

Educators' Perceptions of Aboriginal Students' Experiences: Implications of provincial policy in Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptions of school teachers and leaders in two public school boards in Ontario, Canada, in the context of recent policy related to Aboriginal education. The study's mixed-methods design interrogated participants' perceptions of the Aboriginal community's relationship with their children's school and the concept of ethical space as a strategy to improve Aboriginal students' educational progress. The results attest to the fact that educators' awareness of Aboriginal students' epistemic and cultural identities is lacking. The study underscores the necessity to further inform teachers and principals of the factors that expose Aboriginal students to the isolating nature of schools.

INTRODUCTION

The statistics related to Aboriginal peoples and education is most telling of the residual effects of colonization on their socio-cultural and epistemic traditions. Aboriginal peoples in Canada have less education, represent higher drop-out rates from formal education, and have a disproportionately high dependency on social welfare programs (Cooper & Stacey-Moore, 2009; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). In Ontario, Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) has introduced various public policy related to Aboriginal education in attempt to reconcile the achievement gap between Aboriginal and mainstream Canadian students foster a greater sense of Aboriginal student identity in public schools. These system-wide policy initiatives are in light of the 28% growth in the Aboriginal population across Ontario between 2001 and 2006 (from 188,315 Aboriginal persons to 242,495), including over 50,000 Aboriginal students enrolled in public education (Ontario Policy Framework, 2007). *The First Nation Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007), *Many Roots, Many Voices* (2005) and *Building*

Bridges to Success for First Nation Métis and Inuit Students (2007), represent the seminal public education policies in Ontario that underscore Aboriginal students' learning preferences and the instructional strategies for teachers to implement that are specifically applicable to Aboriginal students' holistic paradigms of teaching and learning. These documents reflect the literature that suggests that teachers' and school leaders' inclusion of Aboriginal students' socio-cultural values and traditions into the Eurocentric curriculum has the potential to positively influence Aboriginal children's self-esteem (Moyle, 2005; Norris, 2006).

Given the fact that public education is a provincial responsibility in Canada (Section 93 of the Constitution Act), the OME has made a public declaration to Aboriginal students and communities on the part of school boards, principals, and teachers that publicly-funded educational institutions will recognize and respect Aboriginal students' cultural and epistemic traditions and inform their practices as frontline educators to improve Aboriginal student academic achievement. Traditional languages and culture are considered crucial to Aboriginal students' educational accomplishments and success in schools (Duquette, 2000; Neegan, 2005). The policies present the OME's intention to raise the awareness of teachers' and school leaders' knowledge about Aboriginal students' social, cultural, and academic needs and styles, so that their knowledge, traditions and worldviews can be authentically incorporated into school and classroom cultures (Cherubini, 2010). According to the research, the schools that successfully endorse inclusive learning environments and celebrate Aboriginal students' socio-linguistic traditions strengthen their identity as Aboriginal persons and improve their academic standing (Hilberg & Tharp, 2002; Kanu, 2002; Swanson, 2003). As Intrator (2006) suggests, Aboriginal students need to cultivate a sense of self-exploration to discover their identity and how their traditions are shaped by the meanings of the community's beliefs.

Purpose of the Study

This study is a component of a research project that examines the perceptions of elementary school teachers and leaders in two large coterminous public school boards in northern Ontario, in the context of recent provincial policy related to Aboriginal education. The study's mixed-methods design interrogated participants' perceptions of the Aboriginal community's relationship with their children's school and the concept of ethical space as a strategy to improve Aboriginal students' educational progress and foster their self and cultural identification. Participants in this study included elementary school teachers and principals who are practising in a region where nearly 10% of the population is Aboriginal and half of whom are less than twenty-four years of age (Census, 2006).

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The conceptual framework for this study accounted for a review of the literature on the characteristics associated with ethical space and the concept of Aboriginal (student) identity.

Ethical Space

The history of Aboriginal peoples in many Western societies is testament to the oppression of their worldviews and the dispossession of their socio-cultural and socio-linguistic traditions at the hands of colonization (Bennett, 1999; Dorset, 1995; Wunder, 1998). There has, however, been a resurgence in Canada particularly over the last thirty years on the part of Aboriginal peoples to reclaim their

contextually rich and culturally-relevant traditions (see for example Assembly of First Nations, 1988; 1990; 1982) and therefore enable some *space* for this discourse and eventual practice (Mastronardi, 2009). This resurgence to re-establish the sense of space is of paramount importance in terms of Aboriginal students' experiences and educational progress in public schools.

The term *ethical space* was defined for the participants in this study according to the following characteristics reflective of the literature and the OME policy documents: the complex interactions across cultures that include the celebration of student diversity, student-centred restorative justice discipline, cooperative and collaborative learning experiences, the recognition of Aboriginal culture norms and physical spaces that reflect Aboriginal culture and student aspirations. It was also understood to include the presence of Aboriginal learners in the school.

