating what is known as an achievement gap. According to the achievement gap, one group of test-takers have exhibited an acceptable level of performance, which becomes the gold standard or norm, while the lower-scoring group become set apart as the deficient ones. This comparison between groups brings forth questions on why one group of students is less successful than their counterparts, and how this achievement gap can be narrowed.

The rhetoric surrounding the narrowing this achievement gap assumes that the gap is due to a deficiency within the underperforming group and that the gap is a valid reflection of academic achievement; however these assumptions are problematic for the following reasons. Studies on this achievement gap have mostly focused on the deficit model, which include investigations into peer effects, how students within a school affect each other’s performance (Friesen & Krauth, 2009), socio-economic factors (Richards, Hove, & Afolabi, 2008) and school quality (Richards Vining, & Weimer, 2010). The achievement gap rhetoric focuses on educational short fallings wherein lower performance is associated with deficiency (Mathison, 2003). This deficiency model concentrates on the performance of low performing groups and searches for solutions to help these children improve their performance to the standard; in turn, strategies set in place to narrow the gap focus on these children requiring them to ‘pull themselves up by the bootstraps’ to succeed. These strategies may include additional tutoring,
after-school programs, or grade retention, or the use of curricular programs, such as phonics-based or direct instruction; despite potential short-term improvement on test scores these solutions do not lend themselves to meaningful learning (Mathison, 2004). Such initiatives require students to essentially work harder to meet expectations, narrow curriculum, and deprofessionalize educators. Such reforms aimed at minimizing the achievement gap do not guarantee higher quality education; nor does it promise equivalent performance across student sub-groups.

In America, research regarding achievement gaps focuses on black or Hispanic students in comparison to white students; these comparisons run parallel to the Canadian focus on the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal performance. There is public concern that Aboriginal students are not receiving enough educational support and this concern is substantiated in part by the apparent achievement gap. High school completion rates, standardized test results, and grade retention provide evidence that a difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educational performance exists; with Aboriginal students scoring and graduating less than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The Foundation Skills Assessment is no exception with a divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, which finds Aboriginal falling behind their peers (Richards, Vining, & Weimer, 2010). The results data allows researchers to calculate a “meet-exceed ratio” (MER), the number of scores that meet or exceed expectations in relation to the total number of scores (Richards et al., 2010). A large number indicates a greater proportion of students meeting or exceeding provincial test standards. Results of 4th grade groups demonstrate a higher MER for non-Aboriginals compared to Aboriginals; moreover, 7th grade results show an even greater divide. These findings appear to show that as Aboriginal students progress through schooling the proportion meeting provincial
expectations decreases and the achievement gap worsens. Research on reducing this gap has focused on peer effects, early education, family resources, and school choice (Richards et al., 2010); meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has reacted by continuing the collection of performance data and setting in place the Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement.

In Ontario, the government has made a similar commitment to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students; however, it has being merely a diversion from larger issues at work. Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir, and Muir (2010) argue “the concept of the gap is in itself culturally insensitive because it espouses individual achievement of students’ proficiency and achievement over a more collective sense of community well-being” (p. 339). They contend that defining Aboriginal success according to standardized measures and diverts attention away from the larger conceptual void between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal epistemologies (Cherubini et al., 2010). Cherubini and Hodson question the validity of such testing practices arguing that “external assessments based largely on a standardized colonially-influenced curriculum would seem to merely perpetuate the bias that typically favours students from the dominant culture” (2008, p.12). So although provincial testing may show a gap, it is important to remember that the test itself is an external measure based on the standards and performance benchmarks set by the Ministry. Within this framework, lower test scores are the result of inappropriate educational measures and practices rather than inability.

But is closing the gap itself even a worthwhile objective? After all, the achievement gap is often actually a difference in mean test scores between cohorts; making it a test score gap. Critical of these tests, their results, and how these results are in turn interpreted; the apparent achievement gap found between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students on the FSA should be treated as a difference in test scores. The achievement gap discourse presupposes that the
schooling is equitable and the test just, circumventing alternative solutions that may restructure the educational system itself. The focus on narrowing achievement gaps disregards the larger societal gaps that affect the lives and schooling of children; therefore, gap analysis should be an opportunity to consider the bias and inequalities that affect education (Kovacs & Christie, 2008). Policies that focus on closing gaps in resources, educational opportunities, incomes, housing, or cultural expression may more effectively support children’s development than ones that concentrate solely on the achievement gap. More evidence is needed to determine how the achievement gap discourse influences teachers’ understanding of Aboriginal performance. Of course an achievement gap would not be possible without a standard to judge student performance against.

**Standards**

To understand the nuances of standardized testing, the standards from which they are based must be explored. The term ‘standards’ refers to the learning goals and outcomes that students within a grade are expected to reach by the completion of the school year. The Ministry of Education creates and endorses these standards, setting the same learning goals for each grade across the province. Standards provide guidance for teachers on what material and skills need to be covered within the school year; however, they have been criticized for taking away local control of the curriculum and juxtaposing the whole-child approach in which the goal is educating students to succeed in life. Educators argue that highly regimented standards inhibit their ability to make instruction relevant to students’ lives and motivate learning; in turn, learners estrange themselves from classroom activities. Within a standards-based system instruction narrows to a checklist of knowledge and skills based on the interests of the governing powers rather than those of the students or community and teachers are mandated by law to follow this
checklist as they plan their classroom activities. To ensure that teachers are following the standards and children are meeting the prescribed learning outcomes, standardized tests are instated.

**Standardized Testing in British Columbia Elementary Schools**

Schools in British Columbia have participated in standardized testing since the 1970’s, however, until the new millennia these tests were administered to random samples of students (British Columbia Public School Employers’ Association, 2009). Since 2000, elementary students in British Columbia have been required to take a standardized test on reading, writing, and numeracy proficiency, in the 4th and 7th grade. This measure, known as the Foundation Skills Assessment, is conducted on a census basis and collects data on specific groups of students, such as Aboriginal students. The objective of its implementation was to assess whether all students reached performance standards to inform policy decisions (British Columbia Public School Employers’ Association, 2009, BC Ministry of Education, 2010d). The BC Ministry of Education describes the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA), as a ‘snapshot’ of student learning and explains that “the main purpose of the assessment is to help the province, school districts, schools and school planning councils evaluate how well students are achieving basic skills, and make plans to improve student achievement” (BC Ministry of Education, 2010g). A team of educators and curricular specialists assembled at the Ministry level develop the test, and send it to schools to be administered.

Classroom teachers administer the test following guidelines set forth by the *Foundation Skills Assessment Administration Instructions* published by the Ministry of Education each year. The manual provides general information on the assessment; administration instructions, permitted materials, technical support, and data entry guidelines, along with a list of important
dates. Each school year, elementary educators are expected to administer the FSA between mid-January and end of February; as well as, complete scoring and score entry by mid-March (BC Ministry of Education, 2010f). The entire assessment takes approximately four and a half hours for students to complete; however, the Administration Instructions stipulate that, “the assessment should be administered over several sessions and not in a single day” (p. 2). Testing takes place in school classrooms and computer labs, as it consists of both paper and online components. The assessment consists of restricted-choice and open-response questions with the reading component, and multiple-choice and written-response items for the numeracy component. In contrast, the writing section requires students to generate two pieces of writing, one long and one short. Students may use dictionaries, thesauruses, and word processors while producing written output provided that schools print off the students’ work and include it with their response booklet. Calculators and rough paper are permitted during the numeracy component of the test.

Scoring of multiple-choice items is automated online; however, teachers mark the open-ended responses by following the Ministry’s FSA scoring rubrics and provincial exemplars during locally-organized scoring meetings. Schools collect the tests, and forward them to the Ministry of Education; once these tests are scored those marks are combined with the multiple choice scores to determine students’ outcomes. Students’ total scores are calculated and their performances are classified into “not yet meeting expectations,” “meeting expectations,” “exceeding expectations” or “performance level unknown” (BC Ministry of Education, 2010f). Three separate FSA scores (reading, writing, and numeracy) are recorded and sent home to parents along with their child’s response booklet by March 31st. The Ministry reports the assessment results at the individual, school, district, and provincial level.


**Legislation and Mandates**

The Ministry of Education decrees school laws through the School Act, a piece of legislation that governs educational practices in the province. The Act sets mandates that prohibit or authorize actions, with bills updating and revising these regulations. Once the FSA was in place, the government subsequently passed Bill-34, requiring each school board prepare and submit an annual accountability contract to the Minister of Education (Bill 34, 2002). These contracts outlined each school board’s commitment to improving achievement in the school district, assuring districts worked to increase student outcomes. In 2007, the province further amended the School Act with Bill 20, which replaced district accountability contracts with achievement contracts, a public promise to improve student success. The new legislation also required school boards to “be responsible in their achievement contracts for achieving specific results for Aboriginal students” (BC Liberals, 2007). A new position, superintendent of achievement, was created to help school boards reach performance goals; the responsibilities of which include making recommendations and reporting on the improvement of student achievement within districts (BC Ministry of Education, 2010k). The superintendent reviews the school boards’ annual contracts, which are shaped by analyzed student performance data and the districts’ school plans (BC Ministry of Education, 2010l).

Each school is required to submit an annual school plan that contains a focus on improving student performance (BC Ministry of Education, 2010a). The plans are developed by School Planning Councils, which in elementary schools consist of the school principal, one teacher representative, and three representatives from the parent advisory council (BC Ministry of Education, 2010h). The councils can use information provided by FSA results to develop school plans (BC Ministry of Education, 2010i). By contributing to school improvement plans and
district achievement contracts, the Foundation Skills Assessment is the major measure of
achievement and accountability in the province’s educational system.

**Successful vs. Failing Schools**

However, the effectiveness of these procedures is controversial, for they may impede
rather than improve education. Test results are meant to demonstrate what students are learning
or more precisely, what they are not learning. High-stakes testing provides governing powers
with the means to monitor how much and how well content is taught in the classroom. Freeman,
Mathison, & Wilcox (2006) shed light on the dilemma this creates:

In assessment-based accountability…test scores are used by the state through the media
to create images of successful and failing schools and districts. This arrangement places
the “objective” accountability system represented by test scores at the center of the
relationship of parent, teacher, and school and reshapes it in critical ways. (p. 469)

Neoliberal ideology uses the science of test scores as proof that schools, particularly public
schools, are failing. Socio-economic discrepancies, structural inequalities, and governmental
policies are not responsible for performance differences; low quality teachers and poorly run
facilities are to blame. This failing school narrative reinforces the idea that schools that offer
higher test scores provide better quality education; from this standpoint educational reformers
advocate for the right to choose schools. School choice legislation allows parents to choose
which school their child should attend; which leads to picking amongst public institutions or
paying to belong to an independent, private school. Such choices shift the blame for poor
performance away from the government to the parents; if your child is not performing well you
have chosen the wrong school.

Although neoliberal ideals promote private education, the end goal is not a complete
take-over of public education. Neoliberalism needs low-performing students and the failing school narrative to maintain a stratified social order of have and have-nots, with the wealthy controlling the metanarrative that justifies and maintain forces that oppress the lower class. Within this social structure the ruling class ideology subjects racial minorities, in this case Aboriginal students, to unpleasant actions or effects to reaffirm cultural hegemony.

**Purpose of Study**

Research on the significance of leadership to providing quality education for First Nations students is growing (Foster & Goddard, 2003; Bell et al., 2004; Fulford, Moore, Daigle, Stevenson, Tolley, & Wade, 2007). Although the literature supports the value of local stakeholders and leaders to improving schooling, their perspectives are too often marginalized in favour of policy makers and educational theorists (Stack & Mazawi, 2009). The purpose of this study was to understand educational leaders’, particularly teachers’, perspectives and expectations of how provincially mandated accountability policies and assessment practices affect schooling for First Nations students.

The British Columbia government initiated the annual test to ensure greater accountability for schooling; however, since its beginnings the FSA has been a controversial issue for political and educational leaders (Ungerleider, 2006). The standardized test results, publicized by the Fraser Institute, a free market oriented Canadian think tank, separates Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students’ scores. This separation enables researchers, policy makers, and educators to compare and contrast student sub-population results. The First Nations Education Steering Committee, a provincial organization of representatives from many First Nations’ groups, initially supported the test as a method of identifying the need to improve
schooling for Aboriginal children (Stewart, 2009). Further research is needed to determine how this testing practice affects educational quality for Aboriginal students.

