LLED 590 MAJOR PAPER

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Title: An Investment in Return: Supporting Aboriginal Learners in the Public School System

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Date: April 29 2009
AN INVESTMENT IN RETURN: SUPPORTING ABORIGINAL LEARNERS IN
THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

by

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A GRADUATING PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
Department of Language and Literacy Education

We accept this major paper as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Abstract

British Columbia’s education system has failed and continues to fail BC’s Aboriginal students. This situation continues to be exacerbated as more and more Aboriginal families move away from reserves to urban centres.

This paper first examines data from both the BC Ministry of Education’s 2007 report titled, “How Are We Doing?” and independent sources which clearly indicate how poorly Aboriginal students are faring in the public school system in comparison to their non-Aboriginal peers.

The paper then provides an historical overview of how residential schools, in their policy to assimilate Aboriginal students, contributed to the children’s loss of language, culture, and a sense of identity. Aboriginal students today continue to struggle in a mainstream system that some Aboriginal researchers and educators refer to as a system of cognitive imperialism.

The paper concludes with a review of the research which suggests changes that need to occur for Aboriginal children to experience the same success in the Canadian education system as their non-Aboriginal peers.
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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

I began my teaching career in 1983, with my first assignment to a federally operated elementary school in Northern Manitoba. The school, located in the remote Ojibway-Cree community, had many positive aspects despite it being federally controlled, which meant that it was mandated by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (now called Indian and Northern Affairs Canada or INAC) to provide students with western-based curricula, pedagogical practices and resources which were often culturally inappropriate. What was evident was the Department’s complete lack of support and promotion of a rich cultural or language programming within the school, a continuation, it seemed, of their assimilationist policy of the residential school legacy.

Three of seven teachers, including myself, were of Aboriginal ancestry, including two local band members who had graduated from the Brandon University Native Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP). The two educators had roles that went beyond the school: they served as the go-between for new and non-Aboriginal staff and community members. Additionally, they informed the school of cultural protocols and practices, celebrations, deaths, and family hardships. Often when visiting parents and grandparents could not converse comfortably in English, the local teachers stepped in and became interpreters for both parties. As a result of their role and initiatives, many parents felt comfortable entering the school as evidenced by the high percentage of parents who attended school functions such as parent-teacher meetings and student-led activities, and those parents who dropped by to present staff with traditional foods. These two teachers, along with the custodian, ensured that all school notices, to be sent home, were not only
transcribed in English but in Oji-Cree syllabics, as well. They also advised teachers in preparing packages for students who were to be away for extended periods of time to be with families for seasonal hunting and fishing camps.

As an Aboriginal person from another reserve, my role initially was that of observer and student as I learned the cultural aspects and protocol of a community somewhat different from my own. I made a concerted effort to establish positive relationships among families and community members to further strengthen the ties between home and school. Within the school itself, I helped to promote culturally relevant resources and pedagogical practices, which acknowledged students’ strengths and talents.

When the school inspector from the Department of Indian Affairs flew in to evaluate the school’s programs and staff, it was disheartening to hear how he declared that our students were academically behind in comparison to their urban peers. Our input was not asked for so stories of excellent community involvement, good attendance (when students were not at seasonal hunting and fishing camps), and creative lesson planning with limited and often outdated resources, was not shared. The paternalistic delivery and subsequent negative reports received, resulted in many of the young teachers, including myself, being very discouraged and frustrated. I remember thinking that he did not know the students, the community, and the culture and, despite this, was making decisions about my students’ lives—these students who had such a wealth of knowledge, knew their culture and language, knew their stories and practices, and knew, intimately, the land that encompassed them. This was my first and only experience in a federally controlled band school and it left an indelible impression on me.
Even as a young Aboriginal educator, I understood that something was definitely amiss in the education system and I became determined to further empower myself through the acquisition of traditional or Indigenous knowledge and western pedagogical approaches in education. I wanted to understand how educational approaches could better draw on more holistic approaches to learning that took into account the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional realms of the students. I wanted an educational approach that recognized and validated our ways of knowing, our traditional languages, our cultural practices, and the understanding of how integral the parent, family and community support was.

In 1993, I began a teaching assignment at Nichi Mahkwa, the first Aboriginal elementary school in Winnipeg, which came to fruition after years of advocacy by Aboriginal parents, the Aboriginal community, and many educators. Here, as both teacher and student, I not only learned more about our Aboriginal history, culture, and languages which reconfirmed the impact colonization has had on our people but I was also given the opportunity to play a larger role as advocate for Aboriginal education.

In 1995, I, along with several other Aboriginal educators, was invited to sit on the planning committee for “The Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts.” One of the most significant changes we made, albeit a small one, was the elimination of the word “tolerate” in several of the prescribed learning outcomes where aspects of Indigenous knowledge were to be included. We informed the committee overseeing the draft changes that the word itself was not acceptable as it connotes pressured acceptance.
Over the years, since then, my role has extended beyond the education of Aboriginal children to providing workshops for colleagues on such topics as Aboriginal parental involvement within their respective schools. I have also provided advocacy-themed workshops for Aboriginal parents and community members to inform them of their rights and the ways in which they can have their voices heard in the public school system.

I am now well within my final decade of teaching. I am presently the Aboriginal Early Literacy Resource Teacher for our school district; however, my role in Aboriginal education, as student, teacher and advocate, is even more critical. I was once told that I am in this place because people in my family, community and nation have made sacrifices. I stand on the shoulders of all those who helped move our people forward and, in turn, I am morally obligated to give back. I do so keeping in mind that all that I've done and all that I do is an investment in return to our children.

British Columbia's education system has failed and continues to fail BC's Aboriginal students. Haig-Brown (1988) makes reference to statistics from the 1970’s identifying Native students' continued lack of success in BC’s public school system. The 94% dropout rate for Native students between kindergarten and grade twelve (p. 132) was not an anomaly. She states that figures such as these began to surface with regularity as Native students moved from residential schools to the public school system.

Richards and Vining (2004), in their analysis of data on Aboriginal learners and results from the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA), standardized numeracy and literacy tests administered annually to BC’s grades four and seven students, state that there is a disparity in the figures between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners.
Averaging over all grades and components, the Aboriginal meet/exceed statistic is 60.1 percent, which is 21.7 percentage points lower than the comparable non-Aboriginal meet/exceed statistic of 81.8 percent (p. 9). Additionally, outcomes for the FSA tests also indicate poor results for Aboriginal students in comparison to their non-Aboriginal peers. FSA results for grade four reading comprehension, for example, indicate that only 59% of Aboriginal students are meeting or exceeding expectations in comparison to 77% (p. 12) of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The pattern is also evident for grade seven students with 52% of Aboriginal students meeting or exceeding expectations in comparison to their peers at 73% (p. 15).

According to Cowley and Easton, in their 2004 report on Aboriginal education in British Columbia, Aboriginal students failed more than 40% of the province-wide reading tests they wrote (p. 3), twice the failure rate of their non-Aboriginal peers. They also state that there is less likelihood that an Aboriginal student enrolled in their first year of high school will graduate with a Dogwood diploma. It appears to be slightly better than one in five (p. 3).

BC Ministry of Education’s own 2007 report titled, “How Are We Doing?” contains a summary of data representing the progress being made by Aboriginal students in the public school system: according to the 2006/07 figures, there were 57,767 Aboriginal students in BC public schools that constituted 9.8% of the total number of students (p. 3). The “Six-Year Completion Rate” (p. 30) represents the percent of grade 8 students who graduate with a Certificate of Graduation and is not the “inverse” of a “drop-out rate” as students may graduate after the six-year period. For 2006/07, 49% of Aboriginal students attained a Certificate of Graduation in comparison to 83% of their
non-Aboriginal peers. On average, over the six years, 50% or less Aboriginal students graduated each year while their counterparts hovered, on average, about 83%. This would indicate that little has changed in terms of the numbers of Aboriginal students graduating from high school.

Data over the six-year period also indicates that there are a disproportionate number of Aboriginal students being placed in the Behavioural Disabilities category of Students with Special Needs. On average, their numbers are four times higher than their non-Aboriginal peers. This appears to be a trend as the BC Ministry of Education released a report in 2001, titled “Over-representation of Aboriginal Students Reported with Behavioural Disorders.” The authors state that “over-representation is greatest in the area of behaviour disorders where the reported incidence among Aboriginal students in British Columbia is approximately 3.5 times that of the general K-12 student population” (p. 1).