Mainstream classrooms have not been invitational and inclusive of physical, intellectual and spiritual spaces for Aboriginal children; in fact, schools have been the vehicle to eradicate Aboriginal epistemologies resulting in an array of psychological scars that in some cases have been transferred inter-generationally (Grenier, 2009). Culturally-appropriate education programs that celebrate Aboriginal student diversity and establish respectful school environments that reflect Aboriginal culture foster Aboriginal students' academic development and sense of self-efficacy (McGarrigle & Nelson, 2006). Further, school-based programs that are culturally-inclusive and honour student voices (Dunn, 2001; McRae, 2000) promote the diversity of Aboriginal students' cultural experience (Johnson & Mancer, 2001; Tripcony, 1995). In this context Indigenous thought, as it is described in Haig-Brown (2008), is represented in the *spaces* of formal schooling as the belief of the interrelationship between all things. Indigenous thought exists with a distinct epistemic space:

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have a primordial unity or fixicity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (Bhabha, 1994, p.37)

The literature also attests to the fact that school and classroom environments that practice collaborative learning strategies, communicate matters of student achievement clearly with Aboriginal parents, and allow Aboriginal leaders to have a consistent presence in the school, accentuate Aboriginal students' experiences in public education. Furthermore, and just as significant, the creation of these spaces promotes the active engagement of Aboriginal parents and community members into the symbolic life of the school (MacFarlane, Glynn, Grace, Penetito, & Bateman, 2008). Constructive approaches to pedagogy combined with inclusive physical and epistemic spaces in schools for Aboriginal students create caring environments that encourage family involvement in their children's schooling (Cavanagh, 2003; 2005). Cooperation and collaboration in learning reflect more of a holistic educational experience that fosters authentic and contextual learning that is in line with Aboriginal student preferences (Bishop, Berryman, Richardson, & Tiakiwai, 2002; Penetito, 2004). In creating culturally-respectful space, school administrators and teachers affirm Aboriginal students' unique identities and respect their practices, stories, and beliefs within the pedagogical and curricular practices of the classroom (Tatum, 2001). Ethical space that promotes Aboriginal student inclusion can create the necessary social and

emotional relationships to the teachers and administrators in the school and result in a social bond whereby students and educators become committed to school goals (MacFarlane & Bateman, 2005). Ethical space values diversity and augments the social dynamics of the classroom for all students (LeRoux, 2001). It also requires that teachers and principals need to be able to guide students in understanding their unique manner of creating knowledge in the context of their social, cultural and epistemic realities (Davidman & Davidman, 1997).

Aboriginal Student Identities

According to the literature, identities are created within relationships between oneself and ‘the other’ as the self recognizes the difference from the other (Hall, 1996; Roseneil & Seymour, 1999). Identity is understood according to culture and language and how oneself perceives their traditions, customs, and norms in relation to the cultural discourses of the other (Curthoys, 2003; Walker, 2003) in a socially constructed context (Brawley, 2003; Jones, 2003). Identity, as a construct of social interaction, involves language to describe how we identify and perceive our notion of self given the social relationships with the Other (Carrington, 1999).

It is generally accepted that Aboriginal students often have varied ways of creating knowledge based on very unique traditions and worldviews (Hilberg & Tharp, 2002; Sparks, 2000). Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) warn, however, against making general conclusions about Aboriginal students’ epistemic understandings. Similarly the concept of Aboriginal student identity cannot be reduced to any one single variable that ignores the complexities of difference (D’Cruz, 2007). This study investigated teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of their schools’ effectiveness to foster the self and cultural identities of Aboriginal students. The research attests to the complexity (and necessity) of this endeavour by describing the general differences in understanding concepts of identity between Western and non-Western cultures; more specifically, in the former individuals understand identity as internal characteristics, preferences and proficiencies. In the latter, the tendency is to perceive identity from relational and collective perspective according to social roles and community memberships (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Kitayama & Markus, 2000).

The literature bears out the fact that mainstream schools represent multidimensional institutional and cultural realities that often do not recognize Aboriginal identities and worldviews (Wotherspoon, 2006). Schools that are culturally responsive to Aboriginal student identity must account for community needs and implement these as priorities in their school strategic planning. Typically, “teachers’ actions and accounts reinforce the depiction of Aboriginal education terrain as a space in which hope and frustration continue to coexist” (Castellano, Davis & Lahache; as cited in Wotherspoon, 2006, p.692). Instead, Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) suggest reconciling educational and pedagogical practices to more of a focus on direct experiences that reflect Aboriginal student learning preferences. In this light, knowledge is holistically constructed and student competencies are assessed in contextually-relevant circumstances. The success of the New Zealand National Early Childhood Curriculum, *Te Wahariki* (1996), is testament to the effectiveness of tailoring curriculum to meet the bi-cultural identities of both the Maori and Pakeha (New Zealand citizens of European origin) peoples. A central tenet of the program is the sustainability of relationships between students, educators and the greater school community. “Different programs, philosophies, structures and environments contribute to the

distinctive patterns” of the program (Ministry of Education, 1996; p.11) and specifically address respect for students’ identities (Carr & Peters, 2005). The program honours Indigenous Knowledge as a product of local practices in various societies that is tied directly to the process by which Aboriginal students identify themselves. By incorporating the principles of Indigenous Knowledge, Aboriginal students can better identify with their socio-cultural and oral traditions from dynamic and holistic perspectives (Boven & Morohashi, 2002). In traditional Aboriginal communities, youth innately identify with the:

Living landscape [that is] encoded with their people’s history and worldview ... the places in one’s community ... evoke a constellation of deep spiritual and emotional responses that visually and emotionally enliven and root a person to this vast whirling world. (Lopez & McClellan Hall, 2007, p.29)

Aboriginal student identity is not displaced by traditional mainstream educational practices that have traditionally disengaged marginalised students:

Schools are founded on principles of increasing identity and decreasing alterity. Historically, identity has been privileged; becoming ‘one of us’ has been the goal and, for many young people, the painful outcome Other languages, other teachers, and other students are respected and sought out as both contributions and contributors to the educational experience and reflections of the wider community. (Hirst & Vadeboncoeur, 2006, p.223)

To honour and meaningfully represent Aboriginal student identity, as it is understood through their socio-cultural, socio-linguistic, and epistemic traditions, potentially requires mainstream schooling practices to be redefined.