As educational leaders, teachers are key stakeholders in schools, fulfilling and negotiating demands from the government, administrators, parents, and children that make up their work environment. This study explores teachers’ perceptions of the province’s accountability structures, particularly the appropriateness of the Foundation Skill Assessment and the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement, to improving Aboriginal students’ success. If the main purpose of these initiatives is to evaluate and help improve student achievement, do teachers feel that these mandates help the province’s elementary schools meet their goals for First Nations students?

**Research Questions**

This research explored relationships between teachers’ perceptions of Aboriginal education and British Columbia’s accountability policies, specifically its requirement that students’ academic achievement improve as demonstrated by results on high-stakes testing. In particular, this study sought to explore the teachers’ perceptions of the effect of standardized testing in their educational practices. The research questions were:

*What are teachers’ perceptions of the effects of high stakes testing on curriculum, instruction, and student outcomes in schools where there are a significant number of First Nations children enrolled? How do teachers perceive students test outcomes to effect classroom practices?*

This study explored teachers’ understandings of the demands of accountability initiatives and how these demands affect First Nations students. Teacher control of assessment practices and professional goals promotes student success (Schnellert, Butler, & Higgenson, 2008), and
educators feel more influential when involved in the decision making process of policies that affect their practices (Green and Dixon, 1996). Teachers’ practical and educational expertise provides them with a detailed frame of reference for critiquing assessment practices and instructional procedures (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2006). Further research was needed to better understand how government imposed accountability initiatives and school improvement plans affect teachers’ role as educators and, in turn, the quality of First Nations education. Teachers’ perceptions provided insight on how these educational policies work in the classroom.

The questions posed by this study created an opening for dialogue on best practice for First Nations education in British Columbia. The objective was to clarify how the current educational accountability policies influence classroom curriculum, practices, and pedagogy; moreover, it provided an opportunity to understand how it affects the educators themselves, their professional identity and personal narrative. The narratives surrounding accountability practices provided an opportunity to analyze and critique the appropriateness of such mechanisms currently in place. An exploration of teachers’ narratives provides a contrast to other narratives on schooling prevalent in society, allowing a deeper consideration of how the ideology of controlling forces influence what takes place in the classroom.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

How the Foundation Skills Assessment came to be and the power it holds raises questions of educational ideology, accountability, equity, leadership, and pedagogy. This study examines these issues to provide greater awareness of how the testing procedures affect education for Aboriginal students in British Columbia schools. A review of the literature on neoliberal ideology and the discourse of accountability will provide greater understanding of the political context that enables these types of assessments. Particularly, an examination of the policies meant to foster Aboriginal student success will provide an understanding of the province’s educational goals. By looking at how the assessment affects classroom activities, educational leadership, and teacher identity, we can critique how well these mechanisms help educators reach these goals.

Neoliberalism

The term ‘neoliberalism’ refers to the political-economic ideology that uses market relationships as a basis for governance (Larner, 2007). Political policies and practices focus on efficiency, customer choice, and privatization. The neoliberal agenda calls for greater market choice and accountability in publicly funded services, such as, education (Mitchell, 2003). Within this paradigm, schools supply and provide education as a commodity to students and parents (Poole, 2007), and schools must please their customers and prove that they offer quality education.

Neoliberal ideology equates quality education with performance goals or productivity. Neoliberals “believe that inserting business practices into schools will boost their productivity” (Davies & Quirke, 2005, p. 525). In turn, neoliberals employ management practices to ensure
schools improve productivity. These practices include increased accountability measures, increased exposure of competition, and the implementation of performance goals reporting (Davies & Bansel, 2007). One strategy for accomplishing these goals is the use of standardized testing as an external apparatus of control (Hartman, 2003). This type of testing encourages a standardized curriculum, which is meant in turn to control classroom activities and places schools under more centralized control (Davies & Quirke, 2005). The tests provide measurable performance benchmarks that quantify school quality.

By creating a measure to discern educational quality, the neoliberal rhetoric offer test performance as an indicator that parents can use to choose good schools. In British Columbia, enrollment reforms already support school choice. In 2003, the province adopted an open boundaries approach to school enrollment whereas previously, students required permission to attend schools outside of their catchment area. Under the new approach, students can be enrolled in any public school with space available (Friesen, Javdani, & Woodcock, 2009). These policies create a market for schools, in which, test outcomes indicate market position; ‘good’ schools produce test outcomes that are higher than others (James et al., 2010). In order for parents’ to make such decisions school level outcomes must be publicly available; thus another key neoliberal initiative emerges, the use of standardized test scores to publicly rank schools (Davies & Quirke, 2005b). In B.C., school rankings are issued by a third-party organization known as the Fraser Institute.

**The Fraser Institute**

Each year the Fraser Institute, a think tank, uses FSA results to produce performance statistics and impart these figures in the *Report Card on British Columbia’s Elementary Schools*. These reports have intensified concerns regarding the misinterpretation and misuse of assessment
results. When the FSA was first in development, a committee of key stakeholders, known as the Assessment Working Group, was formed. This group’s purpose was to make recommendations to the Deputy Minister on how communicate and interpret the test outcomes (British Columbia Public School Employers’ Association, 2009). Members in the group voiced concerns that the data would be misused by third party organizations.

In fact, Freedom of Information legislation allows anyone, including the Fraser Institute to obtain testing results; the Institute uses the reports to rank schools and this ranking is published in the provinces two main newspapers, *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Province*. The Fraser Institute and the newspapers operate within a neoliberal ideology, with donations and business profits leading to corporate decisions. The Fraser Institute’s mission statement illustrates their corporate agenda: “Our vision is a free and prosperous world where individuals benefit from greater choice, competitive markets, and personal responsibility”. Pacific Newspapers Group Inc., which owns the *Vancouver Sun* and *The Province*, is a CanWest company, who’s ‘blueprint of success’ illustrates their own neo-liberal agenda: “We maintain a culture that values accountability, measurement and progress to help us grow, win and prosper.”

The school rankings advertise schools as high-ranking, good quality or low ranking, poor quality and in this manner, the Fraser Institute reaffirms the perception of schooling as a product with CanWest markets this product to parents. Publishing these rankings in a newspaper provides the pretext of objectivity, legitimizing the content of their annual report.

**School Rankings**

There is a plethora of problems with school rankings; to start with they perpetuate the belief that quality education can be found in schools that produce high scores and encourages student mobility from ‘bad’, low performing to ‘good’, high-performing schools. The 2011
Report Card self-advocates that it helps school selection “because it makes comparisons easy, it alerts parents to nearby schools that appear to have more effective academic programs” (p. 3). The Institute depicts its rankings as an indicator of school effectiveness; however, the rankings show bias with affluent, private schools consistently receiving higher rankings than urban, public schools.

The rankings also show unstable trends; school change is a slow, reiterative process, yet individual school ranks can jump hundreds of places between years. This presents another problem with school rankings; they inaccurately depict systemic change as easily attainable. It encourages the belief that school change is a matter of effort and motivation, low-performing schools gain achievement from the pursuit and discovery of the right combination of practices. This sets the impetus for change on the individual schools, rather than the government or public, which control outside forces that influence educational outcomes. Through a neoliberal lens, the rankings motivate change by shaming schools into reformative practices.

This logic is flawed however as the structure of the ranking will always create a continuum of school quality. In this system, ‘good’, ‘bad’, and ‘average’ schools are inevitable; therefore, regardless of educational efforts, one school will always be labeled the worst school in the province. Despite these faults, studies show that schools that receive poor FSA results and low rankings experience an increase in the number of students who leave to attend ‘good’ schools outside of their catchment area (Friesen et al., 2009; Richards et al., 2010). Student mobility trends indicate that school rankings are used to make attendance decisions; in doing so these rankings support school competition, by holding individual sites responsible for student performance. As students flow out of the low-scoring, low-ranked schools, so too does funding and programs; so these ‘bad’ schools are left even less desirable. These trends are visibly present
in Vancouver’s inner city schools, consequently those serving the majority of the city’s Aboriginal population, with student enrollment dropping, leading to fewer school-wide programs. To avoid this perpetual disintegration of the public school system, Decker (2004) offers an alternative to large-scale testing,

Rather than comparing all Grade 4 students in B.C. to one another, it is more sensible to compare all students in our grade 4 class in East Vancouver this year. This comparison contributes richer detail because these students share a school, neighbourhood, a teacher, and a learning experience. (p. 264)

Regardless of individual school outcomes, these current rankings contribute to the failing school narrative, one that depicts public schools as unstable and underperforming. Within this narrative, the government can justify the use of policies and practices aimed at keeping schools and educators accountable for their actions and children’s performance.

**Accountability: Keeping An Eye on the Classroom**

British Columbia’s educational policies focus on ensuring accountability of schools. Accountability structures dictate relations between those with power and those without, as Mathison and Ross (2002) state:

Complex hierarchical systems do not permit those in power to be everywhere and do everything at the same time to achieve what they consider to be desirable outcomes. Consequently, authority must be delegated to others, which disperses power to lower levels of the hierarchical system.

Schooling is a complex hierarchical system, with the government delegating authority to the school boards, these boards dispersing power down to the individual schools, where power is further filtered from the administration to the teachers. It is within this power structure that
educational mandates, governing policies, and programming initiatives are passed down, with teachers always on the receiving end. Although teachers hold very little agency for change, with a curriculum and set of mandates set upon them within the static schooling environment, teachers are ultimately held responsible for what goes on in their classroom and how well their students fare within the system. Teachers, those who receive delegated power become “obligated to answer or render an account of the degree of success in accomplishing the outcomes desired by those in power” (Mathison & Ross, 2002). Educational accountability systems oblige schools to provide evidence of the academic success of their students; in turn, the government supervises school practices to ensure ‘quality’ of education. This accountability regime requires educators’ work be “more visible through inspections, observations, performances and public reporting of test scores” (Webb, 2005, p.191). Thus, the governing powers implement policies to make schooling more transparent.

Achievement contracts, superintendents, annual school plans, standardized curriculum and testing, allow the Ministry of Education to monitor and manage schooling. As Nichols and Griffith (2009) note “a common accountability mechanism is the school and district plan, which demonstrates evidence of management and accountability via performance-based goals, targets, timelines, and standardized monitoring procedures” (p. 243). In this context, standardized testing is used not only to measure student achievement, but also as a method of surveilling teachers’ performance. When power is delegated through an hierarchical system, accountability requires surveillance to work: “the power of surveillance is born out in part by the spectacle that may result from accounting by those to whom power has been delegated” (Mathison & Ross, 2002). Vinson and Ross (2001) provide further explanation of the surveillance-spectacle dynamic: “bureaucrats ‘monitor’ school performance within a ‘micro’ setting (surveillance) while at the
same time the ‘public’ considers school performance (or ‘accountability’) via media-reported (frequently as headlines) standardized test scores (spectacle).” This accountability structure can be found in elementary education in British Columbia where the Ministry monitors Foundation Skills Assessment outcomes (surveillance) and media publishes the Fraser Institute’s school rankings (spectacle). In an informational brochure for parents, the Ministry of Education explains that by “using information from FSA, the Ministry of Education works with school districts to provide support for students and to improve teaching and learning for the coming school year” (2010g, p. 2). The Ministry’s objective ‘to improve teaching and learning’ illustrates the presumption that students’ performance reflects quality of teaching. This explanation of the FSA demonstrates how it is a surveillance and management technology that provides student outcomes (information) used to change (improve) what happens in the classroom (teaching and learning). This monitoring of the ever-adapting classroom perpetuates a cycle of surveillance-spectacle in which schools participate in greater degrees of surveillance and the public continues to watch performance (Vinson and Ross, 2001).

For standards and accountability policies to be effective in changing teaching and learning, schools must use accountability data to judge how well they meet standards, implement changes to educational practices, and monitor the effectiveness of these changes (Ingram et al., 2004). The province’s educational achievement goals, reinforced by accountability legislation (surveillance) and media (spectacle), push schools to self-regulate and conform to the standardization of knowledge, through practices that focus on improving test scores. Various educational reforms aimed at improving achievement will specifically address student groups who are less likely to meet the standard. As addressed in Chapter 1, the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students depicts Aboriginal students as the
underperforming student group. The government has implemented policies to address this and other issues surrounding Aboriginal education.