Suspension rates are also disproportionately higher for Aboriginal students in several districts, including my own, School District No. 28 (Quesnel), and are such a concern that this issue is being addressed in enhancement agreements which are working agreements between a school district, all local Aboriginal communities, and the Ministry of Education and are designed to enhance the educational achievement of Aboriginal students. School District No. 28 (Quesnel)’s Enhancement Agreement, a collaboration among the Esdilagh, Lhoosk’uz Dene, Lhtakot’en, Ndazkhot’en, the North Cariboo Metis Association, the Quesnel Tillicum Society, and the school district, states that one of the social goals is to “reduce student suspension/exclusion rates” (BC Ministry of Education,
2003, p. 1) as part of the district’s effort to ensure Aboriginal students “achieve the same social and academic success as the general students population” (p. 1).

Battiste, in a 2004 plenary address at the University of Saskatchewan, stated that approximately 68% of First Nations students are in provincial schools (p. 7). This is the case in BC public schools as struggling Aboriginal families move from reserves to urban centres in hopes of improving their socioeconomic situations. It is therefore, imperative, that there be a re-examination of data attained in the Ministry’s 2007 report as it clearly indicates that our Aboriginal students are not thriving in this system.

The above statistics raise two critical questions that will be addressed in this research paper:

1. What factors have contributed to the failure of Aboriginal students to thrive in the Canadian educational system?

2. What changes need to occur for Aboriginal children to experience the same success in the Canadian education system as their non-Aboriginal peers?
SECTION 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The intent of this review is to acquaint the reader with the major studies and theoretical works relevant to the area. To that end, the present section has two parts. In part one of the literature review I will set an historical context for helping us understand how the forms of schooling for Aboriginal children have undermined the success of children and families. I will review the intergenerational impacts that are the legacy of residential schooling and consider the policies and practices of residential schools that have seriously impacted the learning and schooling of Aboriginal people.

In part two I will review the literature that suggests promising approaches to education that draw on Aboriginal knowledge and parental and community involvement.

Part 1: Residential schools and the destruction of Aboriginal families and communities

My Story

My grandfather, Albert Ross, grew up in a remote and isolated Cree community in Northern Manitoba where he was taught how to hunt, trap, fish, and be self-sufficient by listening, looking and learning from his family members and those in the community. His western schooling was limited as was his proficiency of the English language. He took what he needed and successfully melded them into the traditional skills he had to survive and prosper in his environment. This traditional form of literacy included the ability to read the land, the water, the seasons, and the animals that were integral to his livelihood as a hunter, trapper, and fisherman. With the combined skills he was able to raise his family and pass on those essential skills he felt they would need to do well in this environment.
Shortly after losing his wife to illness, two of his children were taken from him and sent to the Norway House Methodist Indian Residential School located at the northern tip of Lake Winnipeg. Despite being immersed in an assimilation doctrine they managed to retain their Cree language and most of their cultural practices. They did, however, return to the community suffering the effects of attempted indoctrination—one, which reiterated the message that they were less of a person because of who they were. My mother, especially, suffered feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty about her identity and it took a heavy toll on her mental, spiritual and emotional well-being. Now well into her seventies, she continues to suffer the residual effects of residential school. My uncle became an alcoholic and for years buried his childhood experiences until he was able to begin a healing journey. Ironically, it was only then that he discovered that he had the gift of knowing traditional medicines for healing. He now is able to acknowledge this gift and give back to the community.

My mother, aunts and uncle are living examples of the effects of an ethnocentric approach that was taken by non-Aboriginal people in their failure to acknowledge and appreciate Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing and their attempts to shame our people in the process of providing them with an often inadequate western form of education. I include myself in the intergenerational aftermath of the residential school system. We are all and continue to be survivors.

An understanding of the legacy of the residential school system is critical to understanding why Aboriginal learners often struggle in the Canadian school system. Ample literature suggests that the residential school legacy has been one of the most destructive of any colonialist initiatives perpetrated on Indigenous people. Michell,
Vizina, Augustus, and Sawyer (2008) state that "for over one hundred years, various churches supported by governments ran residential schools for the purpose of destroying Aboriginal cultures, spiritual beliefs, traditional values, and entire knowledge systems and ways of being" (p. 17). There is a growing body of literature pertaining to residential schooling. Grant (1996), Miller (1996), Haig Brown (1988) and Morrissette (1994) address the legacy of residential schooling that continues to impinge on Aboriginal learning today.

J.R. Miller's book titled "Shingwauk's Vision" (1996) provides a comprehensive history of Native residential schools in Canada. It examines three central themes, including the agenda of federal government officials who authorized the school, the missionaries and staff who taught in them, and the students who attended these institutions. In his chapter on assessing the damage caused by the legacy of residential schools, Miller refers to it as an Aboriginal nightmare: Residential schools not only disrupted individual identity and Native families but it also "severed the ties that bound Native children to their families and communities, leaving semi-assimilated young people and shattered communities" (p. 11). Miller details how Aboriginal parents initially were receptive to their children receiving an education on reserve-situated schools to better ensure that their children would be able to cope with the changes that were occurring in western society. As the partnership changed with Aboriginal parents' input being ignored and agreements to place schools on reserves not being met, the parents realized that the government had its own agenda in the education of their children. Aboriginal parents' efforts to resist the changes by not sending their children to residential schools were quashed as government amended the Indian Act and legislated changes such as
compulsory enrolment. If parents did not comply with the new legislation, children were often forcibly taken from family and communities.

Haig-Brown (1988) chronicles the experiences of several students who attended Kamloops Indian Residential School between the 1950's and its closing in 1977. Their stories present a glaring contrast between being raised in a traditional nurturing environment with the guidance of supportive Elders' and family as their teachers to one with rigid time schedules and “constant supervision and direction accompanied by severe punishment for deviations” (p. 45). These were aspects that were very foreign to the Shuswap children.

Haig-Brown states that the cultural attacks began immediately upon students’ arrival at the residential school with the school personnel’s attempts to reign-in the uncivilized children: their “perceptions of Indian children as wild and animal-like is supported by comments made by the Oblates regarding their efforts to instil European values into the minds of the Native people” (p. 51).

Both Miller (1996) and Haig-Brown (1996) document the efforts made by the church to further pull apart families by keeping siblings, attending the same residential school, separated as a means of absolute control. Indeed, Miller states that, for the children, “the worst aspects of these institutions were the loneliness and the emotional deprivation” (p. 422). Additionally, there were physical consequences for children caught violating the strict residential school rules. The missionary staff that operated in loco parentis (in place of the parents) did little to provide the nurturing that absent Aboriginal parents should have been providing but were denied.
A thorough review of the literature indicates no documentation that would indicate parents were invited to provide input into how the residential school staff should treat Aboriginal children while operating *in loco parentis*. On the contrary, there is much evidence that indicates attempts by staff to suppress or deny the horrific treatment many children experienced on a daily basis.

Grant (1996), in her chapter titled *Aftermath* provides extensive research and first-person accounts of the negative experiences some students had upon leaving residential school and returning to their communities. Many experienced a general apathy and could not resume childhood activities such as running and playing, often withdrawing from everyone and sitting quietly. As well, children felt there was a disconnection between them and other family members as a result of having been raised in an institution. Many did not have a normal sibling relationship with younger brothers and sisters. After years of religious indoctrination, some even felt ashamed of their own people and viewed the cultural ceremonies as evil. Adding to this disconnection between community and child was the loss of language. Grant writes, “Language loss created a serious schism between children and community members” (p. 246). Not only could they not converse with their own family members but they also had limited English skills resulting from an often-inadequate education.

Grant also discusses the work of psychologist, Reuven Feurstein in terms of the residential school system and the disruption of Aboriginal communities: Quoting Feurstein, Grant states, “when there is a break in the cultural transmission the children are deprived of their roots” (p 249). Such a break results in little or no knowledge being transferred from one generation to another and, as a result, that generation is ill prepared
to meet life's challenges. Grant suggests that children must not only have insight into their past but also have strong connections with their language and spirituality in order to cope with life and its challenges. She writes, “In the process of learning their culture they [children] are learning how to learn” (p. 249). The residential school legacy has resulted in children being denied their language, cultural roots, family ties and role models.

