

# Indigenous teacher education as cultural brokerage: A university/First Nations partnership to prepare Nishnawbe Aski teachers<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper studies a community-based Indigenous teacher education program in Northwestern Ontario in Canada. This program, the result of a partnership between the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council and Brock University, was designed to prepare Nishnawbe Aski to teach through a Two Worlds Orientation: unique Indigenous understandings combined with Western educational principles. The program characteristics and structure are outlined. The strengths of the program, as identified by teacher candidates and teacher educators, are explored. Challenges to teacher candidate success are also considered.*

*Keywords: Indigenous education, Indigenous teacher education, teacher education, Indigenous knowledge, culturally responsive schooling.*

This paper examines a teacher education partnership between Brock University and the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC) to prepare Nishnawbe teachers in the Sioux Lookout District of Northwestern Ontario to educate for life in two worlds. This community-based First Nation teacher education program attempts to shift the practice of educators by immersing teacher candidates in a Two Worlds Orientation

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1 The term Indigenous is employed in this paper, as it most widely used in the international context. In Canada, Aboriginal is often used as a broad term that encompasses First Nation (replaces 'Indian'), Inuit (in the Arctic), and Metis (mixed blood) peoples. Nishnawbe and NishnawbeAski are collective terms used by the First Nations community in this study, which are part of a broader Anishinabek (Cree and Ojibwa) cultural and linguistic family.

that includes the unique Nishnawbe understanding of such concepts as land, healing, justice, circular time, language, the arts, parenting, and consensus building. A Two Worlds Orientation includes Western educational principles only to the extent that they can be co-opted for purposes that support and strengthen the cultural practices of the communities in the Sioux Lookout District. Through this process emerges “self-determining” educators capable of working from within a “culturally responsive pedagogy of relations” to develop “a common vision of what constitutes excellence in educational outcomes” (Bishop, O’Sullivan & Berryman, 2010, p.20).

For culturally responsive schools to emerge, it is critical Indigenous teachers become *cultural brokers* (Stairs, 1995) able to negotiate in the interests of their people through the content they teach, their teaching methods, and the ways in which they balance between divergent goals such as cultural/linguistic reclamation and economic advancement. Such teachers locate their work between two worlds inherently in tension: traditional values embedded within language, cultural, identity and the land on which they live and Western culture with its emphasis on propositional knowledge, individualism and capitalism. As we observed in a previous study (Kitchen, Cherubini, Trudeau & Hodson, 2009; Kitchen, Hodson & Cherubini, 2011), such teachers experience acute tension as they attempt to reconcile their strong commitment to serving and protecting their students and Indigenous communities with the Western paradigms of education. Too often, the assimilative nature of their teacher education programs (Kitchen, Cherubini, Trudeau & Hodson, 2010) leaves them poorly prepared to ground their work in local Indigenous knowledge (IK).

In this paper, Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy, 2005) is employed as a discursive framework for rethinking Indigenous teacher education. The need for such a community-based and culturally responsive Bachelor of Education Primary/Junior (Aboriginal) B.Ed. program is situated within the movement to develop and integrate Indigenous knowledges into the education system through culturally responsive schooling (Bishop, O’Sullivan & Berryman (2010); Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). After the structure and history of this five-year B.Ed. Aboriginal Bachelor of Education program has been reviewed, we assess the effectiveness of the program in preparing Nishnawbe teachers and offer recommendations for enhancing teacher candidate preparation to engage with language, culture and land-based learning to prepare students to live in both worlds.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Teacher education is an historic site in the struggle of Indigenous people to free themselves from assimilative forces (Smith, 1999, p.232). The Coolangatta Statement (1999), a declaration by the World Indigenous People Conference on Education (WIPCE), asserts Indigenous peoples their right to educational self-determination in the establishment of schools, design of curriculum, and promotion of language, this statement identified Indigenous participation as crucial in teacher certification and selection. This declaration reflects a growing consensus that a culturally responsive

teacher education has a critical role to play in the success of “Indigenous peoples in (re)claiming and (re)creating their lives, languages, and futures” (Deyhle, Swisher, Stevens & Galvan, 2007, p.330).