**First Nations Education: Contemporary Policies and Actions**

The province’s accountability framework includes specific mandates and practices to improve the education of Aboriginal children. In 1999, representatives from the Chiefs Action Committee, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Ministry of Education, First Nations Schools Association, B.C. College of Teachers, B.C. Principals’ and Vice Principals’ Association, B.C. School Trustees’ Association, and B.C. Teachers’ Federation signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Aboriginal Education. The document stated: “We the undersigned, acknowledge that Aboriginal learners are not experiencing school success in British Columbia. We state our intention to work together within the mandates of our respective organizations to improve school success for Aboriginal learners in British Columbia” (BC Ministry of Education, 2010b). The commitment laid the framework for further dialogue, partnerships, and agreements between Aboriginal education stakeholders aimed at strengthening students’ experience.

Each school district and its Aboriginal communities are expected to develop an Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement, mapping their five-year shared initiative to improve success for all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students (BC Ministry of Education, 2010b). Enhancement Agreements focus on improving Aboriginal students’ academic performance, while emphasizing the importance of traditional languages and culture to students’ development (Vancouver School Board, 2009). Members of the Ministry’s Aboriginal Education Enhancement Branch are supposed to ensure that community members are engaged in the agreement process. These stakeholders work together to set goals, make decisions, and develop
programs and services that best support students’ needs. (BC Ministry of Education, 2010c) The agreements are submitted to the Ministry and the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Branch works with all stakeholders to implement and further adjust the agreement. Performance data is used to track student progress and these developments are communicated to the Ministry via annual reports.

The Vancouver School Board uses the FSA as a performance indicator of EA goal achievement. One of the district’s central goals is: “to ensure that Aboriginal students achieve increased academic success in Vancouver schools and that they participate fully and successfully from kindergarten through the completion of Grade 12” (Vancouver School Board, 2009, p. 13). The EA cites an “increased numbers of students fully meeting and exceeding expectations in Grade 4 and 7 Foundation Skills Assessment” as evidence of goal attainment. The district also sets a specific FSA performance target, as stated in the EA: “Increase numbers of students fully meeting and exceeding expectations in Grades 4 and 7 Foundation Skills Assessment by a minimum of 5%” (Vancouver School Board, 2009, p. 14). Although the VSB sets specific goals on FSA improvement, there is little explanation of how these improvements will be reached.

In addition to the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements, the Ministry of Education uses Aboriginal students performance data to compose an annual, How Are We Doing?, report. The publication features student demographics and assessment outcomes, including the FSA, at the provincial and district level. The Ministry uses the reports to initiate dialogue with Aboriginal committees and school districts on how to improve Aboriginal students’ outcomes. The How Are We Doing? report and the Enhancement Agreement have a reciprocal relationship, each informing and contributing to the development of the other. Aimed at Aboriginal education, these documents are only two products of the Ministry’s accountability
framework; working together with other previously mentioned mechanisms, these forces inevitably influence pedagogy, educational leadership, and teacher identity.

**Effects of High Stakes Testing in Classrooms**

Accountability mechanisms affect what happens in the classroom before and after test taking. Test performance pressures can lead teachers to disregard good educational practice and teach in ways that are inappropriate for students (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Moon, Brighton, & Callahan, 2002). These practices include ineffective pacing and sequencing of curriculum; as well as, an emphasis on tested content rather than student interests (Clarke, Shore, Rhoades, Abrams, Miao & Li, 2003). Test content influences textbook selection, which further aligns lessons with district curriculum guidelines (Laudry, 2006). As educators attempt to cover all areas to be tested, they avoid in-depth study in favour of broad, repetitive coverage of tested content (Clarke, Shore, Rhoades, Abrams, Miao & Li, 2003). The classroom discussions and debates are minimized in favour of test drills. Educators spend additional time prepping their students for the assessment by conducting regular classroom assessments that follow the standardized format and teaching test-taking skills (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003), leaving less time for projects and hands-on activities (Mathison & Freeman, 2004). Educators describe the shift in pedagogy as stifling higher-order thinking, exploration, creativity, discussions, and group work (Luna & Turner, 2001). Pressures of high-stakes testing can persuade teachers to overlook individual strengths and needs in favour of preparing everyone for the same test (Mathison & Freeman, 2003). Essentially, high-stakes testing encourages teacher-centred instruction rather than student-centred learning.
Educational Leadership

Although teachers are expected to implement standards-based practices, they do not always have an opportunity to give input on the design or effectiveness of these practices (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000). In fact, accountability procedures and systematic testing can compromise teachers’ abilities to make changes to ensure student success. Current research shows that standardized testing diminishes teachers’ authority to bring their own expertise to organizing or pacing classroom activities (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). Zembylas (2003) explains that once teachers give up their sense of professional autonomy they no longer “question accepted beliefs and ways of acting but simply follow them in order to avoid marginalization” (p.125). A result of this lose of professional autonomy is the potential homogenization of teaching styles and content. As pedagogy and curriculum are more highly structured by those educational policy makers distant from schools and classrooms, teachers have less opportunity to develop their own identity and leadership qualities.

In fact even upon establishing themselves in their role, educators’ responsibilities as administers of these testing practices may be inconsistent with their role as an educational leader. There is a contrast between the educator’s role as a member of a community, that of the school, and their role as a part of a governing agency, that of the ministry. If teachers’ identity as local educator is not aligned with their responsibilities as administers of higher-level policies, a conflict between these two identities may develop. The same is can be true for administrators as well, as Goddard and Rosemary observed in their 2002 study,

The role of the principal tended to be one of mediator and interpreter, attempting to explain to the community the policies imposed from outside and also explaining to the educational hierarchy the reactions of those affected by the imposed policies. The
bridging role of the imported principal was made more difficult because she or he was
perceived to share the values and beliefs of the external agencies that developed policy
statements, which were often in contradiction to local thoughts. (p. 9)
Moll (2004) also noted how large-scale assessments guide professional engagement:
“They represent a power shift in education, taking, decision-making power from parents and the
local community and redirecting it to central organizations and institutions that are disconnected
from the local context” (p.15). This disconnection in power reflects a fracturing of educators’
leadership and identity.

District achievement contracts and individual school plans reflect a top-down educational
hierarchy, in which members are accountable to a higher level of authority. Ideally,
accountability systems would distribute responsibility symmetrically across students, teachers,
administrators, policy makers, and researchers; however, standardized testing creates an
unbalanced, top-down structure in which educators are disproportionally held responsible for
school outcomes (Linn, 2003; Ng, 2006). This hierarchy hinders progress and educational
leadership:

Leadership itself is fragmented. It comes from superintendents, a variety of district
offices, principals, and teachers. All these leaders identify different problems and propose
different solutions. It is no wonder that teachers often close the door and try to teach as
they see fit. But doing so is becoming increasingly difficult, as the content taught, the
materials used, and even the pacing through the content is increasingly specified from a
central source. (Firestone, 2004, p. 146)

This system limits teachers’ pedagogy and students’ choice. Leadership fragments when district
and school employees are “attending to different external constituencies and with overlapping
yet different internal responsibilities” (Firestone, p. 140). As leadership destabilizes and school practices constrict, students’ voices and teachers’ identity can get lost in the system.

**Teacher Identity**

The effects of high-stakes testing on classroom activities can leave teachers conflicted. Instruction techniques that effectively improve test scores clash with the type of teaching that fosters reasoning, problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity (Meaghan & Casas, 2004, p.37). Educators report both positive and negative effects of teaching to the test; this type of teaching can support or contradict teachers’ pedagogy (Clarke, Shore, Rhoades, Abrams, Miao & Li, 2003; Luna & Turner, 2001; Mathison & Freeman, 2004).

The basic tenet seems to be if a test measures what is important then teaching to the test is okay, but if the test is misdirected or poorly constructed or only a partial picture of what is important, then teaching to the test is not okay (Mathison & Freeman, 2004, pp. 86-87).

High stakes testing, and the accountability framework that implements it, contradict multiple notions of educational best practice. This accountability framework distracts educators’ from doing their best teaching and erodes their intrinsic goals (Leithwood, 2001). Top-down standardization threatens many practices and pedagogy that educators hold dear; such as,

- Multiple intelligences, multiage classrooms, or multicultural curricula; cooperative learning, character education, or the creation of caring communities in schools; teaching for understanding, developmentally appropriate practice, or alternative assessment; the integration of writing or the arts into the curriculum; project-or-problem-based learning, discovery-oriented science, or whole language; giving teachers or students more
autonomy, or working with administrators to help them make lasting change. (Kohn, 2004, p. 296)

Educational philosophy and practices create a paradox in which each student is unique yet the standards of academic success are the same. Schools are multi-cultural spaces that support diversity, yet curriculum is determined by Euro-centric ideology and politics. Every child is unique and special, yet they should all meet the same learning outcomes within a pre-determined timeframe. These contradictions leave educators pulled between competing narratives of best practice. This study will provide insight on how teachers make sense of this intrinsic dilemma, by discussing their experiences with the FSA and its effect on instruction.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Epistemological Perspective

This study was guided by social constructivist epistemology, in which reality is constructed and reconstructed by those experiencing it. According to this stance, humans exist within a social context where knowledge and beliefs are created rather than discovered (Crotty, 1998). We construct concepts and schemes to make sense of our experiences and we revise and reshape these creations as new events unfold (Schwandt, 2009). In this way, historical, economical, political, and social conditions mediate our experiences and how we construct meaning. Thus, our context determines the kind of normative system that is developed and how it is applied (Meehan, 1994). These constructs, social norms, and experiences are organized into individual narratives, our perception of the world, our role within it, and ability to change it. Through a social constructivist lens, political ideologies and rhetoric shape these narratives; therefore, educators’ narratives are not inherent or autonomous but rather written and rewritten in response to larger societal influences; such as neoliberalism, accountability, and Aboriginal education. Thus, teachers’ experiences with accountability policies will shape their perception of its relevance to Aboriginal education; their experiences with standardized tests will influence the value they attribute to the practice. This study elicited teachers’ narratives to focus on how accountability policies influenced instructional content, pedagogy, and professional autonomy, and how these changes impacted education for Aboriginal students.

More specifically, narrative analysis was utilized to critically analyze teacher narratives of experience with testing and teaching. This inductive research methodology uses narratives to gain insight into social phenomenon. “While the starting point for narrative inquiry is an individual's experience, it is also an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional narratives
within which individual's experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted” (Clandinin & Rosiak, 2006, p. 49). Narrative inquiry will provide an opportunity to develop a framework for understanding teachers’ experience about the role of accountability to ensuring Aboriginal student success. Teachers’ narratives will provide a greater understanding of the reoccurring issues and themes that emerge when educators are faced with accountability policies in the classroom. And, in turn, narratives help engage readers, encouraging them to question and revise their points of view (Barone & Eisner, 2006).

**Theoretical Framework**

The research was grounded in critical theory, an approach that calls for critically reconsidering taken-for-granted characteristics of our social world (Schwandt, 2007). Critical research studies “call current ideology into question, and initiate action, in the cause of social justice” (Crotty, 1998, p.157). Power relations arrange the social order in our contemporary world; however, an examination of the ideologies and causal stories that control society provides an opportunity to change those dominating relations. Understanding how a group is marginalized facilitates changing those oppressive forces.

Critical analysis provides an opportunity to examine the role of habitus in education. Habitus is a theory of how one’s mind operates according to a set of socially acquired schemas and predispositions (Epstein, 1995). Habitus has been used in recent educational research on social reproduction, power relationships, multiculturalism, and standardized testing in schools (Levine-Rasky, 2009; Corbett, 2010). Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of habitus suggests that past perceptions and experiences shape our current framework for thought and action. Bourdieu’s habitus is a means of cultural perpetuation: “We are left with a traditional socialization model—the bourgeoisie transmit quite unproblematically, their culture to their
offspring” (Willis, 1981, p. 55). If habitus is transmitted and reinforced through socialization then it should be present in the environment where students experience most of their socialization, schools.

Through the choice of curriculum, pedagogical methods, the relationship between teacher and students, and the methods of selection—all of which gave the children of the economically privileged and well educated an advantage over the children of the less privileged and less educated—the education system did not break down class and cultural inequalities but reinforced them. (Robinson & Gamier, 1985, p. 251)

Habitus, therefore, will maintain the status quo and hinder accomplishing social equality goals.

Organizational habitus has been used to explain how teachers, administers, and students understand one another, with race and social class of students shaping how teachers organize their expectations and dispositions (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004). Research indicates that teachers blame students’ minority background or low-income for poor achievement, leading to lower expectations and less initiative to change educational practice (Diamond et al., 2004). This study uses habitus to investigate issues of teachers’ perceptions of standardized testing and top-down educational governance; more specifically, it explores how these issues affect the quality of schooling for First Nations’ children.

