

**Xéch xech Swa7ám Sne'wáyelh**  
**“Remember our Ancestor’s Teachings”**  
**A Personal Journey in Education:**  
**Revisiting, Learning and Adapting my**  
**Cultural, Two-Spirited and Professional Identities**

**David Kirk**  
**EDST 590**  
**University of British Columbia**

**Dr. Jennifer Chan**

**Oct 17, 2011**

## **Abstract**

How does cultural identity influence an Aboriginal learners' education? I am particularly interested in how cultural identities is recognized and nourished including the programmatic aspect of such culturally focused education (i.e. formal or informal, provincially initiated or from the Aboriginal communities). This topic is of great interest to me as I grew up being removed from my culture and have been on a path in my adulthood to rediscover my cultural identity as a Two-Spirited Sto:lo Man. In order to understand my cultural identity it is important to examine what it is to be Two-Spirited and the history that goes along with that identity. In my field of work as a First Nation's advisor for post secondary students I have observed first hand the influence of cultural identity and how that can be nurtured in an institutional setting. The one common thread throughout the literature is that of transformation and how that is key to cultural identity amongst Aboriginal learners.

## **Introduction**

Like all people we have been adapting our traditions...it is important to note that each of us comes from a specific context: social, historical, political and geographic. We share similarities, hopes and dreams and lives full of oppression and denial of who we are as people. We all share a belief that our children's lives will be better because of what we do today.

Noeliane Villebroun, National Dene Chief  
(Abu-Saad and Champagne p.14)

Throughout my research a recurring thought that comes to mind is that “I am an Indigenous student working on a graduate degree.” What does that mean for me and for my community. Xéchéxch Swa7áSne'wáyelh “Remember our Ancestors Teachings” is a thread throughout my graduate educational journey. Yes, I have tried to focus my course work, readings, topics, research on Indigenous teachings, ways of knowing, but what does this graduate degree really mean? Marie Battiste (2002) argues that “a generation of Indigenous graduate students have successfully exposed Eurocentric prejudices against Indigenous ways of knowing and the Eurocentric biases that associated Indigenous thought with the barbaric, the primitive and the inferior” (p.5). She is encouraged that Indigenous students have activated a renewed interest in Indigenous ways of knowing in all Eurocentric disciplines and professions.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, as a person who has come to know and embrace my Two-Spirited, Indigenous and professional cultural identity, I knew the final step of this graduate-school journey, a comprehensive literature review, would be done with and through Indigenous methodological tools.

---

<sup>1</sup> I use terms such as First Nations, Aboriginal, and Indigenous, and Native interchangeably, as appropriate and all terms are meant to include all people, in Canada, of Aboriginal ancestry.

My own journey to discover my cultural and Two-Spirited identity started about 25 years ago. I recall growing up in the 1960's in the suburbs of Vancouver; I would never admit to anyone that I was First Nations nor that I was questioning my sexual identity. I was not raised with my biological parents as my mother had passed away when I was very young and my father had left us shortly after her death. I did live with my grandparents for a short while on my reserve but I was then moved from there, as social workers and others in the family felt it was not the best place for me to grow up. At the time I did not feel proud of who I was nor the history of our people. I was not unique in this embarrassment. For many Indigenous people there was a lot of shame and stigma attached to being First Nations. There was not very much taught about First Nations people in the public school system and, given the legacy of residential schools and forced assimilation, there was not that much taught in homes either. I also recall the many times I was bullied growing up being called fag, homo, etc. It is a time in my life I do not look back at with fond memories but that has been a driving force for me to be an advocate in my journey, as I believe it is important share my journey with others to help end the shame and stigma that have been associated with Two-Spirited and cultural identities.

Our people have been passing on traditional ways of knowing, Indigenous knowledge and culture for thousands of years, and have not needed a formal “degree.” Which raises the question: how can these teachings be incorporated into mainstream western-based institutions? In this vein, Monte, writes “many of the current Native programs within University institutions and many of the Tribal Colleges are in fact also contributing to the ongoing assimilation and colonization of Native students” (p.2). Throughout my paper I will be drawing as upon my work and personal experience to enhance what I have learned in my graduate research, and from many Elders over the years. Specifically, I have been involved in the Coastal Corridor Consortium project, as a committee member, which provides me with some concrete examples of culture identity working for Aboriginal learners.

I think of some of the Elders I have met over the years through my work and community connections that have so much wisdom and knowledge to share who have not attended a post secondary institution. Over the last few years in academia there has been a focus on Indigenous knowledge and attempts to validate it. We have some brilliant Indigenous scholars such as Jo-ann Archibald, Marie Battiste, Lee Brown, Michael Marker, Linda Smith, and Richard Atleo to name a few who are bringing to the forefront the importance of Indigenous knowledge, teachings and culture within the education setting. These are all important factors of one’s cultural identity in a dominated western world of education allowing Indigenous students to freely express their identity.

While working on this paper I soon discovered there were numerous but

similar interpretations and definitions of what culture is and how it fits into society.

A definition that resonated with me was in Wayne Gorman's (1999) thesis

"Words Are Not Enough: Stories of Indigenous Learning" he writes:

Culture is an anthropological term and refers primarily to all those aspects of human beings, which are non-biological that are transmittable through socialization and thereby, the learning processes. It includes artistic, social, ideological, religious patterns, and various techniques to either master the environment or live harmoniously with the environment. The term culture is used to indicate a social grouping that is smaller than a civilization but larger than an industry. Culture is not organic and can therefore only exist only where there is human life because it depends on the perpetuation of the learning aspect of the socialization processes. Thus, a culture is directly proportional to a group's ability to "pass it on". Therefore the term culture is usually used as a collective noun to refer to the symbolic and learned aspects of human society, including language, custom, and convention, and so on (p.14).

In the spring of 2011 at a faculty forum on Indigenous education at Capilano University I was fortunate to listen to Dr. Richard Atleo share some Nuu-chah-nulth stories with the whole room mesmerized as they listened to him. One of the topics of discussion at this forum was the recognition of our Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing and how that often gets overlooked in education both at public and post secondary for our people but he focused on how this neglect is being challenged and how he has observed, first hand, the transformation of Aboriginal culture and knowledge in post-secondary education.