TribalCrit is a useful framework for critiquing existing approaches to teacher education and for examining culturally responsive alternatives that are respectful of the lives of Indigenous Peoples. TribalCrit recognises that colonisation is endemic to North American society and that government policies rooted in “imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain” (Brayboy, 2005, p.429) have systematically attacked Indigenous languages and knowledge, while displacing Aboriginal peoples from their land and cultures. Normative judgments fail to account for “the multiple, nuanced, and historically-and geographically-located epistemologies and ontologies found in Indigenous communities” (Brayboy, 2005, p.427) and lead to assimilative approaches to education that are not responsive to the cultural traditions of Indigenous students (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Such neo-colonialism means that Western knowledge and power structures predominate, while Indigenous ways of knowing are dismissed.

Recognising that government policies are rooted in imperialism is an important first step in re-establishing liminal spaces in which Indigenous Peoples can reclaim self-identity, self-determination and tribal sovereignty (Brayboy, 2005). In Canada, Aboriginal leaders and educators acknowledge that there are considerable challenges facing their communities, and that educational outcomes for their children are distressingly low (for example, Chiefs of Ontario, 2005; Hodson, 2009). Current data suggest that there are an estimated 50,312 Indigenous students currently enrolled in Ontario’s elementary and secondary schools (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2007, 5). Yet, there is considerable cause for concern as almost half of all Indigenous people, aged 15 years and over have less than a high school diploma (OME, 2007). Over 42% of 15 to 29 year olds in Ontario left school with less than a high school education (Statistics Canada, 2003). Indigenous leaders also worry about the declining health of their communities and the decline in knowledge of language and culture among their young (Statistics Canada, 2003).

Indigenous leaders advocate for curriculum that addresses culture, language, history and intellectual traditions to ensure high quality Indigenous education (Anderson, Horton, & Orwick, 2004). For example, the Chiefs of Ontario (2005) identify Indigenous teachers as critical to preserving Indigenous languages and culture. Culturally responsive schooling (CRS) offers “a firm grounding in the heritage language and culture Indigenous to a particular tribe is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of culturally healthy students and communities” (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998), as well as a bridge between home and school (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003) and a demonstrated in means of improving learning of both Indigenous and Western knowledges (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009).

Decolonised Indigenous teachers who understand the intricacies of balancing Euro-Canadian curriculum with Indigenous language and culture (Archibald, Pidgeon, Janvier, Commodore, & McCormick, 2002) have a critical role to as cultural brokers. As Stairs (1995) cautions, “the linguistic and curricular content of First Nation education can be adequately pursued only when embedded in traditional cultural values concerning ways of using language, of interacting, and of knowing” (p.139). This makes Indigenous teachers crucial cultural brokers negotiating in the interests of their people through the content they teach, their teaching methods, and the ways in which they balance between divergent goals such as cultural reclamation and economic advancement (Stairs, 1995).

### **THE ABORIGINAL B.ED. PROGRAM**

This five-year elementary B.Ed. program is the result of a partnership between the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education (the Centre) of Brock University and the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC) that represents approximately 24 communities in northwestern Ontario. The Centre was established in 2004 and was envisioned as both a multidisciplinary research centre that brings the power of the university in culturally appropriate ways to support the needs of Aboriginal communities and a developer of educational programming around the expressed needs and requirements of Aboriginal communities. In addition to providing support for undergraduate and graduate students, the Centre runs several distance education programs including a Bachelor of Education in Aboriginal adult education directed at Aboriginal peoples working with adult populations, a one year Women’s Access Program that provides an entrance to higher education for Aboriginal women, and a comprehensive series of Aboriginal studies courses in cultures, languages and spirituality.

The NNEC, which is directed by the Chiefs and Councils in the Sioux Lookout District First Nations, was formed in 1978 to support students boarding for secondary school outside their communities. Since then, its mandate has been extended to include a wide range of secondary and post-secondary educational services. In keeping with its mission to ensure youth “a sound successful future with a viable and meaningful role in society, and their rightful place as First Peoples,” the NNEC is guided by principles such as the preservation of First Nations’ languages and cultures and the development of effective and innovative education programs, and these principles led the Chiefs to explore ways in which to improve increase the number of First Nations teachers in their schools and promote more culturally responsive teaching in 24 elementary schools in a geographic area approximately the size of France (Brock University, 2011).