METHODS

By using both quantitative and qualitative data, the study’s mixed-methods research design contributed to a broader understanding of school teachers’ and leaders’ perceptions as they relate to Aboriginal students’ educational progress and school effectiveness in the context of system-wide OME policy (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2002; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). This study is in response to the gap in the research literature regarding elementary school educators’ perceptions of Aboriginal students’ experiences in public education.

Participants

The participating two coterminous school boards of education were selected based on their relatively high number of Aboriginal student enrolment. The boards are located in northern Ontario, Canada. Both boards of education encompass an extremely vast geographical region of the province and both have a recognized Aboriginal education cultural program available to students. Sixty-three elementary educators volunteered to participate in the research study. They included twenty-six principals, thirteen intermediate-level teachers (grades 7-8), twelve junior-level teachers (grades 4-6), and twelve primary-level teachers (grades 1-3). As a result of purposive sampling measures, representation of participant

gender, years of experience and grade division taught was balanced. Principal participants represented 41% of the total sample (N= 26). 8.8% of the principals had less than one year experience as a principal; 42.3% had between 1 to 4 years of experience; 23% reported to have 5 to 10 years of experience, and 30.7% indicated having more than 10 years of experience in the role of administrator. Primary-level teachers represented 19% of the total study sample (N=12). 8% indicated 1 to 4 years experience in their role as primary teacher; 33% had between 5 and 10 years experience and 58% had more than 10 years of experience. Junior-level teacher participants also represented 19% of the total population of this study (N=12). 8% reported to have less than one year experience; 25% had between 1 and 4 years of experience; 25% indicated having between 5 and 10 years experience, while 42% reported being in their role for more than 10 years. Intermediate-level teachers represented 20.6% of the total sample (N=13). 23% of participants had between 1 and 4 years of experience; 54% reported to have between 5 and 10 years; while 23% indicated to have more than 10 years of experience as an intermediate teacher. Each of the education's school districts was also represented in the population of this study. It was particularly imperative to recognise district representation since both of the school boards include widely dispersed urban and rural school communities. Three percent of responses from participants were rejected as a result of response prevarication.

Procedure

Participants' responses to the Likert- scale items were analysed with their qualitative response to the open-ended questions. Data was collected concurrently but analysed separately. The quantitative and qualitative data sets were considered to have equal weighting. The data sets were subsequently combined during the interpretation phase of the study (Creswell, Plano-Clark et. al, 2003; Hanson et. al, 2005).

The quantitative section of the survey consisted of three Likert-type statements ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The statements included:

1. Aboriginal parents have a strong professional relationship with the teachers and administrators of their children's school.
2. The term "ethical space" is used in my school with regards to working with Aboriginal students?
3. There are unaddressed "cultural boundaries" in the school where I work.

The qualitative component consisted of two open-ended questions and was intended to solicit further descriptions of participants' perceptions as they related to the focus of this research. The two questions were:

1. Explain the nature of support available in your school for helping Aboriginal students acquire positive self and cultural identification.
2. What support would you recommend be offered to teachers that would assist them in helping Aboriginal students reach their full academic potential?

The electronic survey was administered in December 2008 and remained open for participants' responses until February 2009. Prior to its administration, each participant was assigned a confidential username and password that granted them access to the on-line address where the survey was located. Responses were securely stored in a central data bank. Only the principal researcher had access to the usernames, passwords and responses.

The survey design was based on the goals and strategies articulated in the OME policy Framework. It was field-tested with different populations of elementary school teachers and principals for instrument fidelity (Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, Collins, Filer, Wiedmaier, & Moore, 2007). By accounting for both the quantitative and qualitative data sets, the researcher was better positioned to examine educators' perceptions. It also further validated the findings of this study. Sample integration legitimation allowed for the amalgamation of inferences and findings from the respective data sets as they were eventually collapsed into meta-inferences (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2006).

Data Analysis

Participants' responses to the Likert-scale statements were analysed for means and frequencies. Bonferroni repeated measures were analysed across multiple comparisons, including teacher versus administrator, teachers according to the division taught (intermediate, junior, and primary) and across participants' years of experience in their respective role. The findings are tabled in the Results section of this paper.

The responses to the two open-ended questions were analyzed using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The analysis identified initial codes and their respective properties. Recurring codes and properties were collapsed into themes and eventually broad categories. The process of constant comparison identifies the conceptual relationships among and between themes as they are coded throughout the analysis (Cherubini, 2007).

RESULTS

The quantitative and qualitative results of this research study are presented independently in this section. Four key findings emerged from the data of this study: First, elementary educators do not perceive that Aboriginal parents have a strong professional relationship with the teachers and administrators of their children's school; second, a common understanding of *ethical space* does not exist between educators, students and the school community; third, participants did not agree that there were unaddressed cultural boundaries in their schools; last, participants acknowledged the importance of support services for Aboriginal students and teachers, having an Aboriginal community presence to compliment school culture, and increasing teacher and principal awareness of Aboriginal socio-cultural and epistemic realities through teacher training and professional development.