Atleo was one of the First Aboriginal people in BC to get his Doctorate degree. Atleo who carries the traditional name Umeek is a hereditary chief who helped to create the First Nations Studies Department at Vancouver Island University. He shared with us how he began his life in the house of his great

grandfather, a whaling chief among the Nuu-chah-nulth people where he first started learning those important teachings. UmEEK shared with the faculty some of the historical, and social paradigms within educational practice, policy and community while examining methods used to structure, conceptualize educational performance and schooling differences amongst Aboriginal learners through his many years working in education. Just as Atleo shared the importance of culture and history, Berry (1999) suggests that “a positive Aboriginal cultural identity is comprised of a number of interrelated features, including the perception of oneself as Aboriginal, considering this to be important, having positive feelings about being Aboriginal, wanting to remain an Aboriginal person, and expressing these in one's daily behaviors” (p.6). He also argues that there are various degrees of a negative Aboriginal cultural identity that are comprised of not seeing oneself as Aboriginal, and not considering it to be important or not wanting to maintain one's identity for numerous reasons.

### **Historical Practices of Forced Assimilation**

Remember by Jacqueline Oker 1996

It was not long ago I was jailed at the residential school for a crime I did not commit  
the black robe guards they beat  
the sun dance  
chicken dance  
jingle dance  
fancy dance, and hoop dance out of me  
these dances are evil they yelled  
the sacred language they whipped out of me. Speak this instead they ordered  
confused, and terrified I surrendered my tongue  
brainwashed to take commands like a dog I did not know who  
I was when released from prison many moons later  
Squat over there on your Land if you can't make anything of yourself they said,  
crouching on mother earth, I faintly recall the dreamer's songs, the dances, the

legend of the spider, the hunting ways of my people  
I could not fully connect. I was alone  
one day while sitting with an elder trying to talk the black robe people arrived,  
speak your language tell the legends, sing your songs, dance your dance, record  
this for future generations  
how can I, I replied  
you pounded these sinful ways out of me Remember?  
(Gorman, p.1)

### **Philosophy of the Indian Act, 1876**

The first Indian Act adopted an explicit vision of assimilation, in which  
Aboriginals were encouraged to leave behind their Indian status and traditional  
cultures and become full members of the broader Canadian society. In this  
context, Aboriginals were viewed as children or wards of the state, to which the  
government had a paternalistic duty to protect and civilize.

This underlying philosophy was clearly expressed by the Canadian Department  
of the Interior in its 1876 annual report:

Our Indian legislation generally rests on the principle, that the aborigines are to  
be kept in a condition of tutelage and treated as wards or children of the State. ...  
the true interests of the aborigines and of the State alike require that every effort  
should be made to aid the Red man in lifting himself out of his condition of  
tutelage and dependence, and that is clearly our wisdom and our duty, through  
education and every other means, to prepare him for a higher civilization by  
encouraging him to assume the privileges and responsibilities of full citizenship.<sup>2</sup>

There have been numerous events that have impacted our cultural identity  
as Aboriginal people since colonization. One of the largest impacts has been  
residential schools which were established by the federal government of Canada  
and run by various churches as a way of assimilating and 'educating' Aboriginal

---

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996

people. These residential schools were across Canada with the last federally run school closing in the 1996.<sup>3</sup> Both my grandparents attended residential school in Chilliwack in the early 1900's. Despite my grandparents both attending residential school, I was recently reminded by my aunt that my grandpa instilled in his children how important education was to our family and to our community. He had refused to send his children to residential school at the time and sent them to public school in the 1930's. My mother and her siblings were some of the first "Indian" children in our community to attend public school. My grandpa always encouraged my Aunties and Uncles to get a "white mans" education in order to be self-sufficient and to be successful. My grandparents were the last to attend Coqualeetza residential school as it was eventually turned into a TB hospital. Aboriginal children were in some cases stolen and taken to these schools. While attending residential schools, many children faced various forms of abuses: mentally, emotionally, physically, sexually and spiritually.<sup>4</sup> In an attempt to "assimilate" Indigenous peoples into Anglo-Christian norms, Aboriginal children were often told that their Creator was evil and that "God" would punish them if they practiced their traditions. This forced cultural practice created a generational homogenizing effect by imposing Christian beliefs of morality and removing children from other forms of traditional knowledge and teaching practices including the traditional teachings about Two-Spirited people within the community. The children often faced various forms of abuse and shame, often in

---

<sup>3</sup> UNYA report (2004)

<sup>4</sup> Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996

front of their peers (UNYA report, 2004 p.4).

In 1969 the “white paper” was written with the intention to completely assimilate Aboriginal people. I can only imagine where we would be today as Aboriginal people had the policies in that paper been implemented. In response to the “white paper” in 1972, the Chiefs of the National Indian Brotherhood adopted the first written policy on Indian education, entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education*. It was presented to Jean Chretien, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, on December 21, 1972. This policy was written as a comprehensive position paper that articulated principles of local control, parental responsibility and culturally based curriculum. "We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honored place in Indian tradition and culture" (p.2). It is clear that Indigenous communities in Canada want to take a leading role in the education of their children. Battiste (2002) further supports what impact colonization has had by stating, “every Aboriginal student has been contaminated by an educational system built on false colonial and racist assumptions to target aboriginal people as inferior. The self- doubt it has generated within aboriginal students has made them discount their inherent capacities and gifts” (p.27). I felt this self-doubt throughout my own educational journey from public to eventually post secondary during my undergraduate degree in the 1990’s. Fortunately I have found my voice and do not feel the self-doubt.

## **Indigenous Research Methodology**

All things and all people, though we have our own individual gifts and special place, are dependent on and share in the growth and work of everything and everyone else. We believe that beings thrive when there is a web of interconnectedness between the individual and the community, and between the community and nature.

Everything we do, every decision we make, affects our family, our community; it affects the air we breathe, the animals, the plants, and the water in some way. Each of us is totally dependent on everything else.