When individuals’ habitus is uniform with their environment, they experience social advantages (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Extending this to an analysis of teachers’ narratives, if teachers’ narratives are uniform with the metanarrative of schooling, then they would be in an advantageous position. This metanarrative is formed by neoliberal ideology, characterized by accountability, and maintained through hegemony.

Hegemony.
Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci, proposes that society is a complex layering of economic, political, and ideological forces. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony (1971, 1977) refers to the dominance of one class over others, by manipulating these forces. Hegemony is used to describe how the dominating class presents their ideology as the ‘norm’, and use it as a force to control the lower classes. “Schools like other social institutions, can transmit hegemony through rituals, routines and social practices that politically influence and regulate adults’ authority over how space, time and social processes are organized within their everyday workings” (Rose, 2011, p.17). Thus hegemony is used to ensure those in power stay in power.

**Methods**

The primary method of investigation was individual, semi-structured interviews. These interviews took place over the course of 2011, during the end of one school year and the beginning of the next. Participants were asked to share their views on the FSA, the Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement, and Aboriginal students’ success; with the intent to better understand teachers’ meaning making and actions regarding the FSA outcomes. Each interview began with participants being asked to read an article from the Vancouver Sun entitled, Aboriginal Education Gets a Failing Mark. This article was used as an elicitation device, providing an opportunity for participants to reflect on the study’s issues, as well as, how these issues are presented in the media. The open-ended, semi-structure, of the interviews allowed the participants and researchers to engage in a flowing dialogue. Probing allowed that dialogue to grow and for information to be clarified providing an opportunity for more topics to be discussed and experiences shared.
Participants

Participants were recruited through personal contact with the Vancouver Elementary School Teachers’ Association, Vancouver school board, and elementary schools within the school district. The target population was 4th and 7th grade teachers with experience administering the Foundation Skills Assessment in schools that have a significant number of First Nations students, as well as, principals and administrators with experience with the accountability policies surrounding Aboriginal education. The educators whom participated in the study worked in public schools within the district. After finding initial participants, additional voluntary interviewees were found using the snowball sampling technique, in which current participants recruit colleagues they believe would be interested in the study.

In all, 9 individuals in the educational field participated in the study. That includes 2 school district administrators, 2 principals, 2 grade 4 teachers, 2 grade 7 teachers, and one Aboriginal District Resource educator; one third of participants self-identified as Aboriginal. The teachers and principals had experience working in schools with a high-proportion of self-identified Aboriginal students in these schools. The administrative participants were also important stakeholders, as they played a role in how Aboriginal education and accountability policies affected the district as a whole and provided insight on how these issues affected politics on a different level of the educational hierarchy. Participants from these schools were considered key stakeholders of Aboriginal education in Vancouver.

Ethics

All of the participants were treated in accordance of the ethical guidelines of UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The study asked for the voluntary participation of educators. Research only began once prospective participants have given their free and informed consent.
Informed consent forms were distributed to participants and stored by the researcher in a secure location. Participants right to withdraw their consent and stop their involvement was respected. There were no repercussions for non-participation in the study. The information provided by participants remained private and confidential. To maintain confidentiality, released data did not contain names, initials or any other identifying information. Participants’ names were replaced with pseudonyms in the final report. There were no obvious risks to participants beyond those normally encountered in daily lives of educators. Every caution was taken to ensure all participants felt comfortable and free to withdraw from the study at any point.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

All interviews were tape-recorded, taking between one and two hours. The transcribed data was saved as Microsoft Word files and protected by password. During the transcription process, interview data were written verbatim. Rephrasing and pauses that occurred during the interview were preserved.

Interview guide with teachers. The following questions were selected because they deal with the central question of the research project; how teachers make sense of their practice, particularly their ability to improve Aboriginal students’ success, in an accountability context. Semi-structured interviews ensured that interviews are conversational and flexible, and the open-ended questions guided the interview process ensuring that all participants discussed the same topics. Probing expanded discussion areas and provided an opportunity for teachers’ to describe more salient information as the interview process unfolded.

1) Conceptions of High Stakes Testing:

- Describe your experience with the Foundation Skills Assessment.
  - What are reasons for participating in the FSA?
o What are some of the causes of poor performance on the FSA?

o In what ways does the FSA affect education quality?

o What kinds of changes to the test and/or the reporting of the FSA would you find beneficial?

2) *Aboriginal Education:*

- What would you have to do to ensure that Aboriginal students are successful in schools?
  - Describe what would happen if Aboriginal students performed poorly on the tests?
  - What are the things you need to do to improve literacy and numeracy skills for Aboriginal students?
  - How does the FSA help you do that?

3) *Classroom Effects:*

- What does your role as an administrator of the FSA mean to you?
  - What do you do to prepare for the FSA?
  - In what ways do the FSA outcomes affect your classroom practices?
  - How would not having data from an external assessment source affect your teaching?

4) *School Experience:*

- What kinds of things has the school administration told you about the FSA outcomes?
  - Can you describe how your school uses the Foundation Skills Assessment outcomes?
  - In what ways does your school address Aboriginal students’ performance on the FSA?
**Interview guide with administrators.** Questions for administrators were slightly modified to make the interview process align with their level of experience with the FSA and the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement.

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   - Describe your experience with the Foundation Skills Assessment.
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     - What are some of the causes of poor performance on the FSA?
     - In what ways does the FSA affect education quality?
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   - What would you have to do to ensure that Aboriginal students are successful in schools?
     - Describe what would happen if Aboriginal students performed poorly on the tests?
     - What are the things you need to do to improve literacy and numeracy skills for Aboriginal students?
     - How does the FSA help you do that?

3) *Administrative Effects:*

   - How does the FSA affect educational policy decisions?
     - Describe what happens once the school board receives FSA results?
     - Can you describe how the board uses the Foundation Skills Assessment outcomes?
     - In what ways do the FSA outcomes affect your policy decisions?
How would not having data from an external assessment source affect your policy analysis?

4) *Aboriginal Experience:*

- How does the school board use the FSA outcomes to ensure Aboriginal students’ success?
  - In what ways does the board address Aboriginal students’ performance on the FSA?
  - What kinds of things does the school board do with the FSA outcomes to help Aboriginal students’ be successful?
  - How does the FSA affect Aboriginal educational initiatives?

**Data Analysis**

The transcription process marked the initial phase of data analysis; in which, converting audio recordings to text provided an opportunity to review and reflect upon the data itself. Aided by Inqscribe, a transcription software program, each interview recording was played, replayed, and manually copied into a text document. During this process, reoccurring responses and ideas began to emerge, leading to the formation of thematic codes. Once transcribed, the text files were sorted, arranged, and coded using the qualitative program Hyper Research.

The unit of analysis was group, whereby, administrative and teacher interviews were compared and contrasted to understand the narratives that these educators built to make sense of their practices. Data was analyzed using constant comparison and analytic deduction (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Attention was first given to in vivo categories, and then the data was recoded according to patterns as they surfaced and reorganized according to emerging themes and
conceptual categories. Most passages within the transcriptions were tagged with more than one code, exhibiting the overlapping trends within the data.

Through thematic analysis, it became evident that these reoccurring trends were not just multi-layered and complex, but also abstract. Following the epistemological perspective of the study, participants’ interviews were interpreted as a synthesis of their professional experience. Their responses, attitudes, and positions were not simply a reflection of knowledge collected over time, but rather a shifting, growing non-linear interpretation of the educational system. Systemically analyzing the emerging interview themes seemed unfitting and inadequate; however, poetic transcription offered an alternative.

**Poetic transcription**

Poetic transcription, also known in qualitative research as found poetry, “is created by selecting words and phrases from an original text, then re-arranging these words to create a poem that represents the meaning of the original text anew” (Burdick, 2011). Producing poetic representations of interview data provides a lens to look at the information more attune to other’s lived experiences, and allows readers to understand these lived experiences in complex ways (Prendergast, 2009). Rather than quoting snippets of interviews within prose, the construction of poetry is akin to the construction of participants’ own narratives; non-linear, complex, and nuanced. Thus, interview data from various participants was weaved into poems to reflect the constructs and overarching themes present during the study. This was done using the direct words of participants, at the same time allowing multiple voices to come together in a shared story, one of being an elementary educator. This process leaves the words of participants less fragmented than in the more standard form of analysis whereby short segments are extracted and combined with the researcher’s own critical analysis (Jessop & Penny, 2010). This exposes
readers to many voices at once, providing a more encompassing and richer exposure to data. This method is used in narrative inquiry to provide both the researcher and the reader with more interactive exploration of educators’ lived experiences.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

Interviews were conducted during this study to provide an opportunity for teachers to share personal insights on how standardized testing affects Aboriginal education. Each interview offered new perspectives and feedback; opinions converged, contradicted, stood alone; but what participants answered was just as interesting as how they answered. There were not clear-cut answers, for the problems themselves are not clear-cut, but how participants negotiated and came to terms with these issues provided an opportunity to explore what it means to teach minority ‘under-achievers’ in a neoliberal educational system. The interviews themselves were insightful, at times compelling; while, the conversational structure provided a flexibility, allowing dialogues to develop unforced and spontaneously. We were able to discuss more topics in greater detail, by going beyond the standard interview questions; however, having a lot of data was not the main goal.

The research questions themselves, as previously stated, were; What are educators’ perceptions of the effects of high stakes testing on curriculum, instruction, and student outcomes in schools where there are a significant number of First Nations children enrolled? How do educators perceive students test outcomes to effect classroom practices? In general, participants’ perceptions of the tests were much broader than the narrow scope of curriculum and instruction or static space of the classroom. These narratives on being a professional within the province’s educational system were fraught with competing feelings and pedagogical conflicts, not only between perspectives, but also within.

Through reading and rereading, I decided that selecting individual responses to analyze seemed insufficient because the responses formed a collective of experiences, containing layers of reflection, not easily untwined. So I embraced these complex stories and wove the voices into
poetry, revolving around recurring themes in the interview data. The poems were constructed by using direct quotations from participants, with little editing, and incorporated with their context intact. They reflect the expanding and contracting of our interpretations and non-linear nature of human experience. It is through poetry that I hope the reader will expand on their understanding of these experiences, going beyond my analysis, and incorporating the shared knowledge into their own understanding of our education system.

**Analytic Themes**

Through the coding and poetic transcription process, contextual themes emerged, ones of marginalization, accountability, a divided power structure, and competing demands. These themes led to a choir of voices communicating different narratives and causal stories to explain how educational mandates set down by the government influence education for Aboriginal children. These narratives were both in harmony and in contrast to each other, with participants’ reflections showing the contentions present in the current schooling system. These themes are introduced here, developed in the poems that follow, and considered further in the forthcoming chapter.

1) *Marginalization*. Participants were concerned for how Aboriginal children fit into the system and low graduation rates in the province. Although teachers commented that Aboriginal students in elementary schools might also under-achieve this was not an observation credited to the Foundation Skills Assessment results. Teachers empathized with children who they felt were marginalized both culturally and financially by society, and Aboriginal students were identified as such children. Though some participants listed socio-economic conditions as the reason for poor performance, others felt the issues ran much deeper. They felt limited academic success experienced by Aboriginal students was an indicator of a problem with the system not the child.
2) **Accountability.** Participating in the Foundation Skills Assessment made teachers very aware of the increasing expectations of their profession. They listed a number of assessments and planning activities that occur in their schools and commented on being stretched for time to get through the entire curriculum. Additionally, they felt the FSA was being misused, as something to ‘shame’ them or motivate them into getting better results with fewer resources. They felt that Aboriginal education was harmed within this environment of accountability as it drew attention away for the bigger issues of systemic and institutional racism.

3) **Power Divisions.** Teachers and administrators understood and experienced the accountability mechanisms at work differently. Participants from the school board looked at the FSA as a good tool that could not be used because of lack of participation. Principals also saw a value to the assessment, but saw the teacher’s union and the Fraser Institute as a hindrance to its use. Teachers resented being mandated to do something they felt they could do better on their own, with less political abuse and media misrepresentation.