There are many destructive social problems that have resulted from families impacted by the residential schools. Alcohol abuse, for example, continues to impact many Aboriginal families who have directly and indirectly been impacted by the residential school legacy. For some parents, whose children were taken away to residential schools, their means of coping with the loss was to escape their feelings with alcohol. Haig-Brown (1988) documents one former student’s observations of her mother’s drinking attributing it to feelings of guilt: “Her mother felt unneeded, and in all likelihood felt that the children blamed her for sending them to school” (p. 123).

Another horrific legacy is suicide. Statistics on the number of suicides in the Aboriginal community, which are higher in comparison to mainstream numbers, cannot be laid entirely on experiences in residential school, however, Haig-Brown suggests that it “can be seen as a contributing factor to people’s confusion over values and the meaning of life, and is symptomatic of the social oppression which may lead to such attempts” (p. 123).

Perhaps the most pervasive and damaging effect of the residential school legacy has been the social problems attributed to the lack of parenting skills for those who spent years away from their nurturing families and supportive communities: Miller (1996) states that students were not able to relate to others in a normal family setting and grew
into adults unable to be effective parents. Miller continues: “The lack of parenting skills has frequently been cited as a major problem affecting Native families and communities down to the present day” (p. 339).

The breakdown in families has resulted in many Aboriginal children growing up in dysfunctional homes and communities with a host of unresolved social-emotional issues as parents, grandparents and extended family members struggle to deal with the negative aftermath of the residential school experience. The children carry with them the residual culmination of generations of unresolved issues as they continue on in an educational system that the adults in their lives feel may contain remnants of the residential school legacy.

Morrissette (1994), in his article on residential school survivors and the residual effects on parenting, states that there is a direct connection made between the abuses experienced by individuals who attended residential schools and their lack of parenting skills. Generations of Native people raised in a cruel institutional environment find themselves in a situation where they do not have the skills to be effective parents. He adds that students did not have any role models during their formative and impressionable years and as a result some abrogated their responsibilities as parents. “They replicated the dysfunctional relationships of the (residential) school, and many of the families of this generation became dysfunctional” (p. 334). There is also much confusion and guilt felt by former students as they struggle with the uncertainty of how to discipline their children. Corporal punishment, not a part of the traditional child-rearing practices, became a standard means of discipline in the residential schools. Reflecting on
their own experiences, these parents often “associate discipline with non-caring and thus become emotionally paralyzed” (p 336).

Similar to the findings of Miller (1996), Grant (1996), and Haig-Brown (1998), Morrissette suggests that many Aboriginal families have been and continue to suffer the devastating effects of residential school abuse and that there is a critical need for emotional healing to reconstruct their lives and those of their family members. Only then can they move on to provide the social-emotional and even academic support that is so needed for the next generation of children.

Today, many school districts in the province share the same dilemma of having little or no Aboriginal parent involvement within the system. This reluctance or hesitancy for Aboriginal parents to become involved has resulted in their voices not being heard and their presence not being felt in the learning institutes. As a result, Aboriginal children have few advocates who are able to make significant enough changes to impact their learning in positive ways. Without this critical and supportive voice, the public school system will continue to perpetuate an educational system that does little to ensure Aboriginal student success.

Battiste (2005), states that, in order for Aboriginal students to achieve greater success, there must be acknowledgement that the “exclusive use of Eurocentric knowledge in education has failed First Nations children” (p. 5) and that an educational remedy is to introduce Indigenous knowledge, heritage and languages into this flawed and ineffective system as a means of empowering Aboriginal students.

School districts, if they truly wish to see more positive changes for their Aboriginal students, must start by recognizing and reconciling the history that Aboriginal
people have lived, both pre- and post contact. Battiste (2004) suggests that “developing an awareness of the socio-historical reality, facing the complicities that came with privileging, understanding these relationships to the present and taking action to correct misconceptions promoted as a result of colonization” (p. 11) is a good starting point. Effort must be made to acknowledge and incorporate those critical pieces which traditionally were integral in the holistic way of learning for Aboriginal children.

In their determination to maintain their families and communities, Aboriginal people today are also struggling to preserve and strengthen their culture and save their dying languages. As well, Aboriginal parents want their children to find success in an educational system that, in reality, often excludes them. It continues to deny or denigrate their Indigenous knowledge or ways of knowing, a voice in what is best for their Aboriginal children in terms of pedagogy, and finally, their rightful place as partners in the system. It is critical that this partnership be forged to better ensure success for Aboriginal learners.

**Part 2: Pedagogical Practices, Indigenous Knowledge and Aboriginal Ways of Knowing**

For many educators, indigenous knowledge is an area that has either never been explored or cannot be easily defined. When presented with the question, *what is Indigenous knowledge?* Battise (2002) states, “the greatest challenge in answering the question is to find a respectful way to compare Eurocentric and Indigenous ways of knowing and include both into contemporary modern education” (p. 1). She adds that, to remedy the failure of the existing First Nations educational system, it is necessary to find a satisfactory answer to this question as Eurocentric thinking has resulted in Indigenous
knowledge being marginalized and presented in a diminished capacity. Canada’s educational system has, in the past, ignored Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy and continues to do so, even today.

In her attempts to define Indigenous knowledge, Battiste (p. 4) states that it “comprises all knowledge pertaining to a particular people and its territory, the nature or use of which has been transmitted from generation to generation” (quoted from Daes, 1993). This knowledge, which has always existed and includes both what can be observed and what can be thought, is inherently tied to land through particular landscapes, landforms and biomes and encompasses the sciences, agriculture, technical and ecological knowledge. It is expressed and transmitted through language in the sharing of histories, stories, narratives, songs, geographical places, ceremonial practices, social networks, observations, values, and laws.

In Eurocentric thought, Indigenous knowledge is viewed as being taxonic (static over time), only having validity in the spiritual realm, or has simply been reduced to its quantifiably observable empirical elements (2002, p. 10). Subjecting Indigenous knowledge to such a narrow, simplistic and Eurocentric definition has resulted in its lack of presence in the educational system and has denied Aboriginal learners the opportunity to know and access Indigenous culture within the context of western pedagogy. Laramee (2008) suggests that for Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal learner, the end result is a “void of knowledge about the realities of Aboriginal peoples’ lives, traditions, contributions, beliefs, and worldviews” (p. 59). This, in turn, only serves to reinforce stereotyping as well as racist attitudes and behaviours among non-Aboriginals learners.
Canada's educational institutions, both past and present, have largely ignored Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy and as a result of this exclusive use of Eurocentric knowledge in education, have failed First Nations children. Indigenous knowledge, according to Battiste (2002), is “now seen as an educational remedy that will empower Aboriginal students if applications of their Indigenous knowledge, heritage, and languages are integrated into the Canadian educational system” (p. 9).

**Pedagogy (Pre-contact)**

Historically, Aboriginal people had in place an educational system that was tailored, not only for their survival, but one that sustained and nurtured them holistically, through body, mind, heart and spirit. It was “based on principles of respect, humility, sharing, caring, healing, generosity, cooperation, patience, humour, and a willingness to help others” (Grant, 1996, p. 35). Indigenous pedagogies included ways of transmitting knowledge through language and other symbolic means while respecting other cultures, perspectives, and the realm of being (Battiste, & Henderson, 2000; Miller, 1996). The system was non-coercive, as it was believed that all children were born with gifts which needed to be developed naturally with the nurturing and support of those who were their teachers. The learning environment, which occurred within the context of the natural social setting, was non-intrusive and subtle as many lessons came in the form of storytelling often told by Elders. Grant writes, “Storytelling was an integral component of the education process, second in importance only to observation” (p. 36) and was an effective way of transmitting moral lessons, values and lessons from the natural world. This intergenerational transmission of knowledge nurtured and strengthened the relationships among individuals, the family, and the community.
According to Miller (1996), and reiterated by Laramee (2008), the notion of learning emphasized an approach to instruction that relied on looking, listening and learning – ‘the three Ls.’ It was the “pedagogical typology for all learning” (Laramee, 2008, p. 58). Successful application of what was learned through effective living indicated understanding and the learner was not only given the recognition but the responsibility of passing on the knowledge.