Quantitative Results

The first question that asked participants to indicate the extent to which they perceived Aboriginal parents as having a strong professional relationship with the teachers and administrators of the school resulted in a descriptive mean score of 2.85 (and a 1.14 standard deviation). Mean scores between participant cohort groups ranged from 2.57 (intermediate teachers – including a 1.1 standard deviation) to 3.15 (respective of principals – and a 1.08 standard deviation) representing a 0.58 mean range in responses. The total mean score for the second question that surveyed participants' perceptions of the term *ethical space* as being used in their schools when working with Aboriginal students was the lowest of all total mean scores at 2.30 (and a 1.14 standard deviation). This question also had the lowest range between cohort mean scores at 0.30. The primary cohort mean was 2.13 (including a 1.18 standard deviation) while the intermediate teacher cohort's mean score was 2.43 (1.28 standard deviation). The

third question asked participants about the possibility of any unaddressed cultural boundaries existing in the school. The total mean score was 2.63 (with a 1.13 standard deviation) and the range of responses was 0.53. Like the previous results, the primary cohort had the lowest mean at 2.13 (with 1.18 standard deviation) and the intermediate cohort had the highest at 2.93 (and a 1.07 standard deviation). Please see Table 1 for the complete results.

Table 1. Descriptive means for 6 Likert-scale statements

Statement	PC	N	Mean	SD	SE	R/ M
Aboriginal parents have a strong professional relationship with the teachers and administrators of their children's school.	Primary	12	2.80	1.26	.327	.58
	Junior	12	2.58	1.08	.313	
	Interm.	13	2.57	1.15	.309	
	Principals	26	3.15	1.08	.213	
	Total	63	2.85	1.14	.140	
The term "ethical space" is used in my school with regards to working with Aboriginal students?	Primary	12	2.13	1.18	.307	.30
	Junior	12	2.25	1.42	.411	
	Interm.	13	2.43	1.28	.343	
	Principals	26	2.35	.936	.183	
	Total	63	2.30	1.14	.139	
There are unaddressed cultural boundaries in the school where I work.	Primary	12	2.40	1.35	.349	.53
	Junior	12	2.58	1.08	.313	
	Interm.	13	2.93	1.07	.286	
	Principals	26	2.62	1.09	.215	
	Total	63	2.63	1.13	.139	

PC: Participant Cohort; N: Number of Participants; SD: Standard Deviation; SE: Standard Error; R/M: Range of Mean Scores

Test of Significant Differences: Post Hoc Bonferroni

A post-hoc Bonferroni test of significant differences with a repeated measure of a 0.05 alpha level was conducted on the quantitative data. Participants' responses to the three Likert-scale questions were compared in light of: (1) Their role in the school as either a primary, junior, intermediate teacher or principal and (2) The years of experience in their current role. Notably, there were no significant differences in any of the responses to the three questions across professional role and professional experience comparisons.

Qualitative Responses

The grounded theory analysis of participants' open-ended responses resulted in the emergence of various categories for each of the study participant cohorts. In terms of the principal cohort, the four

categories were described as: (1) Curricular support (2) Aboriginal performances to foster student identity (3) Schools as recognizing all cultures, and (4) The need for further professional development for staff. The primary teacher cohort responses were distinguished by these categories: (1) Resource support (2) Visual representation to celebrate Aboriginal identification (3) Need for more teacher specialists, and (4) Teacher training. The categories emerging from the junior level teacher cohort included: (1) Importance of Aboriginal student social networking (2) Lack of culturally relevant resources (3) Aboriginal celebrations in the school, and (4) Teacher training and professional development. Emerging from the intermediate teacher cohort responses were these categories: (1) In-house support for staff (2) Heightening Aboriginal visual representation (3) Increasing educators' knowledge, and (4) Determining classroom integration strategies.

By constant comparison, the above categories emerging from the participant cohorts were collapsed into three core categories. Grounded in participants' reflections were the following core categories: (1) Support services for Aboriginal students and teachers (2) Community presence to complement school culture, and (3) Greater awareness for educators. Those statements cited in the Results section are considered to be key contributors towards the emergence of the respective core categories.

(1) Support Services for Aboriginal Students and Teachers

Principal participants cited a number of support services that existed in their schools to assist Aboriginal students acquire positive self and cultural identification. Typical of others, one individual explained: "At our school we have an Aboriginal lead teacher, a board Aboriginal consultant, library and reading resources dedicated to Aboriginal students" (Principal 10). Other principals suggested the availability of open "resources for teachers to access" within the school (Principal 9). A majority of participants in this cohort reported that "cultural materials [provided by the school] are used in class" (Principal 54) to better assist Aboriginal students with relating to the core provincial curriculum. The presence of Aboriginal counsellors in the schools was also distinguished by this participant cohort as being pivotal in fostering a sense of cultural identification in Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students, according to principals, consider their counsellors to be role models. As one individual stated, "our student support worker has plenty of experience" working with Aboriginal children (Principal 59). Principal participants also cited the availability of curriculum resource supports for teachers as they aim to better represent the cultural values of Aboriginal students. As an example, one principal distinguished the "reading resources" in the library and classrooms that are suitable for teachers to use in their instruction (Principal 11). Principals distinguished the availability of, what one principal described as, "quality, relevant books with Aboriginal perspectives in our library" (Principal 12). Another individual stated, "we include a great deal of Aboriginal literature in our language and religious programs ... our school often helps Aboriginal parents of special needs students negotiate the health care services and programs that their children need" (Principal 57).

The three teacher cohorts made similar references to Aboriginal language and lead teachers, Aboriginal counsellors, and curriculum resources for teachers to assist Aboriginal students in acquiring positive self and cultural identification. One teacher-participant explained:

The students have an Ojibwa period every day [that is] taught by an Aboriginal teacher. In this classroom, students learn the Ojibwa

language, learn about their culture, have discussions and engage in Aboriginal art. Our board offers the services of an Aboriginal lead teacher who is available to help [children] with any issues or provide teachers with resources that are needed. (Primary 67)

Participants consistently distinguished the success of Aboriginal lead teachers for their assistance in creating a “positive learning environment for the Aboriginal students. Annishnabe teachings are based on love, respect, honest, humility, truth, bravery and wisdom. The students feel a safe connection with the language and the culture” (Junior 61). The Aboriginal “lead teachers at the board and school level” (Junior 17) help to connect children to a greater sense of security within their cultural norms. Participants appreciated that the Aboriginal lead teachers “can be called upon at any time to assist with their interactions” with Aboriginal children (Intermediate 41).