Evelyn Steinhauer, *Our words, our ways* (p. 16)

Research can play an essential role in the decolonization and change for Aboriginal learners. Like many Aboriginal scholars, Amy Parent (2009) suggests in her M.A. thesis, “Keep Them Coming Back for More: Urban Aboriginal Youth’s Perception and Experiences of Wholistic Education in Vancouver” that the process of research itself: the research methods and methodologies, the theories and the questions that they create, and the presentation styles they employ require careful and critical consideration. I feel that as an Aboriginal student doing research I have a vested interest in the truthfulness of the methodology and the value of the research if it is to be of any use for Aboriginal learners. My role as an Aboriginal researcher reflects not only on who I am but my community, my relatives, and my Elders. Like many Indigenous scholars, I see Aboriginal methodology that includes Indigenous knowledge, stories, culture, and experiences. Aboriginal people for many years have been subject to research practices by outsiders who often take advantage of them and their knowledge. Pidgeon (2009) uses the analogy of a paddler to describe the importance of

respect around research. She explains, “The relationships between the paddlers, canoe, and rivers involved in paddling a canoe are much like the living processes that occur in research relationships. This understanding of relationships helps us to conceptualize the principle of respect” (p.71). Numerous Elders have taught me that we are all interconnected with Mother Earth, and the analogy of the paddlers Pidgeon uses is a good example of those important interconnections.

I have selected a holistic qualitative research method because this methodology leaves room for participant point of view or the personal voices, relationships, and experiences Aboriginal people share similar to the story telling of our Elders. Parent (2009) advocates, “a holistic qualitative research approach helps to interpret and articulate people’s individuality and stories in their own words and from their own perspectives, and is embedded in Indigenous knowledge systems” (p.29). Stories are told through various oral traditions embracing human behaviors, actions, and practices throughout a lifetime of social, economic, political and educational development.<sup>5</sup> Archibald (2009) uses the story of "Coyotes Eyes" to demonstrate the dichotomy of oral and literacy traditions. In this story, Coyote ends up with mismatched eyes as a result of not respecting the teachings he was provided. With an eye from a mouse and another from a buffalo, Coyote wanders the world trying to achieve balance as we are now trying to achieve balance between Western literacy models and Indigenous oral traditions.<sup>6</sup>

In my research and in my work I am particularly interested in how cultural

---

<sup>5</sup> Archibald Indigenous Knowledge class UBC 2009

<sup>6</sup> Archibald Indigenous Knowledge class UBC 2009

identity is recognized and nourished including the programmatic aspect of culturally focused education in various formal educational settings. This topic is of great interest to me as I grew up being removed from my cultural identity and have been on a path in my adulthood to rediscover who I am a Two-Spirited Sto:lo person. In my field of work as a First Nations advisor for post secondary students I have observed first hand the influence of cultural identity and how that can be nurtured in a post secondary setting. The one common thread throughout the literature I reviewed was that of “transformation” and how that is key to cultural identity amongst learners. This will serve as one of the main means of exploration and analysis throughout this work.

Part of my cultural journey has included canoe journeys with First Nations youth it was an opportunity to learn about cultural protocols, traditions and teachings. Much like those canoe journeys I will be exploring where we have been and where we are going regarding cultural identity in educational settings.

Berry (1999) summarizes that cultural identity refers to a:

...complex set of features that together indicate how one thinks of oneself in relation to Aboriginal peoples. First, it includes the knowledge aspect: one's perception or belief that one is Aboriginal. Second, it refers to the sense of importance or attachment that one has to an Aboriginal group or groups, in effect indicating whether being Aboriginal is considered to be an important aspect of one's social identity. Third, it involves positive or negative feelings about being Aboriginal, indicating whether the person gains positive or negative self-esteem by seeing oneself as Aboriginal. And fourth, it refers to the degree of identity maintenance that a person desires, indicating whether one wants to keep and display one's Aboriginal identity, or conversely to change or hide it. (p.4)

### **Role and History of Two Spirited people and Imported Homophobia**

We are precious to the world and our communities. We are growing stronger in

our own understanding of our lives and our place in our communities and Nations. Living our lives in our own way is the best teacher for everyone who does not know about the history of Two Spirit women and our present lives. We have been and will always be part of this Earth Mother. (O'Brien-Teengs, p.23)

The traditions and teachings of Two-Spirited people is of great interest to me, as a Two-Spirited Sto:lo man I feel that it is important to share the knowledge I have learnt about Two-Spirited people as this is directly linked to my cultural identity and integral to the overall identity of the culture of communities. As a new social worker, back in the 1990's I first had the opportunity to work with numerous Two-Spirited male youth who were involved in the sex trade. I led a Two-Spirited drop-in group twice a week for over two years. One of the first things I learned from my own experience and also from the youth I worked with was the common sense of rejection, isolation, and shame from our communities because we were Two-Spirited.

Although I was always blessed that my grandmother, my aunt and some cousins have accepted me for who I am regardless, I also have some family members who do not speak to me because of it. Urban Native Youth (2004) report claims that "as a direct result of the residential school experience, homophobia is now rampant in most Aboriginal communities, even more so than in mainstream society. The religious dogma of the Residential Schools has erased a proud and rich history of Two-Spirited people in most Aboriginal communities" (p.7).

The history and traditions of the Two-Spirited people are key components to understanding my overall cultural identity and I believe in order to move

forward we need to know the past. There is much silence about this topic in our communities. In my journey over the years I have had the opportunity to visit with Elder's who shared their wisdom, and challenges with me. This knowledge, as well as reflections on my own life and work experience, serves as a strong thread throughout my research.

Many scholars write about the silence and stigma of Two-Spirited people including Stimson (2006),

The reclamation of Two Spirit people's histories remains problematic, as the entrenchment of Christian practices within aboriginal communities has created divisions. Christian values are still used to isolate Two Spirit people. Stigma due to Western ideas about gender and sexuality remain and confuse traditional understandings. In some instances violence and isolation lead many young Two Spirit people to suicide or unnatural deaths. (p.77)

The traditional role of Two-Spirited people in our communities has changed significantly through colonization and residential schools, but there is a need to honour, recognize, and share the teachings and traditions as it is in these roots of the teachings that will greatly assist our people appreciate and understand Two-Spirited people today. One of the teachings I have learned from Elders, that is valuable lesson for anyone, by telling stories, we will often encourage students to seek the answers within themselves as a way to encourage self-reflection and respect before raising questions and challenges.