Grant (1996) makes reference to this reciprocity of knowledge acquisition stating there was an understanding among men and women that, as they grew in spirit and wisdom, the expectation was that they would pass on what was learned. “It was the duty of those with knowledge to pass on their knowledge, and it was the obligation of the youth to learn” (p. 36).

In their attempts to assimilate Aboriginal children by setting up residential schools (and not acknowledging the pedagogical practises of Aboriginal people), the federal government created an educational system whereby the Aboriginal learner was sure to fail. Many did just that and continue to fail in an educational system that does little to acknowledge the holistic learner, their strengths, language, and culture. “To remove the process of learning from the social, cultural, and spiritual contexts in which it occurs creates a disjuncture between the learner and community” (Michell, et al, 2008, p. 17). Many in the Aboriginal community feel that these constructs, connections and relationships must be recognised and integrated back into the educational system for their children and youth.
Aboriginal Ways of Knowing

In recent years, Aboriginal researchers and educators have insisted that the perpetuation of a western form of pedagogy on Aboriginal learners cannot continue and that changes must be made to include Indigenous knowledge and our ways of knowing. Hare (2005) refers to this as “good walks” and “good talks”, which represent how Aboriginal “children learn to make sense of their world as Aboriginal people” (p. 261). This learning process is closely connected to rich cultural expressions, relationships with family and land, and alternate systems of representation such as dance, music, and ceremonies. “Stories, shared through oral tradition, ensure cultural continuity and define language, traditions, and identity” (p. 261). Society’s acceptance of the narrow definitions of western literacy has resulted in Aboriginal people’s broader concepts of ways of knowing being disrupted and marginalized resulting in, as Hare states implicitly, “home-and school breakdowns for Aboriginal people” (p. 244). The centuries of government policies and destructive educational practices, which continue to be perpetuated in some classrooms today, to the detriment of Aboriginal learners, need to cease. It is necessary, therefore, to acknowledge the educational value of Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning and to incorporate this pedagogical approach in the mainstream educational system.

Summary

Grant (1996), in her chapter titled *Curriculum* states; “all school curricula were characterized by irrelevance for Indian children” (p. 165). Its purpose was to suppress the children’s cultural values and beliefs replacing it with assimilationist policies and the staff’s own ethnocentric biases. Not only did the schools ignore the children’s realities
but also, in many cases, they denigrated the traditional customs, families and communities as being inferior, backward and without merit. "Grant states further that "curriculum was an integral component of the colonizing agenda" (p. 166) and when children failed, it was held up as a confirmation of stereotypical thinking that the Aboriginal population was too uncivilized to learn. There was little effort made to provide Aboriginal children with a quality education as the official policy of residential schools was one of assimilation and as a result many students attained little more than a rudimentary level of reading and writing. Instruction in a foreign language, an over-emphasis on religious studies and vocational skills by instructors who were often not qualified educators resulted in many of the students leaving the system functionally illiterate.

Miller (1996) states that Canadians, their politicians, and their mainline Christian churches have to do two things to right the wrongs of the past: First, Native communities need assistance to "repair the damage done to them, mainly by general assimilative policy, and specifically by the residential schools that were major components of this policy" (p. 436). Secondly, Canadians must ensure that history does not repeat itself. The residential school legacy was allowed to occur because of the "racial superiority" thinking of government, church and society.

Native peoples in Canada still have a vision of the healthy and effective education of their children and the development of their communities and they still look to the people who have usurped their lands for assistance in bringing it to reality" (p. 438).
Part 3: Supporting Aboriginal Learners.

Despite the recent advancements made in Aboriginal education in BC, specifically by the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF), and initiatives at the school district level, such as enactment of Enhancement Agreements, Aboriginal students are still not achieving the successes of their non-Aboriginal peers in school. FNESC, BCTF, and school district initiatives, however, are examples of what the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1996) recommends in their report on education after taking research submissions and testimonials from individuals and community and organization representatives. A key finding of RCAP is the necessity for Aboriginal people to participate in all areas of policy making. The report highlights a “number of systematic problems, such as the continued failure of education to ground Aboriginal youth in a strong and positive identity and the absence of Elder involvement in education” (Herman, Vizina, Augustus, & Jason, 2008, p. 20). Also stressed in the report is the relationship between formal education policy and the continuation, strengthening, and inter-generational transmission of Aboriginal cultures and languages. Education, described in the report as being a lifelong and continuous process, must be provided in a holistic way, that is, “Education processes and institutions must address the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical development of participants” (RCAP, 1996, 3.5.2).

Using this as a jumping off point, this section of the paper will explore practices that appear to be effective in supporting Aboriginal learners.
Parent as Partners in Education

As discussed earlier in this paper (see Literature Review), Aboriginal parents have long struggled to be included in their children's education. Historically, they were often denied this opportunity with the government's policy of removing the children from nurturing homes and communities and educating them in residential schools. Today, little has changed in the public school system, in terms of educators' understanding of the participatory role that Aboriginal parents must and want to play in their children's education. There is acknowledgement that Aboriginal parent participation in the schools is limited but there appear to be few programs that attempt to probe beyond issues of poverty and other socio-economic factors as reasons for their reluctance to become involved.

In order for effective changes to occur for Aboriginal learners, it is important that they be part of the revamping of a system in which their children continue to struggle. Hare (2003) suggests "new strategies are needed for recovering elements of Aboriginal education which can inform and enrich present concepts of education, and help Aboriginal parents and educators reassert their cultural hold on schooling" (p. 411). She explores two approaches in understanding how Aboriginal families can once again participate in their children's education; the first by means of viewing history in a linear or western way, and the second following the circular tradition of the medicine wheel, which enables a "move forward in a way that allows for the recovery of beliefs, practices and a spirit that can revitalize Aboriginal participation in Aboriginal education" (p. 412). She suggests solutions in education can occur not only by looking at the past and examining the damage perpetrated on Aboriginal children, their families, and
communities, but going further back to pre-contact to acknowledge the traditional ways of knowing and learning that were integral part of Aboriginal education, that is, "The inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge, values, and ways of learning bring the history of Aboriginal education full circle" (p. 425). Hare suggests that schools increase Aboriginal content in curricula, incorporate Aboriginal perspectives within existing curricula, and enrich learning with a growing number of Aboriginal resources. As well, Elders' traditional roles in education must be revived and their participation in Aboriginal children's learning should be honoured and fulfilled. Pre-service teachers need to be equipped "with skills and knowledge to address respectfully Aboriginal subject matter and instil sensitivity to the language, culture, and traditions of Aboriginal peoples" (p. 426).

Although Hare does acknowledge that some gains in Aboriginal education have been made, often where children have alternate Aboriginal-oriented facilities available to them, there still remains much to be done. Facilities such as Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where Aboriginal learners are thriving, are viewed not only as a place of academic learning but as a healing centre "that takes a holistic approach to education, ensuring the mind, body and spirit are nurtured" (p. 421).

New strategies are needed "for recovering elements of Aboriginal education which can inform and enrich present conceptions of education, and help Aboriginal parents and educators reassert their cultural hold on schooling" (p. 411). Self-determination with a connection to the past is an essential part of the goal in planning a future for Aboriginal children. It is part of the holistic vision-the tradition of the medicine wheel.
Reyes and Torres (2007), in their research on family literacy and non-mainstream families, introduce Freire’s philosophy as a means of having parents participate in more culturally appropriate programs to support their child’s learning. This approach is viewed as one that is more accepting and affirming of diverse family literacy practices. It is understood that there is a history of non-mainstream families being ‘colonized’ by measuring them against mainstream family literacy practices with an emphasis on fixing their deficits. By acknowledging that this is another example of Eurocentric thinking and instead putting in place ‘culture circles’ or learning environments for dialogue, participants are empowered so that they can address and overcome those institutions, ideologies, and situations that are restricting their voices and actions.