The District Chiefs, alarmed by the chronically low rates of academic achievement of the 2500 children in community schools, commissioned an extensive study in 2003 of 1,800 students in 22 communities. According to Dr. Mary-Beth Minthorn-Biggs, “An alarming 93 per cent of native children in Ontario’s far north lag at least two grades behind in school and have little hope of going past high school without help with

basic skills” (Sioux Lookout District Planning Committee, 2004). Armed with this evidence, the Chiefs directed the NNEC to search for universities willing to partner and develop a new and innovative teacher education program designed to improve the academic achievement. The Tecumseh Centre’s proposal was accepted by NNEC. The relationship between the NNEC and Brock University was formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding and legitimized through a series of First Nation Governance Resolutions in 2006.

After extensive community consultations, an Application for Accreditation to the Ontario College of Teachers in 2007 was approved (Brock University, 2011). The first cohort of 20 teacher candidates began in 2007 with 10 scheduled to graduate in 2012. A second cohort of approximately 20 candidates began in 2011.

### **Description of Program**

The courses, comprised of 20 credits, are delivered face-to-face in locations near Sioux Lookout or at a summer institute at the university or electronically through distance education methods (Brock University, 2011). The face-to-face sessions take place during three-week residential programs at a local lodge or on campus in southern Ontario. The program includes elementary education courses prescribed by the Faculty of Education, as well as culturally specific teacher education courses and is accredited by the Ontario College of Teachers. The education credits are supplemented with discipline-centred course in Mathematics, Science, English, Aboriginal Studies, and Child Development. There are also courses in Nishnawbe language, with a focus on local dialects. While many courses are standard university courses, the specially selected instructors have adapted them to serve the needs of this cohort of teacher candidates. This includes respect for “two worlds” curriculum, holistic approaches to learning, ceremonies, and participation by Elders.

The program begins with three courses designed to enable teacher candidates to understand the context of Aboriginal education, as well as Aboriginal ways of knowing and skills in critiquing the impact of colonisation on Indigenous peoples. The remaining courses are also adapted to the Nishnawbe culture through Aboriginal pedagogy, arts-based activities, and assignments relevant to the local context. By developing a broad understanding of subject matter—including Indigenous understandings—teacher candidates will be able to make appropriate cultural connections for Aboriginal students within their communities. Field experiences in First Nations schools must be successfully completed in order to graduate from the program and become certified teachers.

The overall approach is guided by research demonstrating that Indigenous learners are most successful when educated in ways that support and strengthen their cultural knowledge and identity (for example, Bishop, Berryman, Taikiwai & Richardson, 2003; Battiste, 2009). An Aboriginal educator from outside the community serves as the counsellor, program coordinator and practicum supervisor; she also teaches courses

in the program. This person plays a critical role in assuring continuity and attending to individual needs. The instructors were primarily Aboriginal educators, professors involved in Aboriginal education or research, and non-Aboriginal educators with experience in Indigenous education. Only one of the instructors for the first cohort was Nishnawbe but several courses for the second cohort have already been taught by Nishnawbe instructors. In subsequent years, as local capacity was developed, more instructors were Nishnawbe.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research gives explicit attention to the voices of the first cohort of Nishnawbe Aski teacher candidates in an Aboriginal B.Ed. program in Ontario.

The original teacher education cohort consisted of 20 teacher candidates. The perspectives of these teacher candidates were obtained through two Talking Circles and reflections written during the course of the program. A two-hour Talking Circles took place at the end of a three-week summer program at Brock University in July 2010. Wildfire Research Method (Kompf & Hodson, 2000), a semi-structured format that invites participants to share their experiences and observations in a Talking Circle, provided a communal and sacred research environment respectful of the traditions and cultural beliefs of Indigenous people and the importance of a relationship with the land. The sessions were run by an experienced Indigenous facilitator who understood the crucial role the importance of interconnectedness, respect, and the wisdom of the Indigenous intellectual tradition (Goulet & McLeod, 2002). Six members of the eight teacher candidates attending the summer session participated in these sessions. Reflections written for courses were used to provide additional perspectives on the themes identified during the Talking Circles. Member-checking was used to ensure that teacher candidate perspectives were accurately presented.