4) **Competing Feelings.** Participants were often torn on their feelings regarding the FSA and its use for Aboriginal students. While they appreciated acclaim for high results, at the same time they resented these results being used in the media to undercut public education. They wanted to help Aboriginal students succeed, but questioned how to define success. These competing feelings stem from competing narratives, a concept theorized and expanded on in Chapter 5. Participants’ stories show a multifaceted discord between the contending demands of their profession.
**Being Aboriginal in a Euro-centric System**

Unanimously, participants expressed concern about Aboriginal students’ education, their success within the system, and lives outside of schooling. Making sense of Aboriginal performance led to comparisons between the children and their non-Aboriginal counterparts; where Aboriginal students became characterized as the deficient or ‘other’ child. Within the deficient-child rhetoric, students’ performance is credited to the fulfillment of basic physical and psychological needs, whereby students whose needs are being met succeed while those students with needs not being met struggle. Teachers could clearly articulate how they felt the child’s needs affected their performance; however, when conversations turned to the systemic institutional problems, cultural hegemony, and societal issues at work it became increasingly difficult to distinguish why Aboriginal students were not experiencing the same kinds of success as their non-Aboriginal peers.

**These ‘Other’ Kids**

We’ve seen it happen around the world,
Where you have the conquerors and the conquered,
That’s what’s happened in the history of North America,
The conquering race underestimates the ‘other’,
Assuming that the underclass cannot achieve,
Not at the same level they have.

Many of our students take the test, so we know,
Our Aboriginal students are not doing as well as non-Aboriginal students.
We really work to try to bring these kids up,
Because compared to mainstream society, the results are appalling.
But that gap between success for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students,
Is wide and shameful.

It’s certainly not that these kids can’t learn,
But they aren’t sleeping
If they’re not sleeping, how is anything supposed to move forward?
Some of them are hungry,
If there’s no dinner, it doesn’t matter how good of a teacher you are.
As long as they’re fed and have a good night’s sleep, they’ll learn.

The problem is simply poor attendance.  
A lot of children have difficulty getting up in the morning  
Students who are here at school everyday,  
Ones with involved parents are doing well.  
If they aren’t here on time each day, of course they’ll suffer,  
And who's in charge of that? Well the parents are.

A lot of these families just aren’t pushing for education with their kids.  
The students need to be pushed.  
They’re sitting targets for drug dealers and other unsavory characters,  
We need programs to keep them off the streets and help with homework.  
They have no one at home,  
To help them get themselves together.

I mean there’s a lot that isn’t working for a lot of kids,  
But the Aboriginal kids are particularly vulnerable,  
These kids are the first to drop,  
Like canaries in the coalmines.  
We’ve got to do something better, something different.  
We need to look at the problem differently.

If you consider the issue with a social justice lens,  
The whole gap has to do with racism,  
There’s a lot of ways that these kids are successful.  
But we’re operating within an old British system,  
Measuring success with a very Anglo-Saxon tool,  
That these kids don’t do well on the test doesn’t surprise me at all.

The issues run much deeper than that.  
The challenges more multi-faceted,  
A program that meets once a week can’t fix these things,  
And if we just replicate schools with the same requirements,  
The same rigid structures,  
Nothing will change.

When we ask the Aboriginal children what they really want,  
What the problem is,  
They say they just want to be treated like any other kid.  
Not just tolerated or talked about in a tokenistic way,  
But valued,  
The same as anyone else.
Open Doors

In the ripple effect from residential schools
A whole generation of alienated people,
Families still dealing with the fallout,
Parents who feel nauseated walking in the door,
We can’t get them inside the school.

It was dark,
I remember things seemed very bleak.
Yet there was very little awareness of it.

The cultural impact is reverberating,
Through even our current schools.
Kids are feeling multi-generational impacts
Whether it was their parents or grandparents.
It’s a huge factor.

In the 60's, most of the kids I started with in elementary school
Disappeared by the time I was in high school.
There were a few, but not many.

In Westside schools we try to push the families away,
On the Eastside it's like we're trying to pull the parents in,
The school system has a role to play in it and a responsibility
Still, it's tough,
The issue is complex.

If we're not on the street getting drunk, shooting up, or dying,
We're doing well
Un fortunately, that's 'well'.

Aboriginal students feel marginalized,
They’re still asked to check their identity at the door,
Where they’re constantly getting these negative images of themselves,
Reading textbooks that don’t properly represent them,
Aboriginal with a small 'a'.

We’re dealing with identity,
Getting off of welfare,
Getting out of that dependence loop.

There are all these stereotypes,
A demonization of an entire people
But the problem is a lot of people aren’t educated,
When you have no idea what has actually gone on in history
It’s really dangerous.

We need to look at the history of First Nations,
Stop sweeping the issues under the carpet
Really have discussions about it.

Doing nothing is not an option,
And there's going to be problems and conflicts,
With so many mistakes made in the past,
How do you push ahead without misstepping?
But the status quo is not okay.

We have a lot of work to do

**Being an Educator in an Accountability System**

While all participants agreed that more changes need to occur to rectify the injustices of our colonial past and imperial education system, there is an impasse as to how to solve these problems. Accountability mechanisms, such as tests, plans and agreements, were an observable solution that offered clear information to inform practice and guidelines to move forward. These ‘tools’ become a further site of discord and inconsistency when not all members are aware of or agree on their intent.

**Numbers and Plans**

We have individual data, school data,
The Human Development Index, the Canadian Test of Basic Skills,
There are school wide writes,
Teachers’ own assessments,
We have a snapshot of performance,
The Foundation Skills Assessment.

The more information you have about a child,
I think the better it is,
*You have a professional teacher*
*Who assesses kids daily and puts out a report card.*
*Which is considered meaningless next to this one test*
I’d like to see where the Ministry thinks they should be.
We use various forms of data collection,
*The job of a teacher has become more complex*
But principals have a hard time getting people on board,
To do what’s right for children.
*I’d rather be doing activities within the classroom that support their learning.*
Certainly having more information on a child will influence teachers.

There needs to be a deeper level of conversation among educators,
About what can be done.

*By our nature, teachers are always trying to do,*
*As much as we can,*
*With as little as we get,*
There needs to be an assessment, to keep accountability in place.

We have schools plans, district plans,
Reports on student achievement.
We have standing committees,
Parental committees,
We have a roadmap for success,
An Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement.

I think the agreement is one of the highlights in B.C.,
Every teacher is supposed to be aware of it,
*It’s funny; I’ve never actually read the Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement*
Every administrator is supposed to be talking about it, promoting it.
*I haven’t heard anything from the administrator,*
Not putting it on the Aboriginal teachers’ lap.

But it’s being left to the First Nations staff to implement,
*The Aboriginal Worker would be a part of that, right?*
Or being passed along to parents,
There's supposed to be a poster about it in every school in Vancouver,
*Teachers don’t really know about it, nobody’s read it,*
So I don’t think its affected classroom much at all.

It's a really important document,
*Remind me what that agreement is again?*
It needs to be more than just a document on a shelf,
*I left copies of it out, and posted it on our parent board*
But it’s too easy to put on the side table.
And there’s a resistance to change.

We have students,
Aboriginal and non,
Slipping through the cracks,
Kids who aren’t graduating,
We have a system,
That’s not working.

**Transparency through Ranking**

Imagine those teachers
When they get their results,
Their school on the bottom of every school.
What does that do?
Putting everyone in a hierarchy of who’s better
What purpose does it serve?

When those rankings come out in the paper,
It just makes me ill
We can predict right now who will end up on top
It makes me so upset
And it’s very discouraging,
That counterproductive use of data.

The media publish the results and rank the schools
The results are skewed and used
Misused in the papers,
To sway public opinion on public education
Show that teachers are not doing well enough
Then the shaming comes into place.

It erodes the self-esteem of the teachers
The school is ranked poorly and morale goes down
If I move from a low-income neighbourhood,
To a high income neighbourhood,
Do I become a better teacher?
Many people take it very seriously.

We were the second fastest declining school
Inner city schools are low,
Westside schools are high,
It’s not a surprise when you see,
Which school is failing and which isn’t
But it does create educational instability.

It’s too often used as a grading tool,
A political tool,
An economic tool,
Another shaming device,
To show that teachers are not doing their job
And create competition between schools.

But it’s a very cookie cutter approach
Useful for real estate agents
Parents shopping for schools
It never accurately reflects,
What’s happening in schools.
If you visit our schools they’re very complex.

Imagine if we looked at all the dynamics involved
Rather than this biased information,
And these gloomy conclusions and comparisons
What would that do?
Looking at all the educational issues
What purpose would that serve?

Professional Judgment, Limited

A tool that has been given ‘top-down’
We will administer the test if we’re directed to
But it really is someone else’s device.

Teachers will do them because they’re mandated
If they didn’t have to do them,
They wouldn’t.

There’s a real sense of frustration
I’ve just said I will not administer
Because it’s not working to improve anything
Legally I’m supposed to,
But I won’t
I don’t know what the discipline would be on that.

We’re trying to get the teachers to buy into it
You see the Ministry is not the enemy
We’re going to have controversy regardless,
Because we all like to argue
Though I do have mixed feelings about this
They’re meaningless for many of our schools.

Last year I had to do them,
I ‘divorced’ myself from giving the kids any kind of support
Just administered the test based on the guidelines
Because when you can be reprimanded for not administering
You have no investment
It's not a win-win situation.

We’re always trying to fit in more stuff
Meanwhile I must push aside my own curriculum,
Now I’m catching up on all the things put on hold
I didn’t feel that we benefitted in any way

It’s become so distorted and discredited
We have so many competing demands
We don’t even report them anymore
We don’t find them particularly informative
It’s not worth arguing about anymore.

Resistance

I'd just give them the test without any preparation
Try to reinforce that you should give it what you got
Do your best but don't stress that this is going to be part of your marks for this year
If they needed extra time, I gave it
If they didn't understand a question, I paraphrased it
I couldn't help with the answer,
But I could try to help them comprehend what the question was asking
Understand what the questions are actually getting at.

The way that I would assess students wouldn't be done,
By the time my students get a test they know that they're ready
I'll give the tool back to them and go through it and see where they make mistakes,
With the FSA you can't do that
It’s lost time
Once I've administered the assessment, I put them in an envelope
They go to the principal and she sends it off to the Ministry
It's such a bizarre process to follow.

Last year I ended up getting the students results by second term,
So a term has already gone through
Plus not all the students even took the assessment,
I had two grade 4’s that wrote the test and 28 others.
If you look at participation rates you see it,
The union being so opposed to them sends a strong message
They tell the parents don’t have your kids write, then they don’t write
I was very political and the parents were very interested
Most of the parents opted out from the FSA
For quite a few years, I actually didn’t administer it at all.
Dealing with Standards, Mandates, and Success

Discussions of the Foundation Skills Assessment led to discussions of the standards and curriculum. Aligned with the provincial curriculum, the assessment acts as a reflection of the standards and influences educators’ capacity to work through the curriculum. Teachers voiced concerns with the scope of the curriculum, how it restricts time and by doing so limits child-centred practices. Narrowing the curriculum was not a simple solution; as programs aimed at doing so in the pursuit of success, often restricted professional freedom and still limited child-centred learning. In both scenarios, the curriculum lacked Aboriginal content so the teacher was left to fill in the empty curricular spaces with restricted time and freedom.

It’s What Needs Doing

It’s really hard.
Plugging through a bunch of curriculum
That the government mandates
A few kids I barely knew
I didn’t have time to advocate for them
Or know their families.

It’s such a waste,
That test,
We have such a huge curriculum,
We’re already so scrapped for time,
We’re always trying to fit in more stuff,
Never mind bringing in more stuff
That’s not the curriculum.
Yet it doesn't test a lot of other curricular areas,
So it’s just really time consuming.

It’s too early
February is not a good time,
You’re trying to get all your material in to cover.
February, March, April
That’s critical learning time
Real solid productive months,
It interrupts that time.
It’s frustrating,
I do geometry in June
I looked at the tests years previous
They didn’t have any geometry questions
Then one year, boom,
20 geometry questions.

It’s very vague.
If you’ve ever seen FSA results,
They don’t tell you very much,
‘Sort of meeting’ or ‘not meeting’ doesn’t really explain anything,
15 minutes with a teacher can tell you a great deal more
Than a bar or a category.

If we had more flexibility,
Because we have the 'grade 4 curriculum,'
Or the ‘grade 7 curriculum’,
We don’t give kids the kinds of options,
In terms of their areas of interest,
To explore their own heritage,
Or culture.

I’ve undertaken the task,
Insured that I incorporate Aboriginal perspectives
It needs to be improved upon
The curriculum.
Unless a teacher takes the initiative,
It may not be addressed.
I bring that up to the staff
And experience
The rolling of the eyes.