The presence of Aboriginal counsellors and support workers, according to the teacher participants, was instrumental in delivering culturally-relevant lessons on “character education” (Primary 18). The Aboriginal support workers and liaison were described by participants as “working closely with the staff” (Primary 67). If there was a communication gap between mainstream teachers and Aboriginal children participants explained that, “When one of our Aboriginal students needs to talk they are able to talk to our counsellor. He will contact other Aboriginal people if needed” (Intermediate 15). Similarly, resources to support Aboriginal student engagement in the mainstream curriculum were also identified by the teacher cohort participants as vital to nurturing Aboriginal students’ self and cultural identification. Some individuals focussed on the “newly formed Aboriginal initiative in the school board [whereby] we are beginning to pull our Native students together to create and teach educational presentations pertaining to their culture” (Primary 20). Others considered the “variety of picture book reflections on Aboriginal peoples” as significant contributions to Aboriginal children’s formative development as young readers (Primary 36). Teacher participants distinguished the nature by which school-based projects addressed both the expectations of the curriculum and furthered Aboriginal student identity: “Aboriginal students in the school are presently working on culturally-based projects [that will be] presented to the student body in the form of read alouds, puppet plays and movie times” (Junior 19). When projects are combined with “other textual resources [such as] novels that reflect Aboriginal culture” (Junior 17), teachers can provide more opportunities to foster Aboriginal self-identity in the context of their own unique culture. In many instances, therefore, teacher participants commented on the support services for teachers to assist Aboriginal students: “Each of the teachers in the school not only has Aboriginal study units but encourages their students to apply their cultural knowledge and influences when completing projects” (Intermediate 63).

(2) Community Presence to Complement School Culture

All participant cohorts indicated that the presence of Elders and other community representatives complemented their respective school cultures. Principals reported that the “Aboriginal Elders [who] came to teach art had obvious benefits for Aboriginal students who could better identify with their cultural traditions, but it was also instrumental for mainstream students and teachers who were also able to draw parallels” between Aboriginal and Western cultural beliefs (Principal 27). Principals perceived the presence of Aboriginal leaders in the school as a means to draw the community back to the

educational institutions that have represented oppression and colonial domination for generations past. Participants noted their satisfaction with the “leaders from the Aboriginal community [who] come to speak to our students and parents about Native traditions” (Principal 37). An outcome of having “Chief Sayers presenting to students” included, according to this principal, “parents coming to our school to teach our students the art of drumming, bead and artwork” (Principal 14). The Aboriginal community’s involvement in the school strengthened Aboriginal student identity and enhanced the cultural perspectives of the entire school community. It became, according to some principals, a mutually benefiting relationship: “We bring people in from the local First Nation communities to work through the arts, or tell stories, and we have sent classes to the reserve for sessions there” (Principal 59).

Teachers, too, reported the benefits of having an Aboriginal community presence to complement what they understood to be a Eurocentric-based school culture. Ceremonies whereby “the Chief comes with his drum group” are perceived as “excellent means of teaching Aboriginal children traditional ways [since] there are no Elders in the building” (Primary 35). Similar to the principal cohort responses, teachers cited the benefits of having community “liaisons between school and reserve” (Junior 19) to extend the cultural representation that exists in school into the Aboriginal community and better represent Aboriginal traditions. In turn, teachers are more equipped to make curricular connections between mainstream and Aboriginal paradigms. One teacher stated:

In my class, when studying Canadian government I invited the Chief to speak about his work and the duties of Council. My intergenerational program this year will involve senior citizens from the Aboriginal community. (Junior 63)

These initiatives are particularly relevant since they provide a contextual awareness for students when:

Community members and Elders visit the school ... we have some community members and Elders visit the schools for a variety of reasons and in various classrooms. There are some programs that come from the board level to invite Aboriginal artists, storytellers and Elders into the schools to share their culture to all students. (Intermediate 60)

Participant cohorts typically recognized the Elders and guest speakers from the Aboriginal community as lending greater relevance to the inclusion of Aboriginal cultural celebrations within the existing school cultures. Some principals distinguished how “Aboriginal drum groups [that] performed for our school community” encouraged Aboriginal students to “perform drumming, Aboriginal dance, and solos that reflect their traditions to the student body” (Principal 37). Aboriginal student identity is nurtured when all students in the school are privy to “Métis dancers that visit the school and explain the culture to the other students in the school” (Principal 45). Various principals expressed their appreciation for the inclusion of Aboriginal celebrations in their school culture: “We have been privileged to have dancers and women singers ... present to students and staff” (Principal 21) and as a result various administrators could better appreciate the significance of including Aboriginal traditions into many facets of their school culture to foster Aboriginal student identity. One participant explained

the use of “sacred circles to have students voice ideas, ask questions and share” their unique cultural paradigms (Principal 39).