In analysing the data, the research team borrowed tenets of grounded theory to provide “a procedure for developing categories of information, interconnecting the categories, building a “story” that connects the categories, and ending with a discursive set of theoretical propositions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, cited in Creswell, 1998, 150). Codes, categories, individual stories and the Indigenous context were juxtaposed and discussed by the team collectively in order to identify key themes derived from the interactions of the six participants. Indigenous members of the team played crucial roles in providing a cultural context for statements made by participants. In the spirit of respectful inquiry, this paper has been reviewed by the bi-epistemic research team and quotations have been vetted by participants.

The conceptualisations of bi-epistemic research teams has evolved from Smith’s groundbreaking work (1999) in which she writes, “the latest interpretation of bicultural research involves both indigenous and non-indigenous researchers working on a research project and shaping that project together” (p. 180). The authors have taken this “bicultural” concept to a deeper level in their work relationship in an effort to be

mindful of the epistemological roots that shape culture and by extension are often unconsciously enacted in research to the detriment of Indigenous peoples.

## **STRENGTHS**

The B.Ed. program marked a significant step forward in the education of Nishnawbe Aski youth and the emergence of well-educated and culturally aware Nishnawbe Aski teachers. This is evident from the positive comments feedback provided by teacher candidates, teacher educators, NNEC staff and community leaders. It was clear that there was widespread support for the culturally responsive and community-based focus of the program, even though concerns were sometimes expressed about implementation.

### **Community-Based**

One of the most important features of the program was that it was community-based. For the community, the location reinforced their engagement as full partners in the program. For teacher candidates, remaining close to the land and their culture increased their sense of comfort and safety, by reducing their sense of dislocation from their home communities.

The decision to locate the program in the community arose from numerous discussions between the university and Northern Nishnawbe Education Council that included a series of community-based research studies culminating in an extensive four-day visioning process with a circle of women and men from a number of NNEC communities. The outcome was a comprehensive vision of a “Two Worlds Orientation” on which the BEd program was grounded, as well as the relationships, knowledges, and actions necessary to bring this vision into reality. By being located on the land and in the community, it was easier for the program to remain connected to the community and for teacher candidates to feel at home.

As teacher candidates were from small communities in Northwestern Ontario, they were pleased that most courses took place at a lodge near Sioux Lookout and that several courses were offered on-line. As it was difficult to be away from home, the community created by their instructors and by program staff were vitally important. Teacher candidates spoke highly of the level of caring of staff and the efforts made to develop a strong sense of community among teacher candidates. The staff at Minnitaki Lodge, some of whom were Nishnawbe Aski, helped provide a comfortable and safe learning environment. One teacher candidate wrote:

They are a close bunch of people who share a bond with each one of us. They provide a home-away-from-home... and are trying to incorporate culture into some of their working in the camp. For the staff to build us a tee pee outside for our sharing circle

and gatherings is a huge consideration on their part. It means that they respect us, our work, our culture and our language.

Even though many courses were offered in the Sioux Lookout area, teacher candidates were still required to be far away from their families and friends for weeks at a time. This made on-line courses particularly desirable. While there were problems with aspects of on-line course delivery teacher candidates appreciated being able to remain with their families and in their schools.

### **Culturally Responsive Programming**

The community consultation process led to the development of a culturally responsive program adapted to the needs of the North and the distinct culture of the Nishnawbe Aski. This marked a radical shift in teacher practice through the examination of the unconscious knowing carried within candidate's educational biographies. Britzman (2003) calculates that, "by the time a person enters teacher education, she or he has spent approximately thirteen thousand hours observing teachers" (p.27). It is through this observed experience, that "educational biography", that teacher candidates draw their own teacher identities, or as Britzman (2003) puts it:

They [teachers] bring to teacher education their educational biography and some well-worn and commonsensical images of the teachers' work. In part this accounts for the persistency of particular worldviews, orientations, dispositions, and cultural myths that dominate our thinking and, in unintended ways, select the practices that are available in educational life. (p. 27)