We’re taught that each kid is different
Everyone learns in a different way,
At a different speed and all that stuff,
And yet we still give these standardized tests.
If they can’t show their knowledge on it,
If it’s not in pen and paper, sentences, and answers
Then they’re probably not going to make it.

**Narrowing**

We’ve had great improvement with Aboriginal scores
Mostly because of our direct instruction program,
Reading Mastery.
Teachers have to receive specialized training,
During the year they’re mentored,
Observed by a more experienced Reading Mastery teacher,
Every teacher uses it daily from recess until lunch,
The whole school basically shuts down for Reading Mastery.

I have a script
That I read from,
It’s subsequent,
  Researched
  Improved upon,
  Constantly revised,
    Rote
    Boring
  But the kids show success.

We found a program for the kids
It was costly
We had to replenish the workbooks every year
So we do fundraising
People are more than willing to contribute to literacy
The advantage was that it provided teachers
With all the materials required to teach the program

It’s not a perfect program,
You have to supplement
  Add other things
I’m not sure who made it
We weren’t getting the results
We found another program
  Phonics
  Sounds
  Phenomenal success.

Every couple of years
There's a new math smart program
A literacy workshop
That everyone needs to take
A book about literacy
That you have to read,
There are always these new initiatives
Schools get preoccupied with these things
New trends, different fads.
It’s always missing the point.
Sure it might be beneficial in some ways
But, we don't mix and match
Then it's like that's bad
Now this is good
In a couple years we'll be onto the next thing
We’re always going through changes
I don't know how successful any of it really is.

Changes

BC curriculum
Grade 4 is the big First Nations year,
That's when all the kids learn about First Nations issues
You only need to learn about the Tsimshian and the Haida,
I think that's pretty much it.
Then they're never brought up again
You have choices in high school for course
There is some curriculum, but it's optional.

Not a single person in this class knew about residential schools.

Elementary school
How to be proud of who you are,
School doesn't really address that for Aboriginal students,
Rather than, a special worker who you go to for this many minutes a week,
We need a more effective way of furthering that sense of inclusion.
There needs to be a huge push in teaching cultures,
Everybody's being forced to learn about White culture
And you see this is where the thinking needs to change.

If we want to bring about a different culture then we should be welcome to it.

Grants
We applied for money and brought some authors in.
Updated the resources
Included Aboriginal material by Aboriginal authors.
Embedded some Aboriginal content in various subject areas
Used learning strategies developed with First Nations consciousness.
Following the curriculum and prescribed learning outcomes
But connecting to First Nations beliefs

There is resistance to change, even with our small staff.

Teachers
I've actually heard comments
‘Well Aboriginals aren't the only culture at our school.’
Don’t use the veil of multiculturalism to thwart any Aboriginal education
There was resistance against an elder saying a prayer during an assembly.
People thought 'That's religion, we're not allowed to do religion here'.
She was instructed not to say 'prayer', to say 'blessing'
But that’s how we do a lot of our meetings, our opening remarks.

So there are still facets of racism that are alive and well.

Education
Instructors don't really know anything Aboriginal
My experiences at university
I do see racism in people's eyes when an Aboriginal person comes into the room
If you don't carry yourself well, if you don't speak well, people will write you off
I graduated and I did the questionnaire at the end
I wrote ‘You guys need to have mandatory Aboriginal Ed.’
For all of our students, for all the teaching students.

We've got to surrender some old structures and assumptions.
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications

Although some studies might investigate the construct or content validity of the Foundation Skills Assessment, this study focused on the consequential validity of the measure, namely, what were the intended and unintended consequences of the FSA for Aboriginal students? The findings indicate that British Columbia’s climate of accountability, one marked by the FSA, accountability contracts, and the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement, creates tensions between teachers and administrators; as well as, tensions for individual teachers as they work within such a climate. Educators experience competing narratives, leading to different relationships with the assessment and understandings of Aboriginal student success. These narratives, explored within the chapter, reflect the complexities of accountability-based schooling and the nuances of Aboriginal education.

Competing Narratives About Assessment and Aboriginal Student Success

While most educators rejected the province’s mandate on standardized testing, their reasons for doing so varied. These reasons were a product of their perceived role within the schooling system, identity as a good educator, and educational values. These perceptions generated a number of narratives that defined them as teachers, guided their sense making of the assessment, and its worth; as well as, shaped their conceptions of best practice. Teachers did not identify with a single, linear narrative, but rather complex, competing narratives were expressed. Teaching a grade in which the FSA was administered meant teachers were expected to perform duties that played a significant role in their narratives. When teachers were faced with competing demands, tasks not aligned with their perspective of what teachers should do, they reconstructed
these narratives, which created conflict for them. A closer look at these narratives will provide a 
deepen understanding of such conflicts.

The Attentive Teacher Narrative

One narrative is that of the attentive teacher, an advocate of the student, who guides 
children through their emotional, social, and cognitive development while caring for each one 
differently according to individual need. This narrative exists in the classroom setting, where 
teachers are the authority, able to guide their own reality; that’s not to say that this narrative only 
exists within the physical space of the classroom, but that the classroom provides a setting that 
supports this narrative. The teachers strive to understand their students, to know more about their 
needs, and family circumstances, and use this information to try to form a personal connection 
with each child. Within this narrative, educators value their classroom as a safe learning 
environment where decisions are made in the students’ best interest. It’s What Needs Doing 
began with a 4th grade teacher’s concern with being unable to advocate for their students or get to 
know their families. As educators of Aboriginal children, this perspective is also characterized 
by a desire to ensure cultural identity is respected and explored within the classroom. In the same 
poem, another educator shared how they did advocate for their students, reminding other staff 
members that schooling should be inclusive of Aboriginal culture. Though each participant 
struggled with either a lack of time or with “the rolling of the eyes”, both still valued child 
advocacy as a fundamental element of their narrative.

Operating within an attentive teacher narrative, educators were concerned with the social 
injustices and the equity of education. This is apparent in These Other Kids, when the 
achievement gap is identified as a product of racism, contemporary schooling as a British 
system, and tests as an Anglo-Saxon artifact. Additionally, Open Doors, revolves around the
concern that schools are places where Aboriginals must “check their identity at the door.” These students suffered by existing within a system that does not justly recognize their Aboriginal identity, denoting it to a small ‘a’. Through this perspective, teachers again saw the need for change, valued themselves as molders of future with less disparity, and included Aboriginal perspectives in their practices not just for the benefit of Aboriginal children, but also for greater social change.

*Open Doors* displays another component of the *attentive teacher*, the focus on parental involvement in schools. The narrative associates good teaching with knowledge of the children’s families and open communication with parents. Good schools provide parents and students with a sense of belonging, teachers lamented not being able to “pull parents in” or “get them inside the school.” From this perspective, schools were unappealing to Aboriginal parents; without their involvement their children suffered; moreover, creating open communication would remove this barrier to Aboriginal success. According to the *attentive teacher*, the school structure was a detriment to education, suppressing achievement, and preventing communication between families and educators.

**The Objective Professional Narrative**

Another narrative is that of the *objective professional*, a teacher who is an employee of the province, who performs their mandated duties, while treating all children equally. This narrative is set in the out-of-classroom spaces, in school meetings, professional development workshops, parent-teacher meetings, and community events, where the educator is expected to interact with other stakeholders but with a professional distance. Part of their professional identity was defined as one who could get their students to meet the external benchmarks set forth by the Ministry; therefore educational practice involved seeking activities and resources to
fulfill the prescribed learning outcomes or improve student scores. This narrative is evident in the poem *Narrowing* where the objective of raising achievement lead to direct instruction programs, which participants credited for the success of their students. Teachers adopted these types of programs despite being scripted, boring and rote because they helped children succeed during testing. So while teachers sometimes sought professional autonomy to select their own texts or take part in new programs; this freedom was seen as a tool for allowing them to still meet Ministry standards, rather than question the standards themselves. This is illustrated in *Numbers and Plans* where participants take pride in the amount of planning and data collection that occurs in their schools. Their role was not limited to the classroom, as there is a sense of being a member of the school and teachers sought opportunities to help make the school a respected part of the community. Working in a school with Aboriginal children, meant that they needed to help improve achievement, as low performance signified a problem with the system. An effort was made to treat the symptom, through tutoring, direct instruction, or extra programming, rather than question the cause of the difference and change the system itself. They feel that good teaching is about providing children with a sound understanding of the key subject areas, to help them be successful in high school, and hopefully the ‘real world’.

**The Complexity of Narratives**

Principals also dealt with multiple identity narratives, these were associative, adopted within their shifting role as both administrator, ones who perform the tasks required by the Ministry, and as leader there to support the teachers. Within the administrative role, their focus was on budgeting resources, creating and enacting school plans, collecting independent data, and ensuring mandates are met. In *Numbers and Plans*, principals were concerned with getting teachers “on board” for doing what was right for kids, in this case, collecting data and following
mandates. Meanwhile, the leadership role meant a focus on ensuring teachers had the resources, in the form of preparation time, texts, and lesson materials; as well as the professional development needed to educate children. Their narratives were less concerned with individual student outcomes and more concerned with how they could indirectly influence these children through their administrative and leadership responsibilities. At the end of These Other Kids, a principal asks Aboriginal students what they really want, mainly to create a school where teachers can fulfill this want. These acts of leadership bring about changes for teachers, students, and the school as a community.

These perspectives are not the only narratives educators adopt, they are those frequently displayed during the study. The multiplicity of narratives is demonstrated by different voices and experiences heard throughout the poetic transcriptions. Hamilton (2010) argues that, “The myriad narratives of the individual reflect a dynamic and fluid view of identity and the importance of contextual narratives and the interactions between the inner and outer world of the individual” (p. 411). Both teachers and principals can adopt one or more of these stories indeed most aspects intertwine and overlap; however, these narratives lead to frustration when they compete with each other. As Jessop and Penny explain, “Teachers’ personal and private narratives are told in relationship to the dominant (or public) narratives of education and society, which set the context, and provide the parameters in which teachers’ voices are heard.” (1999, p. 216). Conflicts occur when the narrative held by an educator is contradicted or threatened by influences outside of its control, such as, the demands of their administrators, government, parents, or the general public. This discord within schools is demonstrated when educators criticize and rebel against the educational system, its hegemonic structures, and subsequent meta-narrative which is explained further below.
Narrative Tensions: Conflict in Educational Practice

Teachers expressed frustration when their narratives did not align with their professional practices due to factors such as funding, testing, or curriculum mandates. Competing demands for their time and attention meant that they were often faced with choosing between two narratives; focus on more child centred practice or focus on improving achievement? The conflict occurring here is not simply within the educational hierarchy, but rather a conflict within the metanarrative of accountability-based education.

For the attentive teacher narrative the Foundation Skills Assessment was the means to the wrong ends: it was not considered a useful tool for teaching. They defined success as social, identity, and emotional development, all things that could not be measured by the FSA. While teachers considered writing, reading, and math skills significant to student’s academic development, teachers questioned whether the FSA reflects actual learning and influences teaching. They were frustrated that the standardized test represented a one-size fits all approach to academic achievement, criticizing its closed-ended questions, standardized content, time-restrictive format, and the inherent lack of opportunity for children to express themselves creatively. The test did not adhere to their philosophy that students’ should pursue their interests and display knowledge in a variety of manners within a supportive classroom environment.

Teachers express this inconsistency, at the end of It’s What Needs Doing, when they point out that although every child is different they must standardize to the test, showing knowledge as dictated by the measure. Teachers identified the freedom to control classroom activities as an advantage of being an educator, thus they opposed standardized testing practices as a threat that depersonalized their own student assessments, juxtaposed their judgments of best practice, and took time away from their own class schedule.
Additionally, they felt testing itself was a distraction from dealing with bigger issues for Aboriginal students such as institutional racism, lack of educational opportunities, and high drop out rates. From this stance, they sought professional opportunities to inform their practice, to make it more beneficial to Aboriginal students, because they felt an ethical obligation to provide a culturally sensitive learning environment. These teachers expressed concern that the prescribed learning outcomes, courses, textbooks, and subsequent provincial testing did not have enough Aboriginal content. This can be seen in *Open Doors*, where an educator noted that the textbooks did not properly represent the needs of their Aboriginal students, or in *Changes*, which demonstrates the lack of curriculum devoted to Aboriginal history or knowledge. A similar sentiment is expressed in *It’s What Needs Doing*, whereby the rigidity the curriculum prevented cultural exploration. These irritations were not with the curricular shortcomings surrounding Aboriginal education; it was with the overarching social message that other cultures do not need to be learned. *These Other Kids* foreshadows this ‘othering’ illustrating how the dominating culture marginalizes other groups, values, or sources of knowledge. The attentive narrative confronts this hegemony, questioning the dominating culture’s control of what is known and what should be learned. Teachers operating within the attentive narrative were critical of the existing system, as a relic of Eurocentric imperialism, expressing concern that it suppressed rather than supported other cultural knowledge, contributing to the marginalization of Aboriginal students.