Friere’s philosophy is one based on liberating literacy practices and is not neutral: “It serves to domesticate or to liberate from oppression” (p. 79). In family literacy, this liberation “acknowledges, values and promotes diverse literacy practices and understanding through democratic participation, both in building and implementing those programs through inquiry and in creatively transforming relations with schools” (p. 80).

In my opinion, this is an approach that school districts should consider and implement if their goal is to increase Aboriginal parent involvement within the system. It is an approach that acknowledges the ineffective colonialist thinking of the past and encourages a collaborative and respectful partnership in education planning. The Aboriginal Education Centre in Quesnel School District 28 has successfully implemented aspects of Freire’s approach in their efforts to increase Aboriginal parent involvement. In one school, where parents were invited for cultural gatherings, they eventually formed a
parent group that met regularly and set their own agenda. Staff at the Aboriginal Education Centre and within the school provided support at parents’ request.

A critical step in planning for increased Aboriginal parent involvement is to understand the reasons for their reluctance to establish a working relationship with school staff and the importance of deinstitutionalizing the physical environments so that they feel more comfortable once inside. Often parents have had negative educational experiences, either personally or indirectly through their parents, grandparents, and community members who may have attended residential schools. There may also be a mistrust of staff that is perceived to be part of the system.

Baxter (2006) conducted a qualitative study with six Aboriginal parents and guardians whose children were attending an Aboriginal Head Start program and public schools. The research that she had gathered prior to the study indicated that

SUCCESSES OF THE HOME SCHOOL TRANSITION IS PARTIALLY DEPENDANT ON THE CONTINUITY FROM THE HOME ENVIRONMENT TO THE CLASSROOM. THESE ELEMENTS INCLUDE LANGUAGE, THE PRESENCE OF FAMILIAR PEOPLE WHO ARE RESPECTED, AND THE CONSISTENT VALUE SYSTEM THAT GOVERN DAILY LIFE. (p. 3)

Results from the data collected clearly showed that five of the six Aboriginal parents valued four specific things with regard to a welcoming environment inside the schools. They:

DESCRIBED THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING PHOTOGRAPHS OR POSTERS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE, ABORIGINAL ARTWORK OR CULTURAL OBJECTS SUCH AS THE FOUR MEDICINES...PRESENT AND VISIBLE FOR ALL TO SEE UPON ENTRY AND THROUGHOUT THE BUILDING. (p. 17)
Participants in the study who had attended residential school stated that having these cultural items in a visible location validated and contributed to, not only their self-esteem, but their children's as well. Staff was also identified as playing a vital role in making parents feel welcome within the school. Everyone, from secretaries and custodial staff to teachers and administrators, were factors in making Aboriginal parents and community members feel respected, supported, and treated as equal partners. The building of relationships and trust was seen as important.

**Improving Academic Performance among Aboriginal Students**

In a major review and analysis of research literature on the education of Native children, Demmert (2001), states, in his introduction, that improving the quality of education for Aboriginal students is a complex challenge for educators. Important players in meeting this challenge are “educators, researchers, parents and political leaders” (p. 1) from the Aboriginal communities. All are integral in addressing concerns, changing or making policies, and implementing those practices that will ensure our Aboriginal learners achieve academic success.

Research on teachers, instruction, and curriculum suggests that “teacher attitudes about students, knowledge of subject matter, and understanding and knowledge about the culture of students are all shown to promote improved academic performance and student behaviour” (Yagi, 1985, cited in Demmert, p. 18). Further, “teachers that become involved in community activities and spend time with community members” (p. 18) can also have a positive influence on students' academic performance. Demmert states that place-based education, “an educational approach that draws on local history, culture, economics, environment, and circumstances as a curriculum source” (p. 22), shows
promise. Including a “goal of connecting students with their community to promote
citizenship, entrepreneurship, community sustainability, or environmental stewardship”
(p. 22) is also beneficial. Building trusting relationships as well as extending those
relationships to family and community and using highly engaging, activity-based
cooperative learning appear to be effective in instructing Aboriginal students. Demmert
suggests “emphasizing open-ended questioning, inductive/analytical reasoning and
student discussion in large and small group setting” (p. 19) will result in better outcomes
in comparison to the teacher questions and standard teaching methods.

A summary of findings in research on community and parental influences not
only suggests that parent and extended family members are the “strongest influences (for
good and ill) on student progress” (McInerney, McInerney, Ardington, & De rachewiltz,
as cited in Demmert, 2001, p. 28) but “parent involvement in the design and
implementation of school programs was strongly associated with improved student
achievement” (p. 28) in one school district. In another study, “partnerships between
teachers and communities were associated with the success of 162 small rural high
schools” (p. 29) which had a high Aboriginal student population.

In his conclusion, Demmert states that “much remains to be learned about
personal characteristics of successful Native students-especially what is alterable and
what is not in the school setting” (p. 34). He calls upon the research community to help
in the understanding of all these areas fully as possible.

There is some debate among researchers and educators on the subject of
distinctive learning styles for Aboriginal learners. Pewewardy (2002), in his literature
review, states that “a wide variety of individual differences have been identified” (p. 23)
and this diversity is the norm within any culture. He cautions that there is no absolute learning style among Aboriginal learners and to suggest that there is will only lead to a perpetuation of stereotyping. He has found, however, much research indicating that Aboriginal learners:

[H]ave distinct cultural values, such as conformity to authority and respect for Elders, taciturnity, strong tribal social hierarchy, patrimonial/matrilineal clans, and an emphasis on learning which are deeply rooted in the teaching of the Elders. (p. 23)

Pewewardy's extensive review of the literature suggests that Aboriginal learners tend to have a field-dependent or global processing learning style. For these learners, the process of learning is holistic or global way, that is, learners "begin with the whole picture and establish meaning only in relation to the whole" (p. 28). Further, such learners are not linear thinkers, which may disadvantage them in typical classrooms where "information is frequently presented in an analytical, sequential manner" (p. 28).

Research supports the view that Aboriginal students are visual learners benefiting from opportunities to see the materials they need to master: "They tend to learn best when the teacher provides a myriad of visual learning opportunities such as graphs, films, demonstrations, and pictures" (p. 29). Traditionally, this experiential form of learning was the norm among Aboriginal children as they listened, looked and learned life lessons from their parents, Elders and other teachers before imitating the skill.

The research also suggests a propensity among Aboriginal learners to be reflective: "Reflection is defined as the tendency to stop to consider options before responding, often resulting in greater accuracy in conceptualizing problems" (Hollins,
Pewewardy suggests teachers tune in to the students’ rhythm of conversation and movement to enhance learning and avoid labelling the passive behaviour (as part of wait time) as disinterest or lack of motivation.

It is also critical for non-Aboriginal teachers to understand the important relational role that family, Elders and community members play in the student’s life. Not only are the people appreciated and respected for being teachers and caregivers but they are also seen as providing a sense of belonging and security for the child. As well, relationships and affiliations confirm cultural and self-identity for each individual.

Findings indicate that the teacher of the Aboriginal student “plays a tremendous role in the teaching and learning process” (p. 34). The educator’s pedagogical practices can determine whether the child learns or fails. To avoid the classroom becoming a place of failure for the Aboriginal learner, Pewewardy states that teachers must be aware of their own worldviews to better understand cultural and learning differences in their Aboriginal learners. This is similar to what Battiste (2004) refers to as cognitive imperialism. Battiste suggests teachers must move beyond this often one-sided worldview and be prepared to challenge their thinking that what is “correct” comes from a non-Aboriginal and privileged perspective. Failure to do so will inevitably lead to blaming the Aboriginal child for his or her inability to learn and perpetuating the notion of the “deficit syndrome”.

In light of the research which indicates that the culture of the Aboriginal student plays a major role in learning styles, Pewewardy reiterates the importance of educators implementing culturally responsive teaching techniques as part of their pedagogical practices. Similar to Hare (2003), he also stresses the need for pre-service teachers to be
provided with the knowledge of Aboriginal history and culture and the practical teaching experience of working with Aboriginal students.

Another important finding in Pewewardy’s research is the indication that Aboriginal learners respond favourably to cooperation as opposed to competition in the classroom. Culturally, relationships are central to the Aboriginal peoples’ world where acts of generosity and sharing are expected and appreciated: Typically, competition does not produce motivation” (p. 36). There is also a disinclination for Aboriginal students to respond to manipulative forms of classroom management, for example, rewards and punishment. The building and nurturing of mutually respectful relationships between teacher and student is critical.