These biographies often anchor teacher candidates within a deficit discourse that "...explains [Indigenous] achievement in terms of the students' deficiencies ...or deficiencies of the structure of the school..." (Bishop, O'Sullivan & Berryman, 2010, 24). Culturally responsive pedagogy requires a discursive shift towards "alternative discourses that offer solutions instead of reinforcing problems and barriers" (Bishop, et al., 2010, p.69). This is achieved through the examination of the candidate's educational biography through a dialogic experience that presented Nishnawbe understandings of such concepts as traditional knowledge, history, epistemology, land, healing, justice, circular time, language, the arts, parenting, and consensus building (Hodson, 2009). Western educational principles were used only to the extent that they helped teacher candidates see themselves as "able to solve problems that come their way, and having recourse to skills and knowledge that can help all of their students and they believe that all of their students can achieve" and view "students as having many experiences that are relevant and fundamental to classrooms interactions" (Bishop, et al., 2010, p.70). This disruptive decolonising experience was designed to prepare teachers receptive to enacting a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations.

The commitment to being culturally responsive was also an important factor in attracting teacher candidates to the program. One teacher candidate who had previously

taken post-secondary courses reported that s/he “never really had positive experiences before.” Another favourably compared this program’s commitment to traditional knowledge and community responsiveness with the narrow focus on Ministry of Education guidelines and textbooks in many Native Teacher Education Programs.

The B.Ed. program’s commitment to understanding colonisation as a first step towards decolonisation was appreciated by most teacher candidates. One teacher candidate recalled that it was difficult to examine colonisation, “particularly on a personal level [which is] the gut-wrenching reality people naturally want to avoid.” Another noted that this helped them “become aware of our identity” and that “this is the natural way of starting our healing journey and our way of decolonizing ourselves.” Smith (1999) would seem to agree with this analysis when she writes, “[t]he reach of imperialism in ‘our heads’ challenges those who belong to colonised communities to understand how this occurred...” (p.24).

### **Curriculum and Instruction**

Nishnawbe Aski teacher candidates, like teacher candidates elsewhere, were very concerned with learning curriculum and pedagogy that would be useful in their classrooms. In this program, they sought approaches grounded in Indigenous and Euro-Canadian knowledge traditions. There was considerable appreciation for pedagogy and curriculum that reinforced the program’s grounding in IK. One teacher candidate wrote in her journal:

Today, we as Native educators need to re-examine our ways of teaching and how we deliver our lessons. We have to look at our students holistically and, to me, this is priceless. The traditional knowledge is sitting on the shelf. It is up to us to wipe the dust off it and reuse the traditional ways in our classrooms. This is the key to our students’ success in both mainstream and Aboriginal education systems.

This teacher candidate found the “content of the course empowering” and felt that they would “go home with confidence.”

The Medicine Wheel (Brant Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000, p.xiii) was effectively used as an Indigenous way of organising information and thinking about the world. All teacher candidates agreed that this was a powerful Indigenous tool that could be adapted to a wide-array of curriculum. The Medicine Wheel and its imagery are pervasive in Nishnawbe Aski culture, yet teacher candidates were not fully aware of its power or its pedagogical possibilities: “I myself don’t know much about it but would really love to go deeper into it.”

One teacher candidate recalled in her journal:

The curriculum is what has really taught me what a medicine wheel is. As we began to discuss the Medicine Wheel pattern, I began to see the light. I used to see the design before and I never thought much of it in terms of the education.

I used to see the design everywhere including beadwork. When our instructor explained how we can apply the medicine wheel in our way of thinking, it began to sink into my mind and heart. It affected my way of thinking. I had to re-examine my background and history to make it sensible. It felt like I was looking at myself from another window.

I can see how this way of thinking can be helpful as I continue with my job as a Special Ed. Teacher. I am currently working with a child who was recently diagnosed with Autism. The school and the parents were off to a shaky ground but things improved as the year progressed along. I can see how this method would cover all the bases when dealing with the child for appropriate programming.

I will use the medicine wheel pattern in planning for lessons, and in cultural and traditional activities...

I also learned to incorporate the medicine wheel into curriculum development: the vision, relations, knowledge, and action parts of the wheel.

Daily “sharing” or talking circles were viewed as a culturally responsive pedagogy that was foundational to teacher candidates’ experience in the program and as crucial to effective pedagogy in classrooms with Aboriginal learners. Circles were used extensively in most teacher education courses, according to one teacher candidate, as a means for “sharing and contributing” in ways that opened them to their culture and languages. Although “sharing” circles are common in traditional communities, many teacher candidates knew little about them. One viewed it as a way to “open up and tell our stories to each other” and as a spiritual, communal process. Another regarded the incorporation of circles into the program as “a very good use of time” as morning circle “gauged the mood” while closing circle was “a celebration of the day’s accomplishments. While this student recognised that circles were consistent with best practices for building community for all students, s/he stressed the importance of passing around a feather and the value of circles based on Indigenous traditions of community and healing.