In reaction to these narrative conflicts, teachers sought ways to change the system itself. They were critical of not only the schooling system, but also the universities that prepared them for the profession itself, arguing that the province’s teacher education programs did not prepare them for educating Aboriginal children. In evaluating the university curriculum, one teacher
completed an exiting program questionnaire by suggesting that, “You guys need to have mandatory Aboriginal Ed. for all of our students, for all the teaching students”. Participants made other complaints of the disconnect between the theory in teacher education programs and the realities of the schooling system: “But even at Teacher Ed. we're taught that everyone learns in a different way, at a different speed and all that stuff, and yet we still give these standardized tests.” Here the dilemma lies in the philosophy taught in the teacher education program, which is akin to the attentive teacher narrative, while actual schooling practices require a more objective professional.

Rather than accept the objective testing, teachers sought to adapt it to better fit their narrative. In protest to the lack of Aboriginal content on the Foundation Skills Assessment, one participant spoke of writing the Ministry of Education requesting that Aboriginal stories be included within the assessment. This request was successful leading to a First Nations myth being included in the assessment’s reading section the following year. Other protests were less successful as illustrated by the following experience of an educator who was contacted by their principal after posting posters in opposition to the FSA.

The suggestion from the administrator was that I need to post the opposing argument, the pro-FSA argument beside it in my classroom and I said well, I won't post that and I actually believe most of what people hear is that, so this is a voice coming out that isn't typically heard, so we had quite an argument about that and the following day I was in at lunch and there was a knock at my door and it was the vice-principal and she said, I've been sent on a terrible errand. I need to come in and document everything you have on your shelves and on your walls.
This conflict stems from the tension between the participants’ attentive teacher narrative and the principals’ adherence to the accountability-based rhetoric of the institutional metanarrative. The story serves as a warning to other teachers; protest and you will be put under closer surveillance. This explains why teachers frequently resist the tests in less observable ways by discouraging student participation, not following administrative guidelines, not reviewing student scores nor using those results to guide practice, as illustrated in the poem *Resistance*. Though even these forms of resistance can cause problems for educators.

*Resistance* also reflects the teacher union’s effort to encourage parents to opt their child out of writing the FSA. Setting itself within the attentive teacher narrative, the union describes consequences of the FSA as compromises to educational quality. This can be seen in the union’s FSA withdraw letter for parents that tells parents that the assessment takes “valuable time away from richer and more meaningful learning”, as well as, “valuable resources away from the classroom” (BC Teachers’ Federation, 2012). This letter also contains a compelling illustration: “Choose the best answer: a) test b) teach” (BC Teachers’ Federation, 2012), with the latter option preselected. This illustration signals what the “correct” options for parents, choose the test and support the objective data-driven narrative or reject the test and support teaching. The decrease in participation in the last 10 years has been mainly attributed to efforts such as these. One principal makes the connection between the union’s mission and teachers’ communication to parents regarding the FSA “Look at the participation rates of the teachers. There's the militant union teachers and then they tell the parents to don't have them write, don't have them write,” later adding, “So much of it is impacted by what the teachers say about the tests.” Teachers also spoke of their right to discourage student participation; and how it was a strategy they could use to resist the mandated assessment. One teacher reveals, “I was very political and the parents were
very interested and most of the parents opted out from the FSA so I actually didn't administer it for quite a few years.”

These efforts are only successful if teachers can convince parents the costs of the test outweigh the benefits, that the assessment hinders quality education in the classroom. This can lead to further dilemmas for the teacher should the parent not share the same narrative. As a 4th grade educator commented, “I had one parent who was upset with me because I had sent something home about my issues with the FSAs.” Another teacher shared a similar experience after talking to her students on the costs of the FSAs, “I had parents write a letter of complaint to the administrator and they were upset”. These are examples of how defending their attentive teacher narrative against bureaucratic accountability practices, actually led to a different source of accountability, in the form of parents holding teachers answerable for their opinions. In these cases, both the institutional mandates and public opinion challenge the teachers’ philosophy of best practice, and ultimately their professionalism. In turn, educators compromise their beliefs and administer the test, and their efforts to oppose the assessment become less visible.

Since the BC Ministry states that the assessment is used to guide practice, a straightforward form of rebellion would be to not follow the administration guidelines or not use the results. Some participants attempted to feel more comfortable with the FSA, by aligning it with their attentive teacher narrative and taking action to improve children’s testing experience. In It’s What Needs Doing, one educator considered the FSA content when planning their timeline, leaving the geometry unit to the end of the year because previous tests did not contain this material. The educator became frustrated when their scheduling, premeditated for better performance on the test, hurt their students’ outcomes when the test contained a high number of geometry questions. This educator’s attempt to align their narrative with the test increased
wariness with testing practices; meanwhile, going beyond the standardized administration of the test, by paraphrasing questions or providing additional time helped them regain control. Other educators struggled to do this because although their attentive teacher narrative told them one thing, their objective professional narrative told them another. This is illustrated in *Professional Judgment, Limited* when the participant had to ‘divorce’ themselves from the test, this divorce from the assessment was not limited to its administration; the majority of participants asserted that they did not examine or reflect on the results once they came back from the Ministry. They maintained that something coming ‘top-down’, that they had no control over, should not interrupt their class time. That is not to say that they did not care how children did, but coming from this narrative, teachers were more concerned with how the children felt about the assessment than how they scored. One educator explained, “I never actually even saw the results of my students but I was really concerned for a few of them who really struggle, who have problems even just sitting down for a couple of minutes”. Educators attempted to ease these fears by explaining to their students that the assessment did not count for marks and that it was not a true reflection of their abilities. After sacrificing time for the assessment itself, use of the data was considered a further waste of time and resources, and would pay credence to a practice they found invalid.

This aversion to top-down policy extended to the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement, which some educators had either not heard of, read, or incorporated into their classrooms practices. Although teachers agreed with the goals of the agreement, the mandate itself was seen as something that came from outside or higher up; therefore, it was something that did not belong in the classroom. As seen in the poem *Numbers and Plans*, the agreement seemed to ‘slip through the cracks’ of the system as no one took ownership for enacting its
intentions. Though all teachers wanted to help their Aboriginal students, some complained of the Ministry only approaching Aboriginal education in a tokenistic way that was out of touch with the classroom or the nature of the problem. A 4th grade teacher elaborates, “The issues are about systemic oppression and poverty and things like that, which you don't fix with a program that will come into your school for one day a week.” Educators often felt that they worked hard to undo injustices in the classroom, by discouraging competition, and encouraging children to explore their identity in a respectful manner.

These teachers were concerned that they were working in a broken system, one that reaffirmed a value structure based on success as scores. “It’s challenging because it’s not the norm” one participant commented on undoing the self-focused norm prevalent in the classroom. The challenge of going against the ‘norm’ highlights how schooling practices are hegemonic with ingrained power relations, one that focuses on individual achievement and run counter to a communitarian narrative. A focus on scores, or ‘success’ as measured by tests may miss the purpose of education, but that perspective was difficult to change. Teachers felt the efforts they made in their classrooms were not enough to ensure students would not attach importance to scores later during their schooling; therefore, some were discouraged feeling trapped in a system that followed an ideology they did not agree with. As the following teacher explains, “[the FSA] creates competition between teachers and schools and why are we doing that, except for maybe like, that's how we are in a capitalist society, but myself I'd like to get away from that”. Again this expresses the desire of an educator to get away from the competitive nature of the accountability practices that reflect a neoliberal ideology. In other words, they resist the objective professional narrative because it contradicts their perspective. This contradiction
occurs often within the elementary schools, as the institution itself follows a metanarrative of education based on performance.

Aligned with the rhetoric of accountability-based education, the objective professional narrative experiences less conflict in the province’s elementary schools. This narrative reflects the grander institutional narrative that supports achievement; therefore there is less source of contention. When dealing with the FSA some tension did arise because although it valued the intention of standardized testing, teachers felt that the political effects outweighed the benefits of such data. So while assessment scores were valued as a potential teaching tool, they did not fully support the Foundation Skill Assessment due to the Fraser Institute’s use of the test results. As one principal suggests, “Get rid of the ranking immediately and I think you'll see a huge change in the buy-in by teachers”. This sentiment is echoed in this teacher’s words: “I think the biggest thing would be to get rid of publishing the results and get rid of ranking schools period.” The issue with the rankings was one shared by the attentive teacher narrative, but while the attentive teacher was concerned with how a poor ranking would affect morale, the objective professional was concerned with how it would make them look in the media. They wanted good results on the FSA because that meant the school and community looked successful, and that accomplishment would set up students for further success.

Teachers felt they should administer the assessment because it would prepare children for high school tests of a similar nature, and ultimately prepare them for life outside of compulsorily education. In defense of the FSA, one educator stated “when they get to university they're gonna have tests. In high school they're gonna have tests, so again, it's just practicing and preparing them for the future.” This argument illustrates the acceptance of an educational system based on testing because it presumably reflects the larger societal narrative of competition. This viewpoint
mirrors neoliberalism view that students are future workers, that competition in schools prepares them for the ‘real world’, and that motivation to succeed impacts performance.

Operating within this narrative, educators accepted the hegemonic structures within the system; following assessment administrative guidelines and accepting direct instruction practices. One educator shared that they did not feel they had a way to truly prepare their students for the FSA, that they could perform practice tests “but then it's not an accurate assessment device.” This shows their apprehension to perform classroom activities that might skew the results and threaten the validity of the assessment. To that end, it shows a respect of the measure, a fear of working against its objectives, and a focus on following the conventions of an accountability system. To help kids succeed within this system, teachers adopted direct instruction programs, despite observing that it encouraged rote learning and that their students were often bored. These programs limited teacher’s pedagogical freedom, controlling what and how students learned material, by sacrificing more meaningful exploration of knowledge for scripted, structured lessons. Using direct instruction programs also increased accountability of educators, requiring them to receive additional training on the programs; as well as, having other more-experienced program instructors observe them deliver the lessons. Here we see how the spectacle of performance goes hand-in-hand with surveillance; with monitoring used to ensure educators are properly performing a program and so that their students also become performers. But operating within the system and following accountability practices did not guarantee the success of all students.

Poor performance by Aboriginal students is attributed to not having enough ambition to be a part of the ‘real world’ usually experienced by middle-upper class non-Aboriginals, “I hear this a lot with marginalized youth like, ‘what's the point?’ I can't go to university, I can't pay for
university, so they don't see themselves getting to that point so why even bother, there's no motivation”. Without the drive to complete post-secondary studies, Aboriginal students fail to perform; this explanation sets the blame with the student rather than with the schooling system or neoliberal values. So rather than changing the school model, programs are set in place to help change the child or inspire them to want to achieve. For instance, one school started a sports program lead by university students because they “wanted to have leaders for the program who could inspire the students to want to go on to higher education, who were excellent role models in terms of academics as well as athletics”. Other programs included homework clubs or tutoring, efforts aimed to increase the rate at which students accomplish curricular and performance benchmarks, by offering a replication of things already present in the school system. That is not to say that educators were not concerned with Aboriginal performance in schools, but this concern is more economic than humanitarian. Through this perspective one participant warns,

A lot of people do not realize that we are going to have an economic crisis if we do not address this very important topic of Aboriginal and First Nations education because the fastest growing population in our country is the young Aboriginal population. The fertility rates are higher, more babies are being born, and we also have my group, the baby boomer group. We are into retirement or almost into retirement and so we're not contributing as much in terms of taxes and things like that to society, but we can’t have a situation where we have all these uneducated young people.

Here the concern is not that Aboriginal students deserve an equitable education as it would be socially just, instead the argument is that addressing the issue of Aboriginal education would be more lucrative than ignoring it. This is a good example of how neoliberal ideology influences
educators’ perspectives on what is important and why, leading to decisions based on efficiency rather than individualized, child-centred, or socially just practices. So the objective narrative weaves a story where children’s academic success is necessary not only for educators’ professional integrity, but also for the greater good of the economy.