In his summary, Pewewardy suggests that “the failure of programs at reducing dropout rates and the inability to produce effective communication between majority and minority members are, in part, due to misconceptions and stereotypical notions” (p. 40) about Aboriginal students. All students, he adds, will benefit from the understanding of different cultural values, as well, “when differences in learning styles are addressed” (p. 41) Aboriginal students “will become motivated and encouraged to succeed” (p. 41).

Te Kotahitanga

Many Indigenous cultures around the world share similar histories of colonization and oppression resulting in loss of language, culture and identity. Maori people in New Zealand, have in recent years, taken initiatives to gain back all that has nearly been lost. Like Aboriginal people in Canada, their children too, are facing major obstacles in education. Bishop (2005) chronicles the dismal situation for many Maori students with high drop out and suspension rates, as well as an over-representation in Special Education
for behavioural issues. This is a reflection of what many Aboriginal students are experiencing in BC’s public school system. According to the New Zealand Ministry of Education’s data for 2005, “approximately 50% of Maori students leave school without qualifications” (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh & Teddy, 2009, p. 2) compared to 21% of their non-Maori peers. Rates of suspension for Maori students are three to five times higher than their non-Maori counterparts. Bishop adds that Maori students:

[T]end to be over-represented in low stream classes, are more likely than other students to be found in vocational curriculum streams, leave school earlier with less formal qualifications and enrol in tertiary education (post secondary programs) in lower portions. (Hood, 2007: Ministry of Education, 2006, as cited in Bishop, et al, 2009, p. 2)

Despite decades of educational reform and policies, there is little evidence of academic improvement among Maori students. Bishop suggests that “current policies and practices in mainstream contexts are based upon and are created within a context of epistemological racism…racism that is embedded in the very fundamental cornerstone principles of the dominant culture” (p. 2). Decision-making from outside sources has, in past initiatives, failed to acknowledge Maori ways of knowing and has marginalized its role and importance. Maori researchers and educators have, in the last few years, taken the initiative to become empowered as a means of addressing the educational concerns. As Bishop states, “locating solutions within Maori cultural ways of knowing does actually offer workable solutions to what have long been seen as seemingly immutable problems” (p. 2).
In 2001, after much research, collaboration and consultation, the Te Kotahigtang, a research/professional development project, began with the intent of improving educational achievement of Maori students in mainstream schools. This would be achieved:

[Through operationalizing Maori people’s cultural aspirations for self-determination within non-dominating relations of interdependence through developing classroom relations and interactions and in-school institutions for this purpose. (p. 2)]

The first activity began with researchers talking with Maori students and their families and with principals and teachers. The goal was to have participants share their experiences, through interviews, those factors” involved in limiting and/or improving Maori students’ educational achievement” (p. 2). Researchers felt this process would help students feel empowered knowing that their participation was an integral part of the process. Teachers would also be given the opportunity to see the world through their students’ perspectives.

The narratives were then compiled, analysed and “used to identify a variety of discursive positions pertaining to Maori student achievement and the potential impact of these positions on Maori student learning” (p. 2). Researchers found that the most common discursive positions among the students, their families and principals was the relationship between student and teacher as the most important factor for educational achievement. Among teachers, however, “the most pervasive explanation for the underachievement of Maori students was that they are the victims of pathological lifestyles that hinder their chances of benefiting from schooling” (p. 3). They perceived
socio-economic deficits within the home or problems that Maori students brought to school from the home environment as having the biggest impact on their inability to achieve academic success.

The narratives were then used to begin planning for the professional development component of the program. It “provided teachers with a means of critically reflecting upon their own discursive positioning and the impact this might have upon their own students’ learning” (p. 3). In doing so, teachers would then be able to move beyond the deficit thinking and pathologising practices to explain Maori student underachievement in education and see themselves as having agency - the ability to make those changes necessary for Maori student success through the establishment of power-sharing relationships. It was the position of researchers that “positive, inclusive relationships and interactions will lead to improved student engagement in learning” (p. 3).

An Effective Teacher Profile (ETP) was developed based on the principals of culturally responsive teaching. “

Fundamental to the ETP is the teachers’ understanding the need to explicitly reject deficit theorizing as a means of explaining Maori students’ educational achievement levels and their taking an agentic position in their theorizing about their practices. (p. 3)

Pedagogy practices would then reflect the principles of a caring and respectful learning environment, high learning expectations, a range of discursive learning interactions with students or among students, a range of strategies to facilitate learning interactions, and means of promoting, monitoring and reflecting “upon student learning outcomes that in
turn lead to changes in teachers’ practice” (p. 3) with the end goal of bringing about improvement in Maori student achievement.

Outcomes of the project indicate positive changes, not just for Maori students but for non-Maori students and teachers as well. While Te Koahitanga teachers have improved their use of the ETP in their classrooms, their Maori students have improved in numeracy and literacy achievement, and in external, cross-curricular examination, as well (p. 5). Data also indicates a correlation between Maori student performance and the degree to which teachers are effectively implementing elements of the ETP in their classrooms. Feedback from teachers suggests that many have experienced a reawakening in their self-examination of previous pedagogical practices. They believe that

[T]hey have a high level of understanding of the importance of relating to Maori students from an agentic position and in ensuring that their teaching practices reflect an agentic attitude toward these target students. (p. 6)

In summary, “challenging deficit theorizing and promoting agentic positioning by teachers is fundamental” to the program (p. 5): Critical components of the program include an understanding of the importance of relationships, not only between student and teacher, but among teachers, parents and community members. Sidorkin (2002, as cited in Bishop et al, 2009) “suggests that these people have something very valuable to offer to mainstream education because….relations ontologically precede all else in education” (p. 6). Educators must understand that it is relationships that have the greatest impact upon Maori student achievement, not socio-economic differences.
SECTION 3: DISCUSSION AND CONNECTIONS TO PRACTICE

In beginning the outline for a literature review, I found myself overwhelmed in my attempts to narrow a research topic. I wanted to be enlightened with the most current and culturally relevant research by Aboriginal educators which would provide me with the understandings, insights and tools to re-examine my educational philosophy, pedagogical practices and move me beyond my role as Aboriginal Early Literacy Resource Teacher for my school district. I also wanted to examine research that would give me the tools to empower many of my colleagues who experience frustration at not knowing how to reach struggling Aboriginal learners. As well, I wanted to be able to not only address the data for Aboriginal students but find ways to begin moving forward in terms of suggesting how our Aboriginal Education Department might begin implementing changes within the district. This data, which is evident year after year in our district, clearly delineates the low graduations rates, high numbers of disengaged learners/drop-out rates, disproportionately high number of suspensions and placements in the Special Education "severe behaviour" category. And finally, I wanted to find some answers to help me understand the frustration and occasional despair I feel when I am overwhelmed by the apathy and indifference of policy makers in the public school systems who continue to perpetuate an educational system that has not and does not address the needs of our Aboriginal learners.

In short, I was swamped by the number of factors which I felt were essential if we are to create opportunities for Aboriginal student success. I decided that it would be beneficial to imagine myself in the position of a pre-service teacher. In doing so, I would have to ask myself, "What would I need to know to assist me in teaching Aboriginal
students? What would be a good ‘jumping off’ point to help me understand some of the reasons why Aboriginal students struggle in school?’

I chose to begin my research on the history of residential schools because I have always felt and continue to feel that it is essential for educators, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to be aware of the racist doctrine that was prevalent in the federal government’s planning for residential schools and the church’s subsequent administering of these institutes. Educators must be aware of the negative effects that an assimilationist policy once had on Aboriginal children, their families, communities, culture and language. It has resulted in generations of people struggling to reaffirm their identity as Aboriginal people.

I began my literature review by revisiting “Shingwauk’s Vision” by J.R. Miller, a book that I had read in its first year of publication, 1996. I appreciated his extensive research and examination of the experiences and agendas of the government officials who authorized the residential schools, the missionaries who taught in them, and the students who attended them.