The instructors were generally viewed as very considerate, respectful and caring; the support systems at the lodge were also praised highly. The program was carefully designed to be culturally responsive by progressive Indigenous educators in consultation with First Nations educators in the region. Students were generally very positive about both the curriculum and the instructors hired to teach the courses. While many of the instructors were not of Indigenous descent and only one was Nishnawbe Aski, this was not identified as a problem by students. This was combined with a range of lesson planning approaches for teaching both mainstream and Indigenous content. One teacher candidate reported feeling “overwhelmed” about “how to prepare a curriculum” but soon “became more aware of developing curriculum” through the medicine wheel and approaches to lesson planning. Throughout, in course evaluations and other feedback, teacher candidates were very impressed by both the practical knowledge and resource of their instructors, including those who were less familiar with Indigenous knowledge. “I had not realized that it was so much fun to do a computer course,” one teacher candidate said, recalling computers in the classroom

course that was integrated with a culture-based instructional strategies course so that meaningful curriculum connections could be made. Similar comments were made about other course.

More important was the level of caring and sensitivity of their instructors (Kitchen & Hodson, 2012b). One teacher candidate, commenting on the first three-week residential session, described the program coordinator and the instructors as “the backbone of the program” through their diligence, care and respect for traditional teachings. They also appreciated the sensitivity shown by instructors concerning the challenges of being away from family and the tensions experienced in the face of tragedy in their schools and communities. Several times during the residential sessions, suicides by students disturbed the isolation of teacher candidates. Flexibility demonstrated by instructors including cancelling classes and extending deadlines for assignments; subsequent courses were modified so that teacher candidates could be provided with strategies for coping with these all- too-familiar traumas.

## **CHALLENGES**

While the Indigenous B.Ed. program was positively regarded by teacher candidates, teacher educators and community partners, there were also many challenges for teacher candidates and other stakeholders involved with the program (Kitchen & Hodson, 2012a). In particular, they highlighted the personal and professional challenges they experienced. In some instances there were tears as they spoke of pain and sacrifice. There was also much laughter: sometimes to mask pain or awkwardness, sometimes out of an awareness of life’s absurdities. Similarly, program staff faced many complex challenges as they sought to manage a meaningful program on a modest scale for a small Indigenous group in remote corner of Northwestern Ontario.

### **Absence from Family and Community**

The face-to-face sessions, whether near Sioux Lookout or on campus options, entailed withdrawing teacher candidates from their home communities to reside together for three-weeks at a time. Participants valued the opportunity to live together on the land within Sioux Lookout district, yet they yearned for more contact with their families and communities. One Talking Circle participant described it as “heart wrenching for us and our families.” She worries about her grandchildren: “I wonder what is happening with them because I know one of my children is not very responsible... and I am worried about the community too.” These issues were even more pronounced when they attended classes at Brock University for three weeks.

These absences diminish family life, including declines in school attendance by their children, reduced parental support at home, and greater safety risks within their home communities. Their stories highlighted the heavy burden of health and mortality issues in their communities. Attending classes too often meant not being able to help care for ailing relatives or to mourn properly the deaths of people in the community. One participant recalled having to leave a three-week course early in order visit her father

in hospital after a heart attack. The next year, she lost her grandmother, her father who passed away due to heart failure, her uncle who died due to diabetes. “It was really hard to leave my Mom at the gravesite,” she recalled. While she tried to “keep [her] head up and stand strong” and viewed what she learned as “valuable to [her] and the kids [she] loved: she sometimes wondering it if was worth the sacrifices by her and her family.

### **On-line Learning**

On-line learning was seen as a positive dimension of the program. Teacher candidates liked the idea of taking courses while remaining in their schools and communities, but were often frustrated by the challenges of on-line learning in remote communities. One participant noted “our internet is not good due to band width issues.” Another focussed on the limitations of the laptop computers provided by the NNEC. These issues diminished the impact of the on-line courses, which limited learning for teacher candidates and was frustrating for instructors. On-line learning also presented challenges in terms of balancing study with their personal and professional lives. Being in school and in the community meant that they had difficulty completing teacher education readings and assignments as they continued with other dimensions of their busy lives.