This teaching reminds me to reflect and ponder what it is that I hope to achieve in this paper. I believe the traditions and teachings of Two-Spirited people needs to be shared within Aboriginal and mainstream communities to bring about healing, and acceptance for Two-Spirited People so our communities can be successful in our cultural journeys.

The term Two-Spirited was not intended to mark a new group of gender. Instead Two-Spirited is an indigenously defined pan-Native North American term that bridges Aboriginal concepts of gender diversity and sexualities with those of Western cultures (Gilley 1998 & 2008). As Lang, Williams and Jacob suggest by using the word, two-spirit emphasizes the spiritual aspect of one's life and diminishes the homosexual individual. Homophobia may not be completely avoided by using the term, but it may be held off in some instances. Many suggest there are as many traditional tribal names for these Two-Spirited people as there were tribes. There is not total agreement in communities as MacDonald suggests many "queer" individuals chose not to use the pan-tribal term Two-Spirited. Macdonald (2009) goes on to say, "While two-spirit served as a unifying term, we are entering a historical era in which those who employ the term are beginning to deconstruct and interrogate" (p.165). Among the Lakota, these men were referred to as "winkte", and the Zuni called them "Ihamana". This is another example of history being written through the cultural biases of the historians, and of a distinct culture being lost due to the prejudices of the invaders (Elledge, 2002).

According to Macdonald (2009) and others, it is through the process of reclaiming our cultural and decolonizing Aboriginal history, “we can see why the history and evolution of the word Two-Spirit not only inspired activism, but also generated a community of people invested in returning social and political power to indigenous GLBTTwo-spirits” (p.97).

Many believe including Macdonald (2009), that traditionally, Aboriginal communities sought harmony within the community in order to function. But harmony did not mean homogeneity, it meant everyone had a role, everyone provided and everyone was dependent. Within our own Indigenous communities a process of reclaiming cultural acceptance and gender roles needs to be acknowledged. This model of harmony serves as the base for modern day knowledge of balance including the components needed to make certain successful well-balanced community. This can be seen in the structure of certain practices such as those explored by Jeanette Armstrong (2010) how decisions are made, for the good of all and with a special ear towards the minority voice in Okanagan society. Batiste (2009) affirms that we are “haunted by our loss or erosion of Aboriginal languages, traditions, and cultures, Aboriginal people need Indigenous knowledge (IK) to be acknowledged, affirmed, and animated in their programs to give learners a place where they can be nourished and can learn and develop” (p.16).

MacDonald (2009) argues it is important for Indigenous nations to represent and talk about their Two-Spirited people because Gay, Lesbian, Trans, Two-Spirited (GLBTTwo-spirited) are often sidelined. Zumbo (2003) furthers this thought by stating “This may not be because you are overtly racist, anti-Semitic, sexist, elitist, or homophobic (although it may encourage these beliefs), but it is simply because you do not know any better” (p.371). That we need to challenge oppressive race, class, and gender relations in communities and this entails a rebuilding of knowledge so that we have some basis from which to change these damaging and dehumanizing systems of oppression. There have been so many influences on the acceptance of Two-Spirited people. MacDonald (2009), suggests that “Queer native people were swept back into the closet with the continuous restructuring of Indigenous social systems, particularly at the turn of the twentieth- century with missionary and federal influences moving and restricting Indigenous tribes” (p.51). In more recent times the proverbial closet door is now opening for Indigenous Two-Spirited people under the current climate of cultural reclamation.

In the winter of 2011 I had the opportunity to see the play *Agokwe* (pronounced “agoo-kway; meaning “wise woman” or “Two-Spirited”) that explores unrequited love between teenaged boys from neighbouring reserves. Waawaate Fobister is a dancer and performer from Grassy Narrows First Nation north of Kenora, Ont. Birnie (2010) Fobister urges it is most important to remember that he is forced to face many sad truths about aboriginal life -- as Nanabush notes, the time when two spirits were welcomed by the Anishnaabe has long been replaced by the poison of homophobia. This play reiterated the importance of Two-Spirited people in our culture, and in our stories.

One of the teachings from Elders suggest we need to always remember the sacred role of Two-Spirited people, and bring that forward to modern day to share this important information with our people. Zumbo (2003) also suggests that “knowledge is not just about content and information; it provides an orientation to the world. What you know frames how you behave and how you think about yourself and others. If what you know is wrong because it is based on exclusionary thought, you are likely to act in exclusionary ways, thereby reproducing racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, class oppression, and homophobia of society” (p.371). My hope is that someday there will not be so much silence in our communities about Two-Spirited people remembering our history and moving towards acceptance of Two-Spirited people who are integral to the cultural identity of our people.

### **A Time of Cultural Healing and Transitions**

The beauty of the trees, the softness of the air

The fragrance of the grass speaks to me  
The summit of the mountain, the thunder of the sky  
The rhythm of the sea, speaks to me  
The faintness of the stars, the freshness of the morning  
The dewdrop on the flower, speaks to me  
The strength of the fire, the taste of salmon, the trail of the sun, and the life that  
never goes away, they speak to me  
And my heart soars  
Chief Dan George (Earth prayers p.14)

The Aboriginal healing foundation was set up several years ago to address the impact of Residential schools on Aboriginal peoples across Canada. In their most recent publications *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey and Common Experience Payment and Healing*, they draw on the stories of hundreds of individuals who have attended Residential school who were both male and female various ages and from various places both rural and urban within Canada. The common thread in the research that kept occurring was the impact Residential schools had on people's cultural and self identity. Although many people are not fans of the reconciliations journey process. Gilbert Oskaboose (2010) writes that the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in Ottawa is "staffed by native fat cats and other bottom feeders who have no problem with growing fat feeding off the bodies of Survivors who never made it this far. They died young, often violently, unable to cope with the memories of residential school, unable to adapt, overcome and survive" (p.3).

Assimilation and loss of culture identity has occurred with Indigenous people on a global level. Robinson (2007) recommends to help children cope with school, parents need to impart different cultural identity formation strategies that contain advice on what it means to be a good person according to cultural

traditions, what it takes to be a good student at school, and the emphasis children should place on attainment of one, the other, or both goals. Brophy and other scholars suggest that the diversity of Canada's Aboriginal people is distinct and there is no recipe for integration of Indigenous knowledge and that funding, development, implementation and evaluation must correspond with community, culture, language, and landscape (p.63).

Like many scholars, Matthews supports the need for transitions in education for First Nations Learners. Some of the challenges he identifies which I also see in my own work are: transitioning from rural or band operated schools to an urban school system; sometimes misunderstanding by teachers, administrators and fellow students of the cultural context that Aboriginal students enter the learning environment from; and feelings of alienation and isolation that transfer into a disconnection with the learning environment (Matthew 2001). He further argues that, First Nations Learners, as a group, fit the definition of at-risk learners while First Nations people as a whole fit the description of a segment of society that is faced with poverty and an environment fraught with many obstacles to overcome. In order to help bring about these transitions of change, Battiste (1995) argues that Aboriginal people are on a journey towards higher education to help improve education with their own communities. They are drawing on their own theory from their own languages, cultures, stories and knowledge: "Their research is focused on decolonizing strategies raising Indigenous voices, narratives and visions as foundational to change. New and on-going allies to this work have provided important work in antiracist, anti-oppressive emancipatory

education” (p.14). Education can play an important role and, according to Lee Brown’s work, transformation and change in education can only be successful if it involves healing. This healing must be culturally appropriate and must address the emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wounds of the person, family, community and culture.

### **Culture Identity in Education**

The process of decolonization includes learning personal, family, and community history, and discovering more about personal cultural identity and the positive and negative forces that have influenced the way we live today. Healing often takes the place in this process of discovery and recovery....<sup>7</sup>

More (1996) argues the learning experiences of Aboriginal children, as with all students, are crucial to the educational and life opportunities of the children. Yet many teachers seem unable to use teaching processes, which incorporate the learning strengths of Aboriginal children. Battiste (2005) prescribes Indigenous knowledge as the remedy needed within education to bring about change. There is a need for research that explores cultural differences between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, especially in the school setting to determine the extent to which an Aboriginal pedagogy is justified. Further, if an Aboriginal pedagogy is justified to some extent, such research could assist teachers to approach the schooling of Aboriginal students in a more sensitive and constructive way. More (1990) concludes that there is a link between culture and learning styles. He also proposed a model for using learning styles in multicultural settings and particularly with First Nations students in North America (1989, 1996). Berry (1999) furthers this theme stating “a majority of

---

<sup>7</sup> FNCCEC - *The Mind and Spirit of Life, Language and Related Cultural Practices for Restoring First Nations Family and Community Health*, September 2002

participants lamented the fact that their formal education had not recognized their cultural needs and had subsequently impacted very negatively on their cultural identity. Specifically lacking was: a culturally relevant curriculum, including traditional activities, historically accurate information as part of this curriculum and knowledge of other Aboriginal communities in the different regions of Canada” (p.27). He also noted there is a lack of Native teachers and the fact that many students had dropped out of school because they missed their home communities. I look around my university and note there are very few Aboriginal faculty or staff. One participant in More’s research articulated a feeling of helplessness, “The system wants to keep us down” (p.27).

### **Reclaiming cultural identity and self determination**

Very recently I have been on a journey to obtain a traditional “Indian name”. Many First Nations people carry a traditional “Indian name”. Because of assimilation and residential school my family has not carried on with some of the traditional cultural practices of the Sto:lo people. One of the teachings I have learned from a few Elders was that at one time in our history a Two-Spirited person in the community could be responsible for the traditional name giving. After many months of research, I have recently come across some of my family “Indian names” from, of all places, the University of California. My next steps will be to talk some Elders from my reserve to determine which of these names would be appropriate for me to carry.

I knew that our family had carried several “Indian names” and had truly thought this were lost until discovering them online. The following are my family’s “Indian names” are:

Kwoxwilhót 'Indian name of Miss Susanna Jim from Katz, grandmother of Mrs. Duncan (Dorothy) Wealick (my grandmother)

Yexwéylém or Yexwílém 'Indian name of the third from oldest original Wealick brother

Siyémches, proper name of the youngest Wealick brother in a legend; now the name of Frank Malloway', literally /'said to mean chiefly hand or rich hand'/,

T'ixwelátsa, 'Indian name of second oldest Wealick brother

There are several historical legend/stories about my family history who carry the Wealick or Wileliq name within the Sto:lo people. According to Bob Joe, one of our Sto:lo Elders and has been retold in *Be of Good Mind : Essays on the Coast Salish*:

After the slide, Wileliq and his brothers moved the tribal “headquarters” twenty-four kilometers downstream from Chilliwack Lake to Iy’oythel, a settlement straddling both sides of the Chilliwack River. Over time, as the population grew, Iy’oythel became crowded, and so the headquarters was again shifted approximately twelve kilometres farther downstream to the open prairie at Xéyles, located a little less than one kilometre upstream of Vedder Crossing. Each time the headquarters moved, the satellite villages followed. By the time Wileliq established himself at Xéyles, other Chilliwack were living in the adjacent settlements around what is now the Soowahlie Indian Reserve. Not too long after their arrival at Xéyles, the brothers decided to move the headquarters again, this time a mere couple of hundred metres farther downstream to Tháthem:als (Lerman and Keller 1976). Joe points to the significance of the move: “At Tháthem:als was born a man who was to become a great leader of the Chilliwack’s and to ear the name Wileliq – the fifth man to bear that name since time began”. 15 The fifth Wileliq was destined to become a notable leader not only because of his noble bloodline but also because of the remarkable circumstances associated with his birth: Wileliq was a twin, and, what is more, his twin sister was not born until he was a month old. Moreover, Wileliq V’s birth occurred at the climax of the era of Chilliwack migration, and he was therefore

apparently regarded as special by virtue of his being a product of his antecedents' excursion to a distant location. His birth might best be considered within the context of the Salish spirit quest. Just as prominent individuals ritualistically travel to remote places to acquire spirit helpers, the people of Chilliwack Lake had collectively travelled to Vedder Crossing and acquired a new hereditary leader. Thus, it is not surprising that, under the leadership of Wileliq V, the Chilliwack consolidated their position as a community no longer oriented to the mountainous upper reaches of the Chilliwack River and adjacent Nooksack and Skagit watersheds to the south and east but, rather, to the mighty Fraser River itself. Indeed, until their appearance on the Fraser floodplain, Halkomelem was not even the mother tongue of the Chilliwack people; rather, according to tribal traditions, they spoke a dialect of the Nooksack language called "Kluh Ch ihl ihs ehm" (p.149).

Miller states, "If there is one indispensable element of an ethnic identity, it is a collective history. Other characteristics – race, biological lineage, territorial concentration, language, religion, economic specialization, or unique customs – may set an ethnic group apart, but none is an essential "building block of ethnicity" (p.43). This notion is also something I have heard from Elders is the importance of our collective history and our identity and we must not forget who we are as First Nations people. Those Elder teachings remind me to continue to reconnect with my cultural identity as Two-Spirited Sto:lo man. The above story is a good example of the importance of knowing your ancestry and how we are connected to our culture and history through these stories.

One of the most respected scholars in Aboriginal education is Verna Kirkness who is of Cree ancestry. She has been an advocate for Aboriginal learners and teachers for many years. She played an integral part in the planning and building of the First Nations House of Learning (FNHL) at UBC. She was also the first director of the FNHL. Kirkness states, "In an effort to sustain their

own cultural integrity, there is an urgent need for Aboriginal People to assume roles as teachers, doctors, lawyers, administrators, comptrollers, architects, historians, etc. This need is reflected in an observation made by Chief Simon Baker and Elder from the Squamish Nation...” (p.34).

Kirkness (1995) recommends that if universities are to respect the cultural integrity of Aboriginal students and their communities, they must adopt a posture that goes beyond the usual generation and conveyance of literate knowledge and must include indigenous knowledge and skills not derived from books alone. This can be recognized as “transformation,” a key element in almost all First Nations teachings.

In essence the theme of “transformation” is reflected in much of the research and is key component to the Aboriginal learners’ cultural identity and their educational journey. There is no easy solution to resolve the impact of colonization, residential schools, and the attempts to assimilate Aboriginal people by the Canadian Government. As we move forward there is an opportunity to nurture cultural identity in an educational setting for Aboriginal learners. Many scholars, including Kirkness, feel that Aboriginal societies in today's world are in transition. On the one hand they wish to re-assert their traditions and on the other they have to integrate the traditions into a western dominated world.

Recently I had the honor to meet and listen to Buffy Sainte-Marie present a lecture on education and Aboriginal people. Sainte-Marie (2011) suggests that ultimately we are all responsible for bringing about change in Aboriginal education. We all have the power to be advocates, bringing about even small changes and the need for Aboriginal people to be the voice to carry the message and break down those myths and educate people. She said that in her travels around the world she uses that opportunity to educate people about Aboriginal issues and set the facts right.<sup>8</sup> Over the past few years I have observed my Nation bring about transformation with teachers, schools, and communities of the Sto:lo Nation in British Columbia actively worked together as partners of change to implement curriculum and support structures reflecting Sto:lo ways of knowing rather than reinforcing the pedagogic authority (Archibald, 1995).

Michelle Pidgeon (2008), in research for her doctoral thesis, comments the first characteristic of a successful Aboriginal student was one who maintained his or her cultural integrity . She defines cultural integrity as having a sense of oneself and keeping hold of one's Indigenous understandings (p.146). Many Elders I have met also state that honoring one's self as Indigenous and gaining life skills is important but needs to be a balance. These teaching about honouring one's self reminds me how important it is to continue with cultural journey always remembering my Two-Spirited and Sto:lo identities. Aboriginal communities value education and also want their students to maintain their Native identity. Gilliland

---

<sup>8</sup> VCC presentation Science: Through Native Eyes. Buffy Sainte Marie June 14 2011

states that (1999) “only after we become aware of the [cultural] differences and understand them well enough to accept them as equally valid and good are we prepared to teach these students. Then neither the teacher nor the child will be pressured to adopt the others culture, and mutual respect and understanding can develop” (p.5).

### **Creating Cultural Change**

A holistic philosophy and psychology rooted in traditional Native values can improve the educational opportunities for Native children.  
Joe Couture, Cree Elder– Our words, our ways (p.19)

Pidgeon (2008) says a “successful university respects and honors Aboriginal student culture, identity, and ways of knowing and a successful institution also include the seen face” (p.227). Pidgeon defines the term “seen face” as universities having Aboriginal faculty, staff, and students present on campus. She argues that simply increasing Aboriginal presence on campus does not necessarily change how institutions respond to Indigenous knowledge; Indigenous knowledge is also brought into the academy through the hiring of Indigenous scholars to help change the actual learning process and recognition of what is considered knowledge. This may also include Aboriginal presence or seen face within the curriculum, cultural programming, and physical spaces of the institution such as artwork and architecture.

Another important aspect that Pidgeon and other scholars discuss is the cultural aspect of Indigenous knowledge at institutions providing and participating in cultural ceremony, honouring cultural protocols, and attending Aboriginal social gatherings. Students in Pidgeon's research spoke of the "seen face" that happened through curriculum and pedagogical practices that respected Indigenous epistemologies. Furthermore, Pidgeon and other scholars' feel that institutions were also successful if they honored the commitments to change made through policy.

The Coastal Corridor Consortiums (2008) is one example of this noting,:

Perhaps the most notable of gathering spaces is the UBC First Nations House of Learning, which offers a friendly, helpful atmosphere, and one-stop shopping aspect of learner services available in conjunction with education and social services, allowing the staff to assist students with any issues or problems that may impact their ability to learn while at the institution gathering spaces provide a safe place for delivery of student services, study rooms and computers, textbooks, a sense of belonging and cross-cultural learning opportunities for the rest of the student body at most institutions (p.28).

This is something I have been striving to achieve at the university where I work but it has not been without its challenges. An example of the challenges at work this past year was with the creating the new Indigenous gathering space for students. I came across huge obstacles on how our administration was allocating those dollars that were given by Ministry of Advanced Education. After a year of fighting the university did finally agree to allocate every dollar to the new gathering space. This took a year of my energy fighting this process, which could have been better used elsewhere, but is a good example of the challenges that are still present in the education world for Indigenous people.

One of the exciting projects I have been involved with over the last four years is the Coastal Corridor Consortium (C-3), supported by the Ministry of Advanced Education, C3 is an unincorporated society made up of volunteer board members who work to improve the levels of participation and completion of Aboriginal learners in the Coastal Corridor (Lower Mainland and Sunshine Coast) region. The Consortium is made up of the following 10 partners:

\*Lil'wat Nation \*Métis Nation BC \* Musqueam Nation

\*United Native Nations \*Sechelt Nation \*Native Education College

\*Squamish Nation \*Capilano University \* Tseil-Waututh Nation

\*Vancouver Community College

An example of how much of an impact culture has played in the role in Aboriginal learners is at the Ts'zil Learning Centre, one of our community partners that offers post-secondary learning in the community of Mount Currie. Ts'zil has the ability to offer a wider range of accredited and non-accredited courses. Ts'zil also has a strong component of academic upgrading to assist adult learners that want to pursue a post-secondary designation but need to complete their academic pre-requisites. All of the Ts'zil courses and programs have a Lil'wat cultural component built into them. These programs are intended primarily to ensure post-secondary opportunities to Lil'wat citizens. It is the cultural component that enhanced the overall learning experience for students. This past year faculty has noted with the increase of the cultural aspect to programs they have noticed a significant increase in retention of students. This is a good example the positive effects of including culture in programming and just how

important culture is to Aboriginal learners.

One of exciting projects the Consortium has also developed, which I have both participated in and co-facilitated, is the 'Teaching Aboriginal Higher Learners Professional Development Workshop' (TAHL) that introduces teaching faculty to the specific cultural methodologies and sensitivities required to resolve the systemic issues affecting Aboriginal students' dissatisfaction with education. The purpose of the workshop is that it will assist non-Aboriginal teaching faculty to better understand Aboriginal learners and their learning needs. Some of the keys learning points are:

- \*Aboriginal cultural diversity, regional Aboriginal population and education trends, and the role of Aboriginal peoples in the regional skills / labour shortage and the economy
- \*Aboriginal values and the inter-relationships important to Aboriginal learners succeeding
- \*Traditional Communication styles
- \*Course Planning for Aboriginal learners
- \*Teaching Strategies for Aboriginal learners that are based upon Traditional Learning Styles and Activities related to learning
- \*Teaching Practices that create an environment of respect & empowerment for learners, and measures of success & things to watch for (TAHL workbook p.6)

The desired goals and outcomes of the TAHL workshop follows Battiste's statement that one "the first principles of Aboriginal learning are a preference for experiential knowledge Indigenous pedagogy values a person's ability to learn independently by observing listening and participating with the minimum and convention or instruction" (p.15). Many scholars, leaders and Elders have all suggested that a university is successful when it has established and maintained meaningful partnerships and relationships with Aboriginal communities, which is something I have been working on for a number of years together with our local

communities. The C3 has created strong relationships with its ten partners who are all committed to Aboriginal learners and to continue breaking down some of those barriers down that learners are faced with at post secondary institutions.

### **Closing thoughts**

There is such a need to continue creating environments at institutions where Indigenous students' cultural identity can thrive and that we can Xéchéxch Swa7áSne'wáyelh "Remember our Ancestors Teachings". Montes (2006) asserts "We need to look internationally for positive examples and to work together with other Indigenous groups who are confronting the same battles locally and globally" (p.253). Appropriately, Sainte-Marie recently remarked, "If you don't like what's on the menu, cook something up yourself and serve it yourself."<sup>9</sup> I can relate to Montes' statement: as an Indigenous faculty member and student, he writes "as simple as it may seem to those of us who have worked in Native higher education for years, students may not be fully aware of the socio-political and cultural differences between themselves and the university culture" (p.116).

Knowing the history of our people reminds me the importance of being an advocate for Indigenous students in education so that the mainstream population

---

<sup>9</sup> VCC presentation science: Through Native Eyes. Buffy Sainte Marie June 14 2011

and Indigenous population can coexist and yet the cultural identity of Indigenous students can be maintained and supported in this western centered world of education. In recent months in the news there have been so many stories of young gay people committing suicide as they have been continually bullied which reminds me why it is also so important to continue to an advocate for Two-Spirited and GLBT people. Aboriginal people often say, 'Our children and youth are our future.' By extension, then, the future depends on the effectiveness of education. Education shapes our pathways of thinking, transmits values as well as facts, teaches language and social skills, helps release creative potential and determines productive capacities (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996, p.82). As I reflect back over my research over the last few years in graduate school I am hopeful that our cultural identity can continue to be recognized and nurtured for Aboriginal learners in the post secondary setting. In this vein, Battiste (2002) suggests, "where Aboriginal languages, heritage and communities are respected, supported and connected to Elders and education, educational success among Aboriginal students can be found" (p.17). Within the institution where I work, I know we have strived to bring in cultural components from the in-resident Elder program to the numerous cultural workshops that are offered to the students. Xéxh xech Swa7ám Sne'wáyelh "Remember our Ancestor's Teachings" is what I strive to achieve in this journey of cultural identity in education for the betterment of Aboriginal learners.

## References

- Abu-Saad, Ismael, and Champagne, Duane. (Eds.) (2006). *Indigenous education and empowerment: International perspectives*. Lanham MD: Altamira Press.
- Alberta. Department of Education, Aboriginal Services Branch. (2005). *Our words, our ways: Teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners*. Edmonton, AB: Author.
- Archibald, J. (1995). *Locally developed Native studies curriculum: A historical and philosophical rationale*. In M. Battiste & J. Barman (Eds.), *First Nations education in Canada: The circle unfolds* (288–312). Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.
- Archibald, Jo-Ann (Q'um Q'um Xiiem). (2008). *Indigenous story work: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.
- Battiste, M. (2002). *Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy in First Nations education*. Ottawa, ON: National Working Group on Education and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.
- Battiste, M., & Barman, J. (Eds.). (1995). *First Nations education in Canada: The circle unfolds*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.
- Berry, J.W. (1999). Aboriginal cultural identity. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 19(1), 1–36.
- Braithwaite, C. A. (1997). Helping students from tribal colleges succeed. *About Campus*, 2(5), 19.
- Brophy, Rachel. (2007). The missing links to developing holistic aboriginal early childhood services in Canada: A critical literature review. (Masters dissertation). Retrieved from Digital Commons @ Ryerson. (<http://digitalcommons.ryerson.ca/dissertations/531>)
- Brown, L. (2006). The Native Training Institute: A place of holistic learning and health. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 29(1), 102–116.

- Canada. (1969). *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian policy (The White Paper, 1969)*. Retrieved from <http://www.aic-inac.gc.ca/ai/arp/ls/pubs/cp1969/cp1969-eng.asp>
- Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. (1996). *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Vol. 5. Renewal: A twenty-year commitment*. In *For seven generations: An information legacy of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. [CD-ROM]. Ottawa, ON: Libraxus.
- Coastal Corridor Consortium. (2009). *Teaching Aboriginal higher learners. Professional development workbook*. Retrieved from <http://coastalcorridorconsortium.ca>
- Elledge, Jim. (2002). *Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender myths from the Arapaho to the Zuni: An anthology*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Galley, Valerie. (2009). Reconciliation and the revitalization of Indigenous languages. In Gregory Younging, Jonathan Dewar, & Mike DeGagné (Eds.), *Response, responsibility, and renewal: Canada's truth and reconciliation journey* (243–258). Ottawa, ON: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.
- Galloway, Brent D. (2009). *Dictionary of Upriver Halkomelem*. Vol. 1. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Retrieved from: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/65r158r4>
- Gilley, B. (2006). *Becoming two-Spirit: Gay identity and social acceptance in Indian country*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Gilliland, H. (1999). *Teaching the Native American*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing.
- Gorman, W. (1999). Words are not enough: Stories of indigenous learning. (Masters dissertation). Retrieved from University of Alberta Education & Research Archive. (<http://hdl.handle.net/10402/era.24168>)
- Kirkness, V. (1995). Aboriginal peoples and tertiary education in Canada: Institutional responses. *London Journal of Canadian Studies*, 11(28), 1–39.
- Larimore, Colleen Kay. (2000). When worlds collide: Native American students navigating dominant culture classrooms. (Doctoral dissertation). Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley.
- Lerat, Gil. (2004). *Two-spirit youth speak out! Analysis of the needs assessment*

- tool*. Vancouver, BC: Urban Native Youth Association.
- MacDonald, M. (2009). Indigenous American two-spirit women and urban citizenship in the twentieth century. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Purdue University Library e-Pubs: Dissertations. (AAT 3403125)
- Matthew, M. (2001). *Educational transitions for First Nations learners: Challenges and interventions*. Vancouver, BC: First Nations Education Steering Committee and the First Nations Schools Association.
- Miller, Bruce Granville. (Ed.). (2007). *Be of good mind: Essays on the Coast Salish*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.
- Mixon, L. (2010). *Coastal Corridor Consortium Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education Needs Framework Report*. North Vancouver, BC: Coastal Corridor Consortium.
- Montes, C. (2006). *An innovative response to enhance Native American educational success and advancement in higher education*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from University of British Columbia Library, circle. (<http://hdl.handle.net/2429/18594>)
- More, A. (1987). Native Indians and learning styles: A review for researchers and educators. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 27(1), 17–29.
- More, A. (1990). *Learning styles of Native Americans and Asians*. Paper presented to American Psychological Association Conference, Boston, MA. August 13, 1990. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED330535)
- More, A. (1996). *Adapting teaching to the learning styles of Native Indian students*. Unpublished resource book for teachers. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia.
- O'Brien-Teengs, D. (2008). *Two Spirit Women* (2nd ed.). Toronto, ON: 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, and Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy.
- Oskaboose G. (2010). *Column from the Serpent River First Nation, Northern Ontario*. Retrieved from <http://www.firstnations.com/oskaboose/index.php>
- Pidgeon, M. (2008). Pushing against the margins: Indigenous theorizing of success and retention in higher education. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 10(3), 339–360.
- Roberts, Elizabeth, & Amidon, Elias. (Eds.). (1991). *Earth prayers from around the world. 365 prayers, poems and invocations for honoring the earth*.

New York: HarperCollins.

- Robinson, R. (2007). Education transformation: Issues for implementing an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George, B.C. (Masters dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. (MR48831)
- Steinhauer, E. (2002). Thoughts on an indigenous research methodology. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 26(2), 69–69, 81.
- Stimson, A. (2006). Two spirited for you: The absence of "two spirit" people in western culture and media. *West Coast Line*, 40(1), 69–79, 119.
- Tuharsky, Juanita F. L. (2000). Around the sacred circle: The development of self-concept and cultural identity by four Aboriginal students taking Native Studies 20. (Masters dissertation). Retrieved from University of Saskatchewan iPortal. ([http://iportal.usask.ca/action.php?sid=471577458&url=http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk1/tape3/PQDD\\_0015/MQ54753.pdf&action=go&id=4340](http://iportal.usask.ca/action.php?sid=471577458&url=http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk1/tape3/PQDD_0015/MQ54753.pdf&action=go&id=4340))
- Zumbo, B. D. (2003). Ethnicity, modern prejudice and the quality of life. In Alex C. Michalos (Ed.), *Essays on the Quality of Life* (367–389). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.