Source of Narrative Conflict: Beyond the Tension

The objective professional narrative is a compelling one, who would not want to have their students succeed. Meanwhile, the attentive teacher narrative is also appealing, as who would want to degrade their students’ morale. Though both want children to be successful the distinction between the two narratives lies in their definition of success and what equitable education requires. The objective professional requires finding ways to ensure all children perform well given the same educational experiences, while the attentive teacher focuses on providing different educational experiences to ensure children feel successful. Thus the objective professional looked for an external indicator of success, while the attentive teacher did not need such an indicator as feeling is internalized. Although participants may strive to achieve both outcomes, an emotionally stable engaged student that thrives academically, the demands competing for their time and attention often required them to sacrifice one narrative for another. Neoliberal ideology and a metanarrative of accountability support the objective narrative; while the attentive teacher narrative experiences more conflict in schools. When top-down governing policies countered their philosophy of how to best educate children, educators had to make choices that suppressed one narrative, which lead to mounting frustrations.

Moreover, teachers’ competing narratives creates a climate of conflict between powers within the educational hierarchy, which leads educators to question and express caution towards other job requirements. In fact, educators commented on not reading or knowing about the
Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement, in part because they viewed it as another top-down accountability mechanism. This suggests that educators’ disagreement with the FSA may lead to avoiding other policies. While they are mandated to administer the FSA, there was a clear avoidance to enact non-mandated policies as a rebuttal for power. Educators felt their professional anatomy was threatened by the FSA, thus they sought to regain their identity by circumventing other top-down procedures, regardless of how practical or functional that procedure may be. Consequently, another unintended outcome of provincially mandated standardized testing, is that it creates an air of distrust and insurgence in which educators’ do not participate in other educational affairs that originate outside of their school.

**What Contributes to Success for Aboriginal Students**

**Curricular Changes**

The focus of this study was on the impact of government-mandated assessment on Aboriginal education, but the findings also point to what are perceived more broadly to be successful contexts for learning for Aboriginal students. Teachers felt that Aboriginal students were most successful when they are in a culturally supportive learning environment. This means an environment in which they are not singled out within classes or pulled out of class due to their heritage, but rather that the classroom lessons and activities included accurate information from the perspective of their culture. Teachers were concerned with other students’ ignorance regarding Aboriginal history, but were conflicted about the curriculum standards, which lacked Aboriginal content. They complained that some current content was tokenistic, present as inserts in textbooks or as extra-curricular activities rather than an authentic attempt to integrate Aboriginal knowledge into the curriculum. They were also concerned with how other educators or the community might view Aboriginal learning activities, concerned that it would not be
considered ‘real’ learning by outsiders or that others would demand that all of the school’s cultural heritages be explored. Additionally, educators expressed frustration with their education provided by the local teacher education programs, that it did not thoroughly address how to meet Aboriginal students’ needs, leaving them feeling underprepared for the task.

The following changes within the province’s schooling system could help to ease these concerns. Firstly, Aboriginal curriculum content, developed with knowledge holders within the Aboriginal community, could be included in each grade and included in the province’s prescribed learning outcomes. Secondly, these outcomes should include not only historical information and visual arts, but also an exploration of how an Aboriginal perspective considers aspects of science, language arts, mathematics, and other core subjects. Participants felt that having a meaningful exploration and inclusion of Aboriginal content would provide an inclusive environment that would ensure students continued actively participating in school. This type of environment would provide achievement in many spheres; through identity exploration, through continued vestment in learning, and in turn academic success; through good marks, grade succession, and graduation.

Creating adjustments to the curriculum is one small tactic for beginning much larger change in the schooling system. Prescribed learning outcomes are a top-down product that educators are already vested in; therefore, modifications to these outcomes would begin a subtle change in the classroom. These changes in curriculum could inform teachers of other knowledge to be incorporated into their lessons, while allowing them to determine how such incorporations can be made. Once these changes have been made educators may feel more comfortable teaching Aboriginal content and be able to incorporate such perceptions in their classroom without the
need of these curricular standards. Changes to the learning outcomes are one strategy, but they are not enough to restructure our current system.

**Teacher Education**

The local university teacher training programs should require coursework that focuses on Aboriginal pedagogy and provides an understanding of the Aboriginal learner beyond that of the deficit child model. These concerns were entrenched in the attentive teacher narrative, educators concerned with their preparedness to help Aboriginal students. By infusing the system with teachers trained in these matters, it is the system itself will begin to change; meanwhile, educators currently employed in schools could benefit from professional development workshops that address these issues.

**Changes to the FSA**

Making alterations to the Foundation Skills Assessment itself would have an impact of Aboriginal student success. Educators complained that even if they wanted to use the results to help their students succeed, the test results came back too late in the year and were too vague to use to direct instruction. If the testing was completed earlier in the year subsequently results would be returned earlier in the year, then educators may have the time to review the results. In order for this to be useful however these student outcomes need to be communicated in clear ways. Rather than a simple bucket proficiency level designation, a report that showed where and how students scored incorrectly would provide richer assessment data both for educators and parents. As a consequence of such changes, teachers may be able to actually use the results to help not only Aboriginal students who do not perform well on the assessment, but any child that requires extra educational attention.
Currently, the test is census-based given to every school in the province and the results are available to the public. Both of these conditions allow for third parties to produce school rankings or publications that compare schools. Such publications perpetuate the failing school narrative and undercut faith in public education, which can lead to students leaving schools labeled as ‘bad’. This flight for poor performing schools would create instability and decrease school morale. The schools with low rankings that are typically labeled as bad are the Eastside, inner city schools; those that service the higher proportion of Aboriginal students. Thus such conditions have greater negative consequences for Aboriginal students in Vancouver. Using matrix-sampling to administer the measure or not opening the results to the public would improve the consequential validity of the assessment.

Summary

These changes would require a shift in the schooling meta-narrative, which is currently maintained by habitus and hegemony. When discussing ways to improve Aboriginal achievement, participants often listed socio-economic barriers to success. The poem, *These ‘Other’ Kids*, features lists of these reasons, which focus on a deficient child model. If the reasons children perform poorly are outside of an educators’ control, if it is a matter of lack of parenting, financial stability, or motivation, then there is less incentive to change what takes place within schools. Habitus allows educators to accept present conditions, making it less likely for them to seek out more culturally relevant curriculum or pedagogy. It also makes it less likely for them to advocate changes from governing bodies, such as the Ministry of Education or the universities with teacher education programs.

Social hegemony works in a similar manner, it is in the best interests of the dominant culture to maintain current practices; ones in which affluent, non-Aboriginal students outperform
their counterparts. To this effect, the curriculum has not changed to equitably incorporate other cultures, as this would signify a loss of power for the dominating ideology. There has also not been a change in the education of teachers as this may raise too many questions and discontent with current power structures and oppressing forces. Lack of change preserves the social norms that allow Aboriginal students to be framed as the ‘other’ and less significant cultural body.

Limitations: Challenges in Recruitment

A critical limitation of the study was in fact finding participants, particularly grade 4 and grade 7 educators from schools with high Aboriginal student populations. Although two interviews from each grade were conducted, the initial plan was to do five interviews from each level. This limitation seemed to be caused by a number of bureaucratic barriers, specifically academic research gatekeeping within the local school district and a recent job action by the province’s teacher union.

To conduct educational research within a school district, the study proposal is to be supplied to and agreed by the school board, once accepted the researcher is given a letter of approval to be shared with potential participants. Upon receiving the letter of approval from the local school board, the districts official advised that contact should be made directly with school principals. The administration would then determine if and how to pass it on to their teachers. The paradox being that although I hoped the study would provide insights into top-down educational governance, I certainly had not wished for the study to travel through this very structure. But here it was, getting a stamp of approval by an authority in charge, and traveling down the line to the next level of command. Concerns arose; would the principals understand the study’s intentions, would the study be communicated to teachers in a correct and meaningful way, or would it simply lie dormant in an administrative inbox.
As participant recruitment began it became evident that my misgivings were practical, the most common response being no response at all. Others replied, but with vague answers of rejection, such as ‘this doesn’t look like a study our school would be interested in’ or ‘we have already participated in a research study this year’. It seemed that contacting administrators was more of a gate-keeping tactic than a recruitment strategy, so contact with educators came through correspondence with Vancouver Elementary School Teacher Association (VESTA) and then through the snowball sampling method in which participants recruited other potential participants they knew in the profession. As all of the interviews took place on the educators’ own time and typically off the school grounds, and focused on their professional reflections based on the entirety of their career, their current administration’s awareness in their recruitment was unnecessary.

The second hurdle for recruiting participants appeared to stem from bargaining issues between the government and the province’s teachers’ union, which brought about a job action. The job action required teachers to stop all non-teaching duties, such as, administering standardized tests, attending staff meetings, and communicating with principals. The job action came into effect at the beginning of the new school year when half of the recruitment progress was complete. Now, it became impossible for principals to send forward the research information, and the political environment provided less opportunity for educators to recruit each other. Some potential participants may have been hesitant to participate knowing that taking part in educational research is a professional activity though not a teaching one. Additionally, with such tensions between the union and the ministry, some may have been preoccupied, more concerned with the current bargaining rather than with graduate research.
Despite the limitations surrounding participant recruitment, some interested educators were found and interviewed. Their reflections provided rich data; however, more participants may have provided additional insights not heard, may have reinforced the findings, or may have turned the research in a completely different direction. More interview data from differing sources may have shaped the poetic analysis differently or lead to a different type of analysis altogether. This restriction of sampling may limit the generalization of these results to the larger population. May this act as a parable for future researchers, that the socio-political atmosphere should be considered when making contact with and recruiting participants.

**Future Research**

This study examined the experiences of teachers working within an urban setting; where Aboriginal students constitute a minority. In this setting, there was a sense of accountability and educational struggle, generated in part by the ranking which characterize inner city public schools that serve Aboriginal students as poorer quality than private schools with extremely limited Aboriginal population. The proximity of private schools in Vancouver heightened this contention; further research may focus on a comparison between educators in private and public schools, with their feelings regarding Aboriginal education. Further research could also be done in a setting, with a higher proportion of Aboriginal children; for example in reservation schools or schools in communities were Aboriginals represent the majority. These would provide interesting comparison between educational settings, and may indicate other influences that affect and define Aboriginal success.

Further studies could also address the perspectives of the Aboriginal learner, Aboriginal parents, or members of the Aboriginal community. Research could explore these stakeholders’ experiences with the current school system. This may include how they perceive the FSA, or
may be wider in scope looking on their perceptions of schools as cultural spaces, how their needs are or are not being met within the Euro-model centred educational model currently in place. These Aboriginal stakeholders may reflect on how they feel the curriculum, learning activities, or school programs make schools successful.

The issues addressed in this study may be further supported by additional quantitative analysis of test data. For example, how participation rates on the mandated assessment vary between schools with high and low Aboriginal student populations. Alternatively, an analysis could be done on Aboriginal performance data itself, comparing high performing schools to low performing schools. Such data could be compared to other measures, such as British Columbia’s School Satisfaction Survey. This may provide another indication of how the FSA and its outcomes affect the schooling experience for educators and students.

This research is one step towards creating a dialogue between various perspectives on Aboriginal success. Further research would add to such a dialogue, further exploring both these issues and ones unaddressed to create a bigger conversation on educational change. By creating such a dialogue, participants have an opportunity to critically consider the schooling system and their role within it. Readers of such research would gain an awareness of others’ perspectives and the conditions that shape them. This dialogue generated amongst stakeholders would begin the process of collaborative change.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Overall, this research’s purpose was to provide insights that may guide practice to ensure a socially just education for Aboriginal learners; as well as a professionally just experience for teachers. While educators displayed a genuine care for students’ success, most were conflicted by the BC Ministry’s definition of success and methods of determining it. Frustrations and
resentment regarding the Foundation Skills Assessment and its use did not help guide practice in a manner that was meaningful for Aboriginal students. A multitude of different studies may take from or add to the findings provided; the hope is that this will be the case and that researchers and educators will continue to be critical of the norms currently instituted within the schooling system. Through questioning and cooperative understanding, the system itself may become accountable for more than student performance on a single test, but rather, accountable for providing a culturally sensitive and student focused learning environment. In this we may find true success.
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