### **Communications and Logistical Support**

Many of the practical concerns of teacher candidates could be broadly characterised as communication issues. While teacher candidates recognised that sacrifices were necessary and inevitable, they were irritated by poor communication with and among the university, the NNEC and local education authorities. For example, participants had varying understandings of when courses would run and how many credits they would receive for previous higher education experiences. One participant said, “Nobody talked to me about how long it is going to be: the whole day, one subject, one hour.” The exact dates for the three-week sessions near Sioux Lookout were sometimes not worked out until a few weeks before the session, which added to uncertainty and stress. While there were good reasons for many of these problems, teacher candidates carrying already heavy demands suffered added stress. This stress was compounded by a sense of powerlessness as they dealt with distance bureaucracies. This was particularly evident in their concerns about credit transfers, which were handled by the university registrar’s office. One participant, disappointed to receive credit for only one of two university courses she had previously taken, failed to understand why both credits were not recognised and felt powerless to appeal. She said, “It’s just a hassle when you have to explain yourself over and over again.” Perhaps, if they were near campus, they would have been able to address these issues more effectively. Perhaps, if they were more familiar with the workings of large bureaucracies, they would have been more able in navigating through the process.

## **CONCLUSION**

Education has the potential to play an important role in improving the lives of Indigenous children around the world and this reality is endlessly represented in the associated international literature (for example, Battiste, 2002; Bishop, et al., 2010; Brayboy, 2005; Smith, 1999). Up to now, however, the educational systems offer little of value to Indigenous students. In Ontario Canada, this is evident in the staggering estimate that 60 to 80 percent (Hodson, 2009) of all Aboriginal students leave schools before they complete grade 12. It is easy to project that these students are likely to be faced with outcomes that includes poverty, poor employment prospects, and other negative social/cultural realities. A Eurocentric paradigm of education on Aboriginal students has proven ineffective in meeting its own measures of success. In culture terms, the cost is even greater. This approach has failed to help “develop [students’] personal and community potential through a fully actualized linguistic and cultural identity” (Battiste, 2000, p.192). Instead, there needs to be a clear, comprehensive and consistent approach steeped in culture policies that do not suppress integral cultures and identities (Battiste, 2000). As Aboriginal children are the fastest growing demographic in this country’s schools, the failure of the system to address the unique challenges of Aboriginal education is a national calamity. Clearly, it is time to shift away from cultural imperialism to a policy and pedagogy that decolonise education and restore culture.

One way of decolonising the educational system is to prepare Aboriginal teachers to become cultural brokers able to work between two worlds, while remaining grounded in the richness of their own culture. The Aboriginal B.Ed. program in the Sioux Lookout District is an example of a program that attempts to meet these goals by situating teacher education in the community and focussing on identity, language and culture. The responsiveness of teacher candidates to this program suggests that culturally responsive, community-based and centred on instruction in language and culture can contribute to cultural renewal and improved outcomes for Aboriginal students. At the same time, this study highlights the problems such programs face in a higher education organised around the needs, values and beliefs of the dominant epistemology; associated models for pedagogy, modes of delivery, finance favour and reflect that epistemology. Even with strong curriculum leadership, this presents significant challenges both for delivery of a teacher education program guided by Nishnawbe epistemology and offered in a location far away from the home university where most resources are housed.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

This study has the greatest implication for universities and faculties of education across Canada. There is a moral responsibility implicit to higher education that includes addressing social justice issues and there is none greater than the plight of Aboriginal children in this country today. Education has long been held to be the greatest contributing factor to economic inclusion as well as social/cultural cohesion

and the overall health of a community. Increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers at all levels of public education, teachers working from within their epistemic heritage, is critical to Aboriginal academic success. If nothing else this study offers a road map of what is possible and how it can work. Responsive Indigenous teacher education also requires that we step out of the box of our institutions and ask what we might do to make the myth of Canada the good and inclusive a reality for Indigenous communities. If we do nothing, we are, by default complicit in perpetuating the legacy of colonialism.

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