Teachers, like the administrator participants, perceived themselves to be in a better position to include traditional Aboriginal ceremonies into the context of their classroom culture. They described the benefits of doing “a smudge ceremony and a sharing circle” with their young students (Junior 13) to expose the traditional values to both Aboriginal and mainstream children. Participants suggested that Aboriginal students feel more inclined to participate in classroom and school events where they feel culturally represented. This sense of inclusion suggests to them and the student body that Aboriginal ceremonies are valued and respected in school culture. School staff is more comfortable with “healing circles facilitated by a teacher who meets with classes regularly” (Intermediate 48). Similarly, various teacher participants described how Aboriginal tradition and ceremony were directly infused into school events and not treated as separate components of classroom and school culture. This explanation was particularly insightful:

At our Remembrance Day assembly we had O Canada sung in Ojibwa, French and English, an Anishnabe prayer was given by two grade 6 students and images of Aboriginal soldiers were included in the DVD.
(Junior 63)

The presence of Elders and the inclusion of traditional ceremonies into the school cultures encourage students, according to participants, to better assert their identity as Aboriginal peoples. So to do the opportunities that exists within a school to create distinct physical spaces for Aboriginal students. Some principals indicated that their commitment to “build a cultural space for our students in the building” (Principal 7) whereby Aboriginal students could meet, have discussions with Aboriginal counsellors, and create a space that is visually representative of their distinct identities with, as one principal suggested, “the creation of a Mural of Teachings of the seven Grandfathers” (Principal 12). Teacher participants attested to the importance of creating space for Aboriginal students in the school. They suggested that the school’s commitment to designate a special place for Aboriginal students could be a symbolic and respectful gesture of the importance of Aboriginal students’ identity in public schools. One teacher stated, “there is now an empty room that we have designated as special space for Aboriginal students ... the plan is to have them develop the room’s appearance and use it for cultural activities and as a gathering place” (Primary 20). Particularly interesting were instances when the designation of physical spaces in a school were explained as “ethical spaces” where Aboriginal students could bridge the ideological divide they perceive between their socio-cultural and traditional teachings and more mainstream paradigms (Junior19). Some participants distinguished the value of such space as “a positive learning environment for Aboriginal students [where they] feel a safe connection with the language and culture, in addition to being surrounded by their own people” (Junior 61).

(3) *Heightening Principal and Teacher Awareness*

Just as support services and community presence emerged as core categories grounded in participants’ responses, so too did the recommendations of heightening educators’ awareness of Aboriginal epistemic traditions and learning styles. Principals were often candid in admitting that teachers are “weak” at differentiating their instruction to meet the learning needs of Aboriginal students and need to

better “consider the unique needs of each individual. Then we would know what would work for our Aboriginal students as well” (Principal 7). The vast majority of principals summoned the OME to offer “a Ministry credit course and workshops dedicated to the needs of Aboriginal students” (Principal 10). These participants referred to the “Aboriginal cultural workshops or a few of the professional development days [as having] great benefit to our Aboriginal key teachers” (Principal 45) thereby justifying the need for “more in-service about the Aboriginal culture and specific strategies for teaching Aboriginal students” (Principal 57). These professional development opportunities to further Aboriginal student learning would, according to some principals, be most effective in “system-wide sessions where all teachers are brought in and receive the same message at the same time” (Principal 9). Principals suggested that the objectives of differentiated instruction are key pedagogical strategies to assist teachers to “meet the needs for all students” (Principal 55), and that further to more professional development in differentiated instruction teachers needed “training in assessment” that would “allow them to plan” for Aboriginal student success (Principal 23). Principals included themselves, among others, as requiring a broader understanding of Aboriginal students’ learning styles, customs and identities. Just as teachers need professional development in these areas, principals admitted the necessity for them to have “continued opportunity to increase our awareness of different student needs ... we must continue to dialogue and learn from each other and each other’s culture” (Principal 21).

The need to heighten mainstream educators’ awareness of Aboriginal students’ experiences inside and outside of school also resonated in teachers’ responses. Primary school teachers particularly voiced their concern in this regard. One teacher stated, “It would be great to see what expectations are expected of Aboriginal students before they enter our schools and classrooms” (Primary 31). Like the principal participants, they recognized the need for additional “in-services on documents derived from the research that can be implemented in the classroom to address the needs of Aboriginal students and the strategies to teach them” (Primary 25).

In turn, teachers cited their need for further professional development “on strategies and methods that would be successful when teaching and disciplining Aboriginal students” (Primary 36). It was interesting to note the number of teachers who cited their lack of awareness of Aboriginal student epistemic needs and identities as a barrier to successfully representing them in their pedagogical practice. Characteristic of other responses, one teacher stated: “Teachers need to learn about the culture of their students. Teachers need to learn how to build the Aboriginal student’s self-esteem” (Primary 67). This recommendation and the others like it, calls for raising teachers’ awareness beyond the more common responses to offer “workshops for every teacher who has an Aboriginal student in their class” (Junior 17). Heightening teachers’ awareness of Aboriginal students’ identity would be enhanced by “workshops that are led by Aboriginal peoples in giving us strategies to assist in helping these students reach their full potential” (Junior 30) and towards “making teachers more aware of how they can address cultural differences” (Junior 40). A number of teachers referred to their own professional development and “interest in learning about Aboriginal cultures and addressing the needs of Aboriginal students” to base their recommendation that “all teachers should be given professional development on Aboriginal learning styles and issues on professional development days since many will go voluntarily” (Junior 63). Teachers suggested that “professional development on cultural awareness [and] protocol on

how to address and interact with Anishnabe students and families” would be most beneficial to their awareness of the “inner workings of the Anishnabe community and how our cultures differ” (Intermediate 42). This same participant admitted the following:

I hate to say it but teachers need to be shown how this is done and how to incorporate [different instruction] ... they need it explained and they need to hear about how other professionals have achieved and succeeded in using these methods of instruction. They need examples and instances. We need to get teachers to start to approach student learning from a holistic perspective instead of one that is purely based on performance, assessment and evaluation. Student progress and maturation of tasks lie beyond what they can simply accomplish in the classroom. (Intermediate 42)

In this context teachers underscored the necessity of professional development opportunities to:

Combine Aboriginal curriculum with what is being followed by classroom teachers. Spending time with Elders in intensive day-long learning sessions of teachings of cultural differences and the need for Aboriginal students to have the ability to express themselves in a positive fashion. (Intermediate 65)

Also emerging in the data was the importance of heightening the awareness of prospective teachers during their pre-service training. First, principals identified the need for more Aboriginal teachers in public school. They suggested, in various contexts, the need for faculties of education to address the lack of Aboriginal teacher representation in mainstream schools. Indicative of other responses, one principal stated: “We would certainly like to see more Native Second Language trained teachers available in this area” given the decline of Aboriginal socio-linguistic traditions across the country (Principal 59). By having “more Aboriginal teachers,” various participants recognized the benefits this would have on students and staff alike in terms of better understanding “the students and their background” (Junior 61). Further, “more Aboriginal teachers in the classrooms” would translate, according to this individual, as more role models for Aboriginal students (Intermediate 60). Some teacher participants called for more dramatic change to teacher training. One primary teacher wanted “a totally revamped education system that allows teachers to be [trained] as specialists in their areas. This would allow teachers the time and energy needed to address some of the needs of Aboriginal students” (Primary 20). Others stated that pre-service teachers’ awareness of Aboriginal student identity could be heightened by “courses in Native Studies” to emphasize “the differences and similarities in modes of teaching” and that these courses “should not be optional” (Principal 50). Participants suggested that “more of an emphasis in teacher education faculties” and in “teacher training programs” of study (Junior 17) would assist prospective mainstream teachers in helping Aboriginal students reach their full academic potential.

DISCUSSION

The quantitative and qualitative results that emerged from the study are reflective of a very strong consensus of elementary principals and teachers' perceptions of Aboriginal students and education. These have a profound impact upon first, the manner in which physical and ethical space is occupied in mainstream schools by educators and students alike, and second, the manner in which Aboriginal student identity is understood and manifest in mainstream public schools.

Participants overwhelmingly indicated that Aboriginal parents did not have a strong relationship with school officials. At best and common to all other cohorts, the principal cohort mean score indicated their indifference (suggesting they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement) to the matter. This can at least partially be explained by the implicit distrust many Aboriginal peoples have for a formally institutionalized education system that has historically perpetuated colonial practices at the peril of marginalizing Aboriginal students (Patrick, 2008). Similarly, participants disagreed that the term "ethical space" was being used in conversations between students, teacher and principals. They did, however, acknowledge how classroom space could enhance Aboriginal student identity within school culture. The literature suggests that teachers and students enact and engage in physical space that symbolizes relationships and identities that are either supported or contested (Hearst & Vadiboncour, 2006). Spaces, in the context of schooling, often mediate relationships, offer possibilities, or present limitations on the respective student-identity positions (Atwell, 1998; Schlegel, 1998). The physical spaces that the study participants identified in this research were not necessarily associated to ethical space (with the exception of one individual) but were alluded to in light of Aboriginal students' cultural groups (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & McLaren, 2004). Consistent with the results, participants strongly indicated that unaddressed cultural boundaries existed in the school. Yet, this result seems to contradict participants' recommendations to heighten teachers and principals' awareness of the Aboriginal students' epistemic and cultural needs given their inability to effectively enact the necessary professional capacities towards ensuring Aboriginal students' academic potential.

Furthermore, the fact that no significant statistical relationships existed between participant cohorts throughout the quantitative analysis presents a rather conclusive finding; namely, educators' perceptions do not significantly differ regardless of their role, their position, or their years of professional experience in their current roles. Whether one is recently qualified as a teacher, whether they have been teaching or administrating for ten or more years, whether they teach in the north, south, west or east region of their respective school boards, or whether they have achieved all the necessary experiences and additional qualifications to be a school principal, has essentially no statistical impact upon their views related to Aboriginal education in the context of this study. Institutions of teacher training, the OME, and boards of education have had a relatively low impact upon informing and transforming educators' practice and relationships with Aboriginal students and communities (see Bartlett, 2005). Prospective and practising teachers, along with school administrators, have not been informed of the holistic and integrated epistemic practices of Aboriginal peoples that contrast with more fragmented Western approaches (Kukari, 2004). These culturally-based notions of learning have genuine repercussions on Aboriginal student development and identity:

Conversations about race, class and academic achievement are inherently difficult for Canadians. Educators share a commitment to

equal educational opportunity, but we are less certain about making a commitment to equal educational outcomes ... These conversations are difficult because they involve disagreements about what happened or should happen ... They involve identity - what the situation means to each of those involved. (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999; in Milton, 2008 p.17)

The study also identified that both principals and teachers acknowledge the importance of offering Aboriginal students the necessary support services in public schools. This attests to the fact that educators recognize that Aboriginal students have different needs than mainstream students, and that these needs are not exclusive to academics. Participants identified various behavioural interventions and social competency skills that, when left unsupported, hinders Aboriginal student engagement in mainstream school classrooms. In many instances participants cited the positive effects of culturally relevant support for Aboriginal students that had a major influence in both their formative and academic development. They perceived the support of Aboriginal lead teachers and counsellors as intrinsically valuable to address issues of behavioural, institutional and community resistance to Western practices. Participants' reflections provided evidence that mainstream educators have at the very least a fundamental awareness that Aboriginal students do not excel in traditional schooling practices and that the dynamic social practices and institutional structure of education contributes to the shaping of students' identity (Bourdieu, 1991), as well as to Aboriginal students' processes of identity negotiation (Davies, 2000; Weedon, 1999). One can speculate, however, that participants' responses indicate an over-reliance on Aboriginal youth counsellors and support workers to address all of the Aboriginal students' needs in their particular school. Participants alluded to the hiring of Aboriginal support personnel and lead teachers as necessary in order to meet the guiding principles of Aboriginal customs and traditions. While these individuals can undoubtedly contribute to the positive outcomes of fostering Aboriginal students' identity through custom and tradition, the study participants' references seem to underestimate first the myriad of differences and nuances that are unique to Aboriginal peoples, and second the cultural context that define concepts of identity (Hall, Kwong & Marsh, 2000). While participants readily recognized the importance of tending to Aboriginal students' academic and social skills (Sparks, 2000), equally important was the understanding that Aboriginal identity and reality are not concepts that can be reduced to singular realities and that significant variability exists (Gross, 1995). While Aboriginal teachers and counsellors certainly assist in building the necessary in-roads to further Aboriginal student identity, the literature makes clear that:

Care must be taken that total responsibility for the learning and well-being of Indigenous students is not placed entirely upon them... Placing this responsibility on teachers of difference can limit the opportunities they have available to take up other roles in schools and/or develop their professional skills on a broader level. It also has the effect of absolving mainstream teachers of the responsibility to work towards developing strategies to teach for difference and diversity. (Santoro, 2007, p.93)

The fact that the vast majority of participants in this study also distinguished the significance of embedding a visual representation of Aboriginal peoples into the library books, bulletin boards in the classrooms and hallways of the school, suggests how far removed such culturally-responsive practises must be from the curricular and physical spaces of schools. It is heartening to note that educators recognize that Aboriginal student identity is not celebrated or recognized in school materials. This supports the fact that Aboriginal student identity continues to be challenged by negative stereotyping that is indirectly perpetuated by the lack of positive images to which Aboriginal students can better identify (Charleston & King, 1991). A further caveat can be applied to this result; Aboriginal cultural representation cannot be solely reduced to pictures in storybooks and posters on school walls. While these may be noteworthy initiatives, they will not accomplish the level of academic, social and cultural engagement of Aboriginal students in public education to which they have a right if the representations are not supported in theory and practice in each classroom, activity, and celebration. The visual representations must be a part of a much more involved process of socio-cultural inclusion that is in and of itself characteristic of the school's epistemic and social conscience.

The study's findings also suggest that the principal and teacher participants expected the presence of the Aboriginal community to complement school culture. This, too, has a significant implication on the notions of ethical space and student identity. Participants' recognition of Aboriginal Elders and community representatives' inclusion into school culture was readily dispersed throughout the data. However, in some instances, principals and teachers explained how the stories of the Elders, traditional teachings, and Aboriginal ceremonies were beneficial for both Aboriginal and mainstream students. By exposing mainstream students and teachers to the various Aboriginal traditions participants described how enlightening it was for their school populations to understand another peoples' beliefs and practices. Various research also cites the significant contributions that cross-cultural teachings and perspectives have for all students towards the development of school curriculum practices and pedagogies (Burrige, 1999; Santoro & Reid, 2006). This, therefore, has significant implications for teacher and principal training and professional development. Participants' responses clearly indicate that left to their own devices they are unprepared and unequipped to address issues of Aboriginal representation and to foster Aboriginal student identity in public schools. One may have expected a different finding in this case given that participants overwhelmingly reported that unaddressed cultural boundaries did not exist in their schools. The emergence of the "teacher awareness" category suggests, quite conversely, that teachers and principals themselves cannot reconcile the epistemic, conceptual, pedagogical and cultural boundaries between Aboriginal and Western traditions.

CONCLUSION

In keeping with the literature, it is difficult for mainstream teachers to comprehend and address the unique needs of Aboriginal students whose life experiences are very diverse and different from their own, thereby further increasing the divide between Aboriginal and the Eurocentric curriculum and school practices (Tees & Pollesel, 2003; Windle, 2004). Participants in this study shed light on the fact that existing programs of teacher education and additional qualification courses not only do not address the aforementioned conceptual and pragmatic divide, but they do not inform how educational customs, policies, and procedures marginalise some students and promote the status quo for mainstream students

(Santoro, 2007). To shrink this divide teacher educators must become more versatile in challenging prospective teachers and administrators to consider the influence of their prior beliefs of teaching and learning. Pre-service teachers' beliefs are largely shaped by their prior experiences in school, and according to the literature, their preconceptions of teaching and knowledge-generation are also the result of the nature of interaction within their cultural context (Britzman, 1991; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Wideen et al., 1998). The danger inherent in this theory is that prospective teachers assume that the realities of teaching and learning are only those to which they have been exposed and will be their realities as teachers and administrators (Kukari, 2004).

The study attests to the fact that educators' awareness of Aboriginal students' epistemic and cultural identities is lacking. There is a need, thus, to generate and share the socio-cultural and socio-historical particularities of Aboriginal learners with the well-intentioned teachers and principals in the public school boards across the province. While educators certainly point to the challenges that Aboriginal students and communities experience in public school cultures in terms of crafting purposeful associations, the study underscores the necessity to further inform teachers and principals of the specific factors that expose Aboriginal students to the isolating nature of schools.

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