I was fortunate to have someone recommend Agnes Grant’s “No End of Grief” and found that her research complemented Miller’s so well in that I was provided with a more rounded account of the residential school legacy. Similar to Miller’s research, she presents a chronological history of residential schools touching on such areas as history, conditions and consequences using students’ narratives to provide us with accounts of the school system. I was especially touched by narratives of several people I knew personally or who were former colleagues in education.
As a result of having familiarized myself with both authors’ accounts of the residential school legacy, I plan to summarize their research with the intention of sharing it as a power point presentation to our district staff. More than ever, I feel it is imperative that high school teachers, especially, be provided with an overview of the residential school legacy to begin their understanding of the intergenerational effects which continue to be felt in our Aboriginal communities today. It seems that our Aboriginal learners’ biggest struggles are in high school.

Prior to the start of my literature review, I had limited knowledge about the extensive research undertaken by Marie Battiste on Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous pedagogy and cognitive imperialism. She states that this notion of cognitive imperialism has resulted in Indigenous knowledge and our ways of knowing being excluded or marginalized in educational institutions committed to Eurocentric knowledge (Battiste, 2002, p. 5). It is critical that our educational system re-evaluate its importance.

Such rethinking of education from the perspective of Indigenous knowledge and learning is of crucial value to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators who seek to understand the failures, dilemmas, and contradictions inherent in past and current educational policy and practice for First Nations students. (p. 7)

Battiste’s definition of Indigenous knowledge and explanation of the three main approaches Eurocentric scholars have taken to emasculate not only its meaning but significance are especially insightful. It causes to me wonder if there was more than just cognitive imperialistic reasoning behind their attempts to weaken it. I have been told by Elders that Indigenous knowledge is such a powerful entity that it is often perceived as a threat to “other” thinking.
I am so appreciative of the vast amount of research Battiste has conducted to push forward an agenda that is needed for Aboriginal people to once again become empowered and take their rightful place in education. She reiterates succinctly, the message that exclusive use of Eurocentric knowledge in education has failed First Nations children (p. 9) and that the government is still responsible for holding up its constitutional fiduciary obligations when they contract with schools off reserve land. The data that I’ve examined indicates a growing exodus of Aboriginal families from reserves to urban settings and as a result, Aboriginal children are being educated in a system that continues to set them up for failure. According to the 2001 Census, “only 31 percent of Canadian Aboriginals now live on-reserve (down from 33 percent in 1996)....and 49 percent live in urban areas, up from 47 percent in 1996” (Richards and Vining, 2004, p. 5).

Battise’s research has enabled me to better understand why Indigenous knowledge and our ways of knowing need to be included in our efforts to make changes in education policy and practices. It is an integral part of the planning when we begin to move beyond theorizing and actually start to implement effective educational programs for Aboriginal learners. She states that “teachers need to discover…the Indigenous humanities, the language literacies, visual expression and philosophical foundations of the Indigenous communities” (Battise, 2004, p. 11).

The two high schools in Quesnel will soon be reconfigured, with one school accommodating grades 8 and 9 and the second for grades 10 to 12. A research based mandate has been set with a focus on student-teacher relationships, social-emotional learning, and teachers being given agency for the day to day design of the curriculum.
Our Aboriginal Education Department, of which I am a part, has implemented one aspect similar to the *Te Kotahitanga* model even though the program has not been formally referred to. Aboriginal students have been involved in sessions where they share their high school experiences including those experiences which may be challenging and/or successful. The administrators at the Aboriginal Education Centre and high schools are now at a point where these responses will be examined. I feel this is an opportune time to approach administration in the district to present my findings on the *Te Kotahitanga* Program. I am also part of the district’s Professional Development Committee and will be able to make a presentation to committee members, hopefully for a district wide workshop in October, 2009.

As part of my responsibilities as an Aboriginal Early Literacy Resource Teacher, I am given the opportunity to strengthen ties with the parents and caregivers of Aboriginal students as well as with community members. Past initiatives have included hosting workshops for parents and family members to help bridge the gap between home and school, to demystify education and special education policy and language, and to empower them by explaining their rights as caregivers. These sessions have resulted in a more visible presence of Aboriginal parents in several of the schools in our district. As a follow-up to what has already taken place, I plan to meet with parents to share my findings on the history of residential schools. Many of the young parents I have established working relationships with have parents and grandparents who attended residential schools. Some only know bits and pieces of their parents, grandparents and extended family members’ experiences and are not fully aware of the intergenerational effects. Some even blame themselves for their children’s struggles in school. I am
keenly aware of the emotional aspects of such presentations and plan to present tobacco
to several of our community’s Elders to assist me in this endeavour. In implementing this
workshop, I intend to gauge parents’ needs in terms of information sharing for future
gatherings.

In summary, the entire process of writing this literature review has been a very
challenging and humbling experience. I was initially overwhelmed at not being able to
narrow my topic, partially because I felt that I had to include so many areas that I thought
were critical in supporting Aboriginal learners. I also felt that my twenty-five years in
Aboriginal education afforded me the privilege of being somewhat of an authority on the
subject. In the process of familiarizing myself with the research of Battiste, Hare,
Pewewardy, Demmert and Bishop, I realized that aspects of their research were missing
in my educational philosophy and pedagogical practice. I understood from a practical
point of view what was needed to instruct Aboriginal students so that they would feel
empowered, validated and respected. After all I was well informed of our history and the
negative effects of the residential school legacy. I was aware of how our Indigenous
knowledge and ways of knowing were not acknowledged and included in the public
educational system. I had even completed the Response Ability Pathways (RAP) training
with Larry Brendtro, who, along with Martin Brokenleg and Steve Van Bockem, wrote
“Reclaiming Youth at Risk”. I understood how significant and powerful effective
relationships could be for Aboriginal learners. The four main components of their Circle
of Courage program: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity were
incorporated in my approach with children. I even acknowledged how my success in
school could be attributed to the positive relationships that were established by caring
teachers who supported and encouraged me throughout my formative years. What I was not able to do was to see the “big picture” to realize that there was an imbalance. I had bits and pieces incorporated in my educational philosophy—one that acknowledges, first and foremost, that all students have strengths, gifts and talents and as educators it behoves us to use that as a base in our instruction, and second, learning is a reciprocal process whereby the educator should be able to learn as much from the student as he/she will learn from the teacher. The process of completing a literature review has helped me to re-envision learning with Coyote’s eyes. Archibald, in “Indigenous Storywork” (2008), tells of how Coyote, when given mismatched eyes as a result of misadventure, is forced to learn balance as he sees from two perspectives. This teaching legend has helped me realize that I am both student and teacher and must be careful to ensure that there is a healthy balance between both. I don Coyote’s eyes as I continue in my journey in Aboriginal education.
SECTION 4: CONCLUSIONS

I began this paper with two questions:

1. What factors have contributed to the failure of Aboriginal students to thrive in the Canadian educational system?
2. What changes need to occur for Aboriginal children to experience the same success in the Canadian education system as their non-Aboriginal peers?

I want to present a summary of my findings regarding these questions using the symbol of the medicine wheel, a circle, as an analogy of the components that both identify what has contributed to the failure of Aboriginal students to thrive in the Canadian educational system and what is needed to support Aboriginal learners in the public school system.

Part one of the medicine wheel: Impact of residential schools

In my literature review, I examine the first and most critical component of the circle, the research on residential schools and the negative effects it had and continues to have on Aboriginal people. Aboriginal educators such Battiste (1998, 2002, 2004, 2005) and Hare (2003, 2005) reiterate the necessity for educators to be knowledgeable about Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing as well as the damage inflicted on students who attended residential schools, their families and communities. Miller (1996), Grant (1996), Haig-Brown (1988), and Morrissette (1994) chronicle the negative impact residential schools had on generations of children. It resulted in children being denied their language, cultural roots, family ties and role models thereby leaving them with few critical learning opportunities to pass on the culture effectively.

Grant’s introduction of Feurstein’s theories on cultural transmission is insightful and relevant to what transpired between the generations attending residential schools.
Feurstein suggests that the fragmentation of families results in little or no knowledge being transferred from one generation to another and as a result that generation is ill prepared to meet life’s challenges. If, on the other hand, children have insight into their past and strong connections with their language and spirituality, they have the basis from which to cope with life. In the process of learning their culture they are learning how to learn (Grant, p. 249).

**Part two of the medicine wheel: Cognitive imperialism**

Battiste identifies that cognitive imperialism, the notion that one educational system is more effective and superior, is detrimental to other systems and, in this case cognitive imperialism (Eurocentric notions of education) had a devastating impact on Aboriginal people. The Eurocentric approach to education permeated the educational systems of the past, deeming Aboriginal people as unintelligent and incapable of learning sufficiently to become citizens of the broader society. In doing so, it denied Aboriginal people their language and cultural integrity, maintaining legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference (Battiste, 1998, p. 20). Cognitive imperialism, which permeates contemporary educational systems through its policies and practices, continues to have an impact on Aboriginal student achievement. It constrains the use and development of Aboriginal cultures in schools, and confines education to a narrow view of the world (Battiste, 2005, p. 9). In its distrust of diversity, it allows for little or no change in policies that would better accommodate Aboriginal learners.

**Part three of the medicine wheel: Role of Aboriginal Parents**

A third component to the circle is the role of Aboriginal parents, both historically and today. Grant (1996), Miller (1996), Hare (2003, 2005), Battiste (1998, 2002, 2004,
2005), and Haig-Brown (1988) in their research describe how Aboriginal parents’ role in the education of their children throughout history has been subjected to either a marginal placement or not at all.

While the integral role of mainstream parental involvement in the academic achievement of their children is understood and well documented, there appears to be little understanding and support for the important role that Aboriginal parents and to a lesser extent, Aboriginal communities, play in contributing to and supporting Aboriginal student success. Aboriginal parents want their children to do well in school but their ways of supporting may look very different from the status quo. Nevertheless, it is still evident and educators must realize that it is imperative that they find respectful and relevant ways to include them as partners in the educational process.

Friere (in Reyes & Torres, 2007) provides an example of a more culturally respectful approach. This approach acknowledges and accepts diverse family literacy practices, in essence, acknowledging the myriad ways of knowing. This approach works through acknowledging the history of colonization of non-mainstream families through the imposition of mainstream family literacy practices on non-mainstream families and acknowledging the way in which non-mainstream families success is measured using mainstream family literacy practices with the emphasis on ways in which their deficits can be fixed. With the acknowledgement of this Eurocentric thinking, action can be taken to put in place ‘culture circles’ or learning environments where participants are empowered to speak in order to overcome those institutions, ideologies, and situations that restrict their voices and actions.
The Aboriginal Education Department in our district, of which I am a part, has assisted several schools in implementing key aspects of Freire’s approach in their efforts to welcome Aboriginal parents to the school. One of the first steps in this process is to lessen the “institutional” feel of the building and to make it more inviting for parents. Baxter (2006) writes that Aboriginal parents identified that in order to feel more comfortable in a school setting they “valued an Aboriginal presence such as photographs, posters, artwork or cultural objects… visible for all to see upon entry and throughout the building” (p. 17).

Part four of the medicine wheel: Culturally responsive pedagogy

The fourth component in the circle pertaining to support for Aboriginal learners focuses on pedagogy and curriculum, learning styles, and student-teacher dynamics. Hare (2003), suggests that schools increase Aboriginal content in curricula, incorporate Aboriginal perspectives within existing curricula, and enrich learning with a growing number of Aboriginal resources. Pre-service teachers must also be knowledgeable about Aboriginal subject matter to better support language, culture and traditions of their students. Elders’ roles, which, prior to contact, were one of teacher, guide, and role model, must also be revived and honoured so they may once again participate in Aboriginal children’s learning.

For Aboriginal children to succeed in the educational system, Demmert (2001) suggests that “teacher attitudes about students, knowledge of subject matter, and understanding and knowledge about the culture of students are all shown to promote improved academic performance and student behaviour” (Yagi, 1985, quoted from Demmert, p. 18). Building trusting relationships as well as extending those relationships
to family and community and using highly engaging, activity-based cooperative learning appear to be effective in instructing Aboriginal students. According to Demmert’s research, “place-based education, an educational approach that draws on local history, culture, economics, environment, and circumstances as a curriculum source” (p. 22), shows promise. Pedagogical practices where the instructor emphasizes “open-ended questioning, inductive/analytical reasoning and student discussion in large and small group setting” (p. 19) will result in better outcomes in comparison to the teacher questions and standard teaching methods.

Pewewardy (1998), in his literature review on Aboriginal students’ learning styles cautions that there is no absolute learning style among Aboriginal learners and that doing so will only lead to a perpetuation of stereotyping. He has found, however, much research indicating that Aboriginal learners have “distinct cultural values, such as conformity to authority and respect for Elders, taciturnity, strong tribal social hierarchy, patrimonial/matrilinial clans, and an emphasis on learning which are deeply rooted in the teaching of the Elders” (p. 23).

Pewewardy stresses the importance of educators implementing culturally responsive teaching techniques as part of their pedagogical practices. He also presents specific methodology for teachers working with Aboriginal students to help increase motivation and improve success rates. The general characteristics he finds are: visual, cooperative, and experiential learning preferences, reflective thinking and decision-making, receptivity toward a classroom management style that avoids rewards and punishment, self-image based on cultural or tribal identity, and family-centred reasoning. Findings indicate that the teachers of Aboriginal students “play(s) a tremendous role in
the teaching and learning process” (p. 34). Establishing and maintaining a positive and respectful relationship between teacher and student is critical.

In his summary, he suggests that the “failure of programs at reducing dropout rates and the inability to produce effective communication between majority and minority members are, in part, due to misconceptions and stereotypical notions” (p. 40) about Aboriginal students. All students, he adds, will benefit from the understanding of different cultural values and, as well, “when differences in learning styles are addressed, Aboriginal students will become motivated and encouraged to succeed” (p. 41).

Conclusions

Research suggests that BC’s public school system is failing our Aboriginal learners because they continue to impose a Eurocentric educational system. The B.C. Ministry of Education, including the policy makers, need to examine the research on those factors that are critical for Aboriginal student success. A partnership which includes the policy makers, Aboriginal educators, parents and community members, and non-Aboriginal educators, is necessary to begin planning for effective change. It is evident in the research that Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing must be recognized and reaffirmed as part of the educational philosophy when planning for Aboriginal student success. So too is a culturally responsive pedagogy which addresses cultural literacy, self-reflective analysis of attitudes and beliefs on the part of the educator, a caring, trusting, and inclusive classroom, respect for diversity, and transformative curriculum to engender meaning.

As well, there must be concerted effort to revamp the educational programs in all Canadian universities. We are now at the end of the first decade in the new millennium
and still there is only discussion about the inclusion of courses to better prepare pre-
service teachers to work with Aboriginal children and families. As one who has
accumulated nearly eight years of post secondary education over an expanse of thirty
years, I am disheartened that little has changed in that period of time.

Past educational efforts have failed for two reasons: 1) there has been little or no
acknowledgement of the findings of Aboriginal researchers that support what is needed
for Aboriginal students' success; and 2) “band-aid” solutions have been undertaken
without consultation and communication with the Aboriginal community.

I do commend the Ministry’s effort to address the issues by putting in place
enhancement agreements. This is just the start. With the partnerships being forged
among the Ministry representatives, district staff, and the Aboriginal community, I feel
there is some hope and optimism for positive changes to be made.

Finally, it is imperative that the Ministry begin to take action to change the
circumstances that many Aboriginal students find themselves in otherwise society will
suffer the consequences of a poorly educated population. The Aboriginal population is
not only growing (at 1.8%) almost twice as fast as the Canadian population (1.0%)
(Steffler, 2008, p. 14) but there is an increase in the number of Aboriginal people in
urban settings and therefore more Aboriginal children attending public schools (45, 804)
in comparison to on-reserve schools (11, 963) (BC Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 5).
As many as 300, 000 Aboriginal children could enter the labour force over the next 15
years (Cappon, 2008, p. 61). With the focus on investing in education, Aboriginal
people and Canadian society have a huge stake in the success of Aboriginal learning.
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Appendix A: Medicine Wheel

Impact of Residential Schools
Cognitive Imperialism

Role of Aboriginal Parents
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy