

**SUPPORTING ABORIGINAL STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR HIGH
SCHOOL COMPLETION**

by

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Abstract

Aboriginal education in Canada is in need of reform. Research suggests that Aboriginal students are less likely than non-Aboriginal students to graduate from high school. This study identifies specific and relevant supports that are needed for Aboriginal students in Northern British Columbia to complete high school. Recognition of rights of Aboriginal people to implement their own education systems and use Elders as teachers of traditional knowledge is essential so that more languages and cultural traditions do not become extinct. Placement of students in appropriate programs based on ability, not on perceived inability may also lead to increased success in the education system and society as a whole. Self-esteem will increase, potential income may increase, and overall health and lifestyle may be positively affected as well. This study, using Indigenous Methodology, used a narrative approach to provide the data used for analysis. The Medicine Wheel, a holistic way of viewing life from a First Nations perspective, has been used as the framework for understanding themes associated with these issues. As Aboriginal Education continues to come to the forefront of educational studies and policy, it is important to acknowledge the past and present influences on Aboriginal student success, including: cultural understanding, self-regulation, resilience, family, societal and community connectedness, curriculum, funding, and educational delivery. It is time for the current system to not only recognize the need for change, but take action and positive steps to implement the change. This study has been made available to School District #57 in Prince George, BC, and other community agencies that work with Aboriginal youth in order to provide specific, relevant supports for completion of high school.

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Key Words/Terms

Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement: a working agreement between the school district, Ministry of Education, and Aboriginal communities to meet the needs of Aboriginal students by shared decision making and specific goal setting to enhance student performance

Aboriginal Student: a student who has self-identified as being of Aboriginal ancestry (First Nations, Inuit, or Métis)

At-Risk: students who are considered more likely to not find academic success, with the probability of lack of success in post-secondary life (further education, careers, etc.)

BC Certificate of Graduation: A “Dogwood Diploma” granted by the Ministry of Education upon successful completion of school graduation requirements

Cycle of Poverty: the idea that generation after generation will stay in poverty if that is where they were born; the station in life where further education and economic success are less likely and dependence on financial assistance is more likely for one’s children and their children’s children

First Nations: the indigenous peoples of Canada. Also called Aboriginal, Native, or First Peoples

High School: a school attended after elementary school or junior high school and usually consisting of grades 8 through 12.

Holistic Approach: teaching and learning the whole process/idea, not just parts; ensuring balance and meaning for the whole person and learning process

Resilience: the ability to recover from forms of adversity and adapt to negative or stressful situations

Six Year Completion Rate: the proportion of students who graduate with a Certificate of Graduation within six years from when they enroll in grade 8

Special Education: education that is modified or particularized for those with singular needs, as disabled or maladjusted people, slow learners, or gifted children; a supplemental program provided by schools to assist students who are identified as having “special requirements” in achieving a Certificate of Graduation and/or other outcomes as specified in the student’s Individual Education Plan

(definitions taken from the British Columbia Ministry of Education and www.dictionary.com)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Throughout education systems all over Canada, especially in the North, many Aboriginal students attend school. These students are often isolated, placed in special programs, and can be perceived as being treated differently than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Many students believe they are forced to disregard or push aside their traditional heritage to try to fit in to the mainstream educational system and society. Despite some recent efforts by government, educators, and parents to decrease these issues, as well as recognition of double standards, there are areas in the education system that contribute to the isolation and repeated mistreatment and misplacement of these students. There are, however, starting to be more discussions on making shifts in the area of Aboriginal Education and a movement towards promotion of Aboriginal student success and high school completion, for example, the Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements for school boards in British Columbia (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013).

The current state of Aboriginal Education in Canada, or the achievement gap between First Nations students and other youth, can be attributed to a variety of factors; these include: curriculum, instruction quality, and social factors (White, Peters, & Beavon, 2008). In this project I have interpreted social factors as: lack of connection/understanding of First Nations belief systems, cultural sensitivity (or lack thereof), understanding the impact of the Residential School system on subsequent generations of Aboriginal students and social/emotional learning. Other factors that also have an effect on the education of First Nations students are lack of funding and lack of appropriate restoration programs. Continued resilience in the face of these challenges is not only necessary, but essential, to try to raise the bar of the current education system for Aboriginal students in Canada, and to increase the ability of Aboriginal people to be

accepted and encouraged to find success in contemporary society. In the following statement, Battiste (2002) describes the challenges surrounding Aboriginal education today:

Rethinking of education from the perspective of Indigenous knowledge and learning styles is of crucial value to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators who seek to understand the failures, dilemmas, and contradictions inherent in past and current educational policy and practice for First nations students. The immediate challenge is how to bring colonial legitimacy, authority, and disciplinary capacity with Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies (p. 7).

The issue of Aboriginal education is of significance because there are hundreds of thousands of students within the education system each year, and in British Columbia alone, 11% of the student population, or 62,161 out of 564,532, self-identified as Aboriginal according to the 2012/13 data used in the Aboriginal Report - *How Are We Doing?* report on First Nations Education in BC (Ministry of Education, 2013). As Canada is a very diverse country, it is important that all learning styles and cultures are recognized, and that all students have the right to the same amount of achievement as others. Reform in Aboriginal education in Canada is needed so that young Aboriginal people can find and experience success and feel more valued within our society as a whole.

As the process of educational reform continues, it is imperative that researchers understand the structure of doubt the Canadian educational system has generated among Aboriginal people. Every Aboriginal student has been contaminated by an educational system built on false colonial and racist assumptions that target Aboriginal people as inferior. The self-doubt it has generated within Aboriginal students has made them discount their inherent capacities and gifts. No educational system is perfect, yet few have a history as destructive to human potential as Canada's with its obsession with assimilating Indians. In this

coercive system, more than three out of every four Aboriginal students fail. (Battiste, 2002, p.27).

Social factors are a significant undertone in the lack of completion of high school and achievement for Aboriginal youth. Reform from within the system can help with others' tolerance, acceptance, understanding, support, and assistance. Many First Nations students do not complete high school, therefore, further education and training are limited and the cycle of poverty continues (Richards & Vining, 2004). Being successful in school can lead to increased self-worth, higher achievement, potential job opportunities, and less marginalization. White et al. (2008) have stated that lower attainment has been correlated with lower income, reduced well-being, and lower rates of participation in the labour force.

If supports were to increase at the school and community levels, achievement for Aboriginal students, who are often considered at-risk, could lead to significant raises in completion rates for First Nations students, therefore leading to less economic disability (Richards & Vining, 2004). These students are in need of an inclusive system, but not assimilation, which will advance their productivity, self-worth, confidence, and resilience. By being involved in a system that is inclusive, First Nations students may also find success and increased achievement by feeling more connected with the school, rather than as a segregated or discounted minority that has no place in the school system or in society as a whole.

School districts in British Columbia are attempting to make Aboriginal Education an important factor in the success of their education systems as shown by the commitment to implementing Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements across the province (BC Ministry of Education, 2013). Supporting Aboriginal students in their high school education can help lead to future success in post-secondary goals of further education, careers, well-being, and economic contributions to society.

Significance of the Project

With a large First Nations population in Northern British Columbia, it is important to address the needs of this demographic in the education system. The goal of this project was to understand from participants what supports would be effective for Aboriginal students to use on the path to graduation, especially those in Special Education programs. Finding effective ways to increase completion rates, provide appropriate program placement, and encourage schools to incorporate Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, can significantly contribute to the success and completion of high school, which in turn can lead to positive involvement in society (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

The British Columbia Ministry of Education has a list of desirable attributes (BC Ministry of Education, 2014) that they determine are important for students who complete high school to ease the transition into the worlds of work and/or post-secondary education, therefore, Aboriginal students who gain the necessary skills, attitudes, and knowledge to be responsible citizens and contribute in a positive manner will be beneficial for all of society; these students can increase their self-esteem, their knowledge of culture and heritage, and have access to opportunities that others who do complete high school already currently have access to. Tolerance and acceptance or less prejudice/racism from peers and people from society in general, may increase when Aboriginal people are seen on the same playing field as other races in Canada (Battiste, 2002; Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). Research that has been done in locations across Canada has indicated that such things as: At-Risk status for Aboriginal students, literacy skills, family, personal supports, self-identity, and use of culturally appropriate learning styles in the classroom can either assist or act as barriers for students (Aman, 2008). Consequently, it is of the utmost importance that people within the education system look at the needs of these

students and learn from the experiences provided by current and former students as to what worked and did not work for them in the system as it is/was provided for them.

Background, Statement of Purpose, and Research Question

In Northern British Columbia, many First Nations students are being left behind in their education. Placement of these students in Special Education courses, (often not based on ability but on attendance or lack of connectedness with the school) and lack of community resources, among other factors, has resulted in a significant number of students not completing their high school education. It is imperative to identify the supports necessary for these students to complete their high school education and be provided with all available avenues for completion so that they are given the opportunity to find success in society. Follow-up with Aboriginal students who have completed their high school education would be beneficial for researchers to learn and address the benefits and hindrances of the programs provided.

In order to find ways to promote graduation for Aboriginal students in Special Education programs, I investigated and identified specific supports needed for these students to complete high school in a timely manner, usually six years. Needs at the educational level go hand in hand with societal needs, including: acceptance, tolerance, non-prejudicial judgement, financial well-being, and emotional well-being (Richards & Vining, 2004). It was my intention to use Indigenous Methodology via a narrative approach to ask students to tell me their experiences, whether they were positive or negative. By using this method, I was better able to understand and use the opportunity to reflect on my own teaching practices as well. Hence, I also hoped to help inform the policy and decision-makers who are in positions of power by providing additional research in this area. It has been my ultimate goal to investigate areas of Aboriginal

Education that have been under researched, such as Special Education, and then provide data that assists in developing pedagogy and curriculum that will encourage increased Aboriginal student success in completion of mainstream high school courses which will lead to obtaining their high school diploma. I would also eventually like to be a part of a team writing curriculum and resources to assist these students with high school completion.

The question used for this research was: *What are the specific supports that First Nations students in Northern British Columbia who are placed in Special Education courses believe are needed to help them complete their high school education in a timely manner?* The starting point for my research was: why is there such a high percentage of First Nations students placed in Special Education programs in the first place? This is important, because those who have completed their grade 12 education have an increased likelihood of contributing to society. For the purpose of this research, the definition of Special Education I used was: “education that is modified or particularized for those with singular needs, as disabled or maladjusted people, slow learners, or gifted children; a supplemental program provided by schools to assist students who are identified as having “special requirements” in achieving a Certificate of Graduation and/or other outcomes as specified in the student’s Individual Education Plan (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2014, p1.).

I also hope to increase understanding of determining student placement in courses, areas that face barriers and need improvement in educational supports, and assist students and community agencies with access to useful supports for future opportunities. My goal for this research is to provide information to school and community programs in the North so that decisions about the needs of First Nations students’ education are increasingly addressed and that specific, relevant supports are put in place in both the school and community systems. This

research will inform and possibly enhance current and future practices within the high school education system.

Background of the Study: My Personal Location

Absolon and Willet (2005) believe that it is essential for researchers to locate themselves before conducting research; when conducting Indigenous research, one needs to provide answers to the following questions: “What brought you here? What do you feel you have/need to contribute...? From what “place” do you speak?” My interest in this topic is tri-fold based on my experience as an educator, as a student, and as a person with Aboriginal heritage, specifically Métis. I have seen and experienced the double standard presented to Aboriginal students in the education system and have a desire to understand why it exists, and to help in finding a solution as to what can be done about it. I first became interested in Aboriginal education while completing my Education degree at the University of Alberta and volunteering at an inner city school called St. Alphonsus Catholic School. I completed my required observations for my program there, and then volunteered my time through the university’s Wahpitew program – a mentorship program for Aboriginal students. Also, I have always been fascinated by history and knew that in my family there were people, including my grandfather, who had experienced the Residential School System in Alberta. While completing my degree, I was increasingly involved in learning about my family’s history and learning about the effects of the Residential School system on them. It was because of my curiosity and my own personal experience in school that I decided to become more involved in Aboriginal Education and became a First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Liaison worker as well as a teacher of Aboriginal Studies. During my tenure as the F.N.M.I. worker, I developed my idea for my study, although I did not act on it for 6 years afterward – during which time I was a Special Education worker in a Prince George High

School; at one point my class consisted of 12 Aboriginal Students and 1 Caucasian student. I began to see a steady pattern of Aboriginal students being placed in my program, even though some were capable of doing some mainstream work. I made it my mission, much to the chagrin of some of my colleagues, to do anything I could for these students to have them included and placed in as many mainstream classes as they were able to do. While it is true that some of my students were correctly placed in my program, others were there due to poor attendance or because a family member had previously been placed there, not because of academic needs. This became increasingly frustrating for me as I began to identify more and more with my heritage and my own inability to be heard because I was working with “those kids.” I saw this continue to happen in my school and other schools within my district. Some students see this difference and ask me about it and I have no justifiable answer to give them; families ask me what can be done, and I have no answer to give to them; other teachers I collaborate with ask me why I take this personally and put my neck on the line often, and it is because I know that what is being done to these students is wrong. I also have guilt because I know that it is easier to give up and conform to the system than it is to change it.

I believe that it is completely relevant for all those involved in education in any way – from policy makers to teachers and students - to recognize that double standards in education do nothing to increase ability and success, but only contribute to keeping the oppressed from the same standards that the prevailing cultures are allowed to experience. This is an issue that needs to be acknowledged and rectified so that Aboriginal people can continue with the healing process from the trauma experienced from the colonization and attempted assimilation of their race, specifically the Residential School System, and begin to move forward with their lives in a positive way while contributing to society.

My involvement with and within Aboriginal education is limited – as a child I was raised as a “white kid” and often partook in the racism/prejudice against other Native people. As a young adult with a growing conscience and curiosity, I began to question my heritage and relevance within society and was encouraged to take pride in the people I knew of Aboriginal heritage and in myself as a Métis person. I began by wanting to work with numerous people who inspired me and led me to the path I have started on in the education system within the last decade. My experience has been both positive and negative for myself, in what I have witnessed and participated in throughout my years as a student and an educator. Now, as a researcher, I have experienced mixed feelings and attitudes as well.

As a professional, I believe it is in my best interest and the interest of my students to provide all avenues possible for them. I often stand alone in my views and vocalization of “hot topics” and hope that this research will assist with shedding some light on my determination surrounding the issue of Aboriginal education. Personally, I feel that rather than being a bystander and criticizing the system, I should become actively involved and try to make a difference; no matter the turn out, I will know that I have participated and made a contribution – hopefully in a positive manner.

Background of the Study: Statistics

In School District #57, located in Prince George, BC, there are 13,286 students, of which 3,556 or approximately 27% of students are identified as First Nations. Of these Aboriginal students, only 56% complete high school within the standard 6 years as compared to 81% of non-Aboriginal students (District Achievement Contract, 2013). In British Columbia, there were 564,523 students in the 2012/13 school year; 11% (62,161) identified as Aboriginal, and 89% (502,371) were non-Aboriginal. A total of 59,101 were grade 12 students in the 2012/13 school

year; of these, 53,075 were non-Aboriginal and 6,026 were identified as Aboriginal. 51% (3,081) of Aboriginal students graduated with a Dogwood Diploma as compared to 72% (37,960) of non-Aboriginal students. 10% (574) of Aboriginal students were able to obtain a BC Adult Graduation Diploma (Adult Dogwood Diploma) as compared to 5% (2,855) non-Aboriginal students, and 5% (294) of Aboriginal students compared to 1% (672) non-Aboriginal students received a BC School Completion Certificate. Of note is the fact that for Aboriginal students across the province, the 6-year completion rate has steadily increased from 49% in 2008/09, to 60% in 2012/13 (2009/10 – 51%, 2010/11 – 54%, 2011/12 – 57%), respectively, whereas the non-Aboriginal 6 year completion rate remained stagnant in 2008/09 (82%) and 2009/10 (82%) with only a slight increase in 2010/11 (83%) and 2011/12 (84%) with an increase in 2012/13 (86%). Statistics for Aboriginal students show that more females (1,669) than males (1,597) are enrolled in Alternate programs, whereas the opposite is found with non-Aboriginal students – 2,255 females vs. 3,000 males; this has been a trend since reporting for this six-year cohort started in 2008/09. For students in Special Needs reporting groups (sensory disabilities, learning disabilities, behaviour disabilities, and gifted students) the percent of Aboriginal students compared to non-Aboriginal students are 2% and 4% higher in the learning and behaviour groups – 5% Aboriginal (3,224 students) vs. 3% non-Aboriginal (15,168) and 6% Aboriginal (3,616) vs. 2% non-Aboriginal (9,123), whereas the Aboriginal students are less than 1% (actually counted as 0%) of the sensory disabilities and gifted groups (BC Ministry of Education – *How Are We Doing?* 2013).

Conceptual Lens

I am using the Medicine Wheel as portrayed by the Aboriginal Education Department in School District #57, Prince George, BC, (see appendix) as my framework for this study because I

believe that the concept of the whole is essential to the success of our Aboriginal students. In a report written by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007), it was pointed out that holistic learning should be the focus of educational assessments, rather than having the primary focus on intellectual performance alone. Kitchenham et al. (2016) elaborate on this by stating that “cultural heritage of Aboriginal peoples including oral tradition, storytelling, traditional knowledge, and experiential/holistic learning and spirituality has a huge impact on Aboriginal children’s learning in schools” (p.31). I believe that it is paramount to allow students to enhance all aspects of themselves and grow as a whole, rather than focus only on one aspect of their being, which may not be telling of the whole person. In using the Medicine Wheel in this sense, it is important to explain what my view on it is. There are quadrants in the visual that focus on select aspects of overall well-being: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual; if one of these is out of balance, the others will not perform optimally either. In this model, the student is at the center, and each of the quadrants also has a focus on a type of learning that students and educators should work on: physiological/safety/basic needs, feelings, academics, and self-identity. It is by focusing on being well-rounded, that students will likely be the most successful. I believe that when we know ourselves and let that shine through, other aspects will fall into place, and vice versa. I have seen students that are very academically motivated and who have not found an outlet for their other needs, and just wind up giving up when they do not attain the goal they have set for themselves; conversely, I have seen students who are not academically strong, but have a strong drive within arts or sports, that have found success because they are in tune with themselves and know how to take a break and not focus on the negative aspects of their academics.

I view the Medicine Wheel as a way to gauge one's wellness. It is a way of life. It allows for checks and balances. If one part of the wheel is out of balance, work needs to be done to make it right. People should not be taught that only one aspect of life is important to focus on, but that a well-rounded person and lifestyle is essential for a good life. The Medicine Wheel is a visual representation of the whole self, it is the healthy, successful, complete person that is ever changing and continuing to grow. Archibald (2008) explains the Medicine Wheel very well:

Each Indigenous group has developed its own cultural content for the holistic circle symbol; however, a common goal has been to attain a mutual balance and harmony among animals, people, elements of nature, and the Spirit World. To attain this goal, ways of acquiring knowledge and codes of behaviour are essential and are embedded in cultural practices; one practice that plays a key role in the oral tradition is storytelling. Some stories remind us about being whole and healthy and remind us of traditional teachings that have relevance to our lives. Stories have the power to make our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together. When we lose a part of ourselves, we lose balance and harmony, and we may feel like Coyote with the mismatched eyes. Only when our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together do we truly have Indigenous education. (Archibald, 2008, p.12)

Parameters of Study

In the Prince George School District, 27% of the student population have identified as Aboriginal (Superintendents Report on Student Achievement, 2013). Therefore, with permission from the School District to do this research, and providing letters of information and consent to parents, I was able to focus on experiences of past and present Aboriginal students from one high school in Prince George. My use of Indigenous Methodology, which uses a narrative approach to research and relationships, required many hours of work with the stories of each participant – interview, transcription, review, coding/themes, etc. so I limited my interviews to a maximum of

six student participants ranging in age from 16 – 24 years old. The recruitment of participants was based on students I have previously taught and worked with or been in contact with and students that have been recommended by other educators. Participant consent as well as parental consent was necessary if the participants were under the age of 19 years old and part of the education system.

Summary

The intentional and unintentional double standards prevailing in the education system in Canada, and more specifically for Aboriginal people in Canada are detrimental for the success of these students. Further success in society is significantly hindered if Aboriginal students are placed in separate programs, treated differently, and expected to meet lesser standards than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This is often quite visible in high schools, and it is difficult to combat without support from all levels of the education system and recognition that it is an issue that needs attention. Stories from Residential Schools provide extreme cases of the effects of culture destroying dominance and attempted assimilation as well as the long lasting effects of an education system that can use improvements so it is a tool used for success in society, not oppression. The whole culture of a school can be affected if these issues are not addressed in a timely manner. In my personal experience, I have been left looking for answers and trying to assist others to recognize the need for change. I have been intrigued by and frustrated with this topic for many years. I hope that I am able to contribute in a positive way to finding an answer to increasing Aboriginal success in the Canadian education system. I believe it is important to investigate the current state of Aboriginal education in Canada (specifically using Prince George, Northern British Columbia, as my research location), provide suggestions for further research in

this area, and assist with some strategies for increasing the success of Aboriginal youth in completion of mainstream high school education and setting up for success in their lives.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In recent years, the topic of Aboriginal education has come to the forefront of research in the Canadian education system; however, it is still quite in its infancy (Battiste, 2013). This literature review drew upon critical aspects of the scholarly works of both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous writers on the following sub topics: Colonialism, The Residential School System, Statistics, Social Factors, Cultural Considerations, The Medicine Wheel/ Holistic Approaches, Self-Regulation, Curriculum, Education and Training, and Intervention/Supports. Dr. Marie Battiste is one of the main published and widely recognized researchers in this area, while increasing research has also been completed by the British Columbia Ministry of Education and its partners. Other notable researchers in this area include: JoAnn Archibald, Verna Kirkness, and Shawn Wilson, respectfully.

In order to be the most informed on my research, I (and other researchers) needed to understand that Aboriginal education in Canada is consistently underserving Aboriginal students due to a variety of reasons stemming from the past and colonial era, to current issues of continuous racism, lack of academic achievement, lack of culturally relevant curriculum and supports, lack of parent involvement, and improper recognition of needs from all levels of administration and government (Silver & Mallett, 2002). Critical analysis has been and continues to be necessary to present the most recent studies and information in a fair and balanced manner.

In the past, the focus of Aboriginal Education was often on assimilation, rather than on deeply meaningful strategies to assist and enhance the education experience of these students (Battiste, 2013). For over 40 years, Aboriginal people have been speaking about their goals for

Aboriginal education; they want to have education that prepares them for life in society to be responsible, contributing citizens who are proud of their culture and Aboriginal identity (BCTF Publication). In British Columbia, statistical data is available from the Ministry of Education, who has been tracking Aboriginal student data each year since the early 2000's, and still continue to do so, with their publication called Aboriginal Report- *How Are We Doing?* Information is also available on programs geared towards "at-risk" students, however, many of these studies deal with only one aspect of the needs of students to find success, and are not specific to Aboriginal students. For Aboriginal students, one of the limitations is use of supports, supported by evidence, that can assist or enhance First Nations' students in attainment of their Dogwood Diploma. As stated by MacLean (2006), this includes the idea that "creating an awareness of the cultural biases that exist in the classroom is a crucial step in creating a meaningful learning atmosphere for at-risk First Nations youth"(p.23).

Literature Results

This literature review examines previous research about and experience on this topic. The literature used provided an overview of the current supports and programs available for Aboriginal students on their paths to graduation, including use of the Medicine Wheel as a conceptual framework, with additional topics such as resilience and Residential schools, and community supports, among others. The Medicine Wheel is especially significant within my study because it can be used as a metaphor in terms of Aboriginal concentric learning or for conceptualizing the themes found in the research.

I found that within the literature, many Indigenous researchers included discussion on the Medicine Wheel, while others focused more on the various social factors that affect the

graduation rates of Aboriginal students. Works that outline advantages and difficulties of Aboriginal students from both past and present have also been utilized. Some themes that have been important in discussing supports to be used specifically for education or on a more general level to apply to everyday life are: self-regulation, social needs, psychological needs, critical thinking, and academic needs. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of current barriers and supports for assisting with Aboriginal student completion of high school.

Methods

English language articles found through the University of Northern British Columbia Library's EBSCO host data base system, including: ERIC, Academic Search Premier, and the Bibliography of Native North Americans were used, as well as: internet articles from Google Scholar, government publications, and books. Results were usually narrowed down by date – publications preferably from the year 2000 onwards, however, some exceptions were made. Recent data (up to and including 2016) on government publications was preferential.

Purpose of the Review

Awareness, knowledge, and initiative have recently increased in the area of Aboriginal student high school completion, where people are gaining a voice and calling for change. I found that the overwhelming response was similar from all print reviewed – the current system is failing Aboriginal students due to: a lack of funding, understanding of cultural needs, non-reconciliation with the mistreatment of the past, generalizations that what fits for one will fit for all, and Eurocentric dominance, among others. There has been effort for better understanding by all parties involved, (government, educators, Aboriginal students and families, etc.) however,

progress has been slow. Recognition of needs is one step in the right direction, but proper implementation and specific supports will be where the results will show.

Description

Literature reviewed for this research was consistent in description of similarities that need to be addressed and both strengths and weaknesses of current research. This type of research and review fits with the current paradigms in Canadian education reform and is useful for further innovations in the system with regard to Aboriginal education and the system as a whole.

The objectives of the articles reviewed range from understanding Aboriginal learning needs, integrating Aboriginal perspectives into curricula, supporting First Nations students, describing needs in Aboriginal education and providing recommendations for the directions in which to move forward. Settings of research were from a variety of places- on reserve, off reserve, mixed schools, Aboriginal schools, choice schools, provinces all over Canada, and Indigenous population locations around the world. Intervention and reform needs are to be recognized on a holistic point of view and needs to be understood from an Aboriginal perspective, not from a Eurocentric one (Battiste, 2002), therefore, a brief overview of the history is necessary for further clarification.

History: Colonialism Colonialism took place increasingly from the 1600's onward. It was due in part to the European desire for discovery of new lands and the increase in the fur trade. After the invasion and take over of Aboriginal lands by the Europeans, legislation, which included the Indian Act, 1876, and various Historical Treaties from 1870-1921, to create reserves was enacted that ensured that Aboriginal people became wards of the state. In brief, this meant that Aboriginals, therefore, were not able to leave those reserves or perform cultural ceremonies,

and would therefore become more easy to control (Wilson, 2003). This was the deliberate attempt to destroy the Aboriginal peoples' political and religious systems as well as their cultures and replace them with their acceptable and practiced European counterparts (Silver & Mallett, 2002).

Wilson calls the period of time from 1940-1970 the assimilationist period (Wilson, 2003; Fournier & Crey, 1997). When the eradication attempts of the 1800's did not work, assimilation became the objective of the government, and "the colonial aims of extinguishing Indians altogether" created a system that has been flawed and has impacted so many generations that it is still being felt today (McIvor, 2010). Attempts at assimilation have led to continued feelings of inferiority and racism towards Aboriginal people and cultures by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people:

A vicious cycle is created: the assumption of Aboriginal peoples' cultural inferiority, initially advanced as a means to justify the European domination of North America, becomes internalized by Aboriginal people themselves, in response, many Aboriginal people lash out in self abusive ways; such behavior then reinforces in the minds of the colonizers the assumptions of Aboriginal inferiority that lie at the heart of the colonial ideology (Silver & Mallett, 2002).

In regards to research, from approximately 1900-1970 (and in some cases, continuing today), research was done on Aboriginal people, but not for or by Aboriginal people. Wilson (2003) states that this is when non-Aboriginal people became experts on Aboriginal people. The most recent movement, however, to affect Aboriginal people has been a positive one; from approximately the year 2000, research by Aboriginal people on Aboriginal education has come to the forefront. Previously, researchers were typically outsiders, now the call for Aboriginal researchers with Aboriginal voices has been made. In the beginning, collaboration was being

encouraged but as the movement expanded and began to gain traction, more and more Aboriginal researchers began speaking for themselves (Wilson, 2003). Smith (2005) makes a powerful statement in discussing what research is: “Research, like schooling, once the tool of colonization and oppression, is very gradually coming to be seen as a potential means to reclaim languages, histories, and knowledge, to find solutions to the negative impacts of colonialism and to give voice to an alternative way of knowing and of being” (p.91).

Using Indigenous Methodologies, research for Aboriginal peoples has now become about relationships. “The abilities to enter pre existing relationships; to build, maintain, and nurture relationships; and to strengthen connectivity are important research skills in the indigenous arena. They require critical sensitivity and reciprocity of spirit by a researcher (Smith, 2005, p. 97).” Wilson (2003) says that this new paradigm has focused on decolonization and alludes to the works of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Dr. Marie Battiste (2000), and Youngblood Henderson (2002) as forerunners in this area and have allowed other researchers and scholars to “do research that emanates from, honors, and illuminates their world views and perspectives.” As such, storytelling fits within this cultural awareness as it has been part of Indigenous culture since the beginning of time (McIvor, 2010).

Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop. The Residential School System was an attempt by government to assimilate the Indians after the eradication attempts of the 1800’s did not work. The Residential schools, for many of the Aboriginal children involved, were “horrific places” (Silver & Mallett, 2002). The premise was that Aboriginal children had been taken from their families in order to educate them, when in fact, they were taken to try to assimilate them (White, 2003). A brief and general explanation is that the Residential schools began as a system of religious schools that took Aboriginal children from their homes and families and

made them live in residence at the school. Students were separated by age and gender, and were taught that their heritage and belief systems were bad and wrong. They were punished for speaking their own language and forced to learn the White Man's faith, language, and way of life. Their education focused on wiping out the Indian inside of them. They were fed meagre meals and stayed in dorms; many were sexually abused. If the children tried to take extra food because they were starving, tried to stay with their siblings, spoke in their native tongue, or did not look at or answer the Brother or Sister or Father appropriately, they were punished in any number of ways – no meals, isolation, abuse – physical, mental, and/or sexual. Also, “many suffered from hunger, overwork, and shockingly high rates of disease and death (Silver & Mallett, 2002, p. 33).” My grandfather was a Residential School survivor.

In writing about Residential schools, Archibald (2007) states that “colonized assimilation and acculturation predominantly through education forced Western literacy, values, and ways of thinking upon generations of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal languages, and hence our forms of orality (oral tradition in practice), were prohibited in the residential schools” (Archibald, 2007, p.14). She also says that “losing the “eyes,” or the understanding, of a worldview embedded in Aboriginal oral traditions, particularly in the stories, is strongly linked to the legacy of forced colonization and assimilation during the missionary and residential-school eras and then through the public schooling system” (Archibald, 2007). This led to a generation and learning gap, where, as they got older, the children felt a disconnect between themselves and their homes; they did not fit in on the reserve any longer, but also did not fit into mainstream society. Drugs and alcohol were increasingly used as coping mechanisms and important life lessons were missed out on, such as: cultural beliefs and knowledge of language, how to raise a family, and how to contribute in an effective way to their community. Not surprisingly then, the effect of

Residential Schools has had “a devastating effect on Aboriginal people and families, and ...created in the mind of many Aboriginal people a thoroughly negative perception of formal education” (Silver & Mallett, 2002, p.12).

Smith (2005) surmised that “the identity of “the native” is regarded as complicated, ambiguous, and therefore troubling even for those who live the realities and contradictions of being native and of being a member of a colonized and minority community that still remembers other ways of being, of knowing, and of relating to the world” (p.89). Thus, in the 1960’s, when the government once again came to apprehend children from reserves and put them in foster care, families were at a loss and felt the effects of the Residential Schools all over again, for the second time in a generation. In Ontario, this was called the Sixties Scoop which was due to an amendment of the Indian Act in 1951 that put provincial social services in charge of child welfare. Some were sold across the border into the United States for up to \$4,000.00 per child (Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, 2012) and were adopted into mainstream Caucasian families (White, 2003). The result of the Residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, has been “a legacy of ill feelings directed by Aboriginal people at the Canadian educational system” (Silver & Mallett, 2002, p.34). Partially as an act of defiance, and as a means of healing, stories continued to be told about the history of each Aboriginal peoples. Beliefs and ceremonies were not allowed to be practiced, and Indigenous language was not allowed to be spoken, but history has a way of making itself known. Stories were not only told to teach lessons, they were used to change lives (McIvor, 2010), and that is what they have done throughout history.

Aboriginal Student High School Completion Rates: Statistics Large numbers of Aboriginal students in Canada are placed into Special Education programs (McBride & McKee,

2001), while larger numbers of Aboriginal students do not complete high school in the usual 6-year timespan, if at all. For example: completion rates for Aboriginal high school students in British Columbia were 42.5% in 2001, compared to 79.2% for non-Aboriginal students (Richards & Vining, 2004). A report completed by the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada in 2004, found that the Aboriginal graduation rate was 42% compared to 78% for the non-Aboriginal population. That year, the CMEC (the national body representing all of the education heads for each province) agreed that Aboriginal education needed to be made a priority, and they started work on finding appropriate pedagogy, content, and inclusive processes (Battiste, 2013). In 2006, 40% of Aboriginal people aged 20-24 did not have a high-school diploma, compared to 13% of non-Aboriginal Canadians in the same age group. The rate was even higher for First Nations living on reserve (61%) and for Inuit living in remote communities (68%). This means that trends over time have stayed relatively the same. These numbers are distressing given the importance of a high-school diploma in the pursuit of further education, training, employment (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009), and the ability to meaningfully contribute to society.

Low completion rates for Aboriginal students are attributed, but not limited to, the effects of the Residential School System, lack of community connection and support, misplacement in Special Needs programs, and lack of funding (Battiste, 2002). Aboriginal students tend to have poorer school performance, more missed days of school, and lower grade point averages than non-Aboriginal students (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). Another issue in regards to graduation rates is the reason why students are being placed in Special Education classes: Silver & Mallett (2002) allude to behaviors and refusal to learn as a form of resistance and way of defying colonization. They state that schools respond to behavioural issues in many different

ways, including placing students in special education programs, and cite a study from the British Columbia Department of Education called the *Over-Representation of Aboriginal Students Reported With Behaviour Disorders*, where it was found that “Over representation of Aboriginal students in populations of students with special needs has been well documented both in research literature and in the data collected by the Ministry of Education of British Columbia in its student level data collection system... [it] is approximately 3.5 times that of the general K-12 student population” (Silver & Mallett, 2002; British Columbia, 2001, p.1). From my experience as a teacher, this is something that I have experienced, and one of the main reasons for wanting to complete a study on this topic.

Interventions in the education system for Aboriginal students are needed to address the aforementioned needs and increase knowledge, acceptance, and understanding of them. Dr. Marie Battiste affirms that literature on Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy does exist in the Canadian context, however, it is very limited. Reforms are necessary in the system to allow for innovative programming that will address the challenges of Indigenous knowledge and the conflicts surrounding Eurocentric vs. Indigenous Ways of Knowing (Battiste, 2002).

In British Columbia, Aboriginal student high school completion rates are slowly on the rise. In Prince George, specifically, the rate is 56% (School District #57 Achievement Contract, 2014). The British Columbia Ministry of Education report titled *How Are We Doing?* (2013) on Aboriginal student school statistics states that enrollment and completion rates are 11% and 60% compared to 89% and 86% of their non-Aboriginal peers, respectively. The population of Aboriginal school aged students in Prince George is approximately 3000 (National Household Survey, 2011), therefore, it is imperative that focus on retention and completion of high school be a main focus of the education system here in Northern British Columbia.

Social Factors. High school completion can open up many doors for students. For Aboriginal students and other at-risk youth, there are many factors that contribute to incompleteness and therefore the possibility of reliance on social programs to survive. Social factors are determinants on issues such as: health, education, early childhood, wellbeing, poverty, over-crowded/unsuitable housing, etc. Social programs may include: welfare, low-income housing, food banks, shelters, etc. Each of these factors can impact, whether it is directly or indirectly, the way in which a student learns and can be a reason for completion, or lack thereof, of high school. I will briefly speak to two of these issues from my own experience, as they are what resonated with me the most in doing this project: wellness, and poverty. Overall wellness is significant and the issue of poverty ties in with this issue. For example, if a student is experiencing a deficit in any of the areas of spiritual, physical, mental, or emotional wellbeing, the belief is that he or she will not be learning or engaging in academics at the optimum level. Wellness can be defined as the state of being healthy in both body and mind, and poverty is being deficient in the necessities of life – the state of being poor (Dictionary.com, 2016). The areas of the Medicine Wheel include: relationships, food, shelter, clothing, self-esteem/self-worth, self-regulation, beliefs and values, among others, and all of these things are interconnected. If a student comes to school without having eaten, he will be less likely to concentrate on his lessons because he is concentrating on how hungry he is; there is access to a food program, but not until lunch time, which means hours of waiting. If a student comes to school without showering or in clothes that haven't been washed for days or weeks because there is no water on at her house and there is no money for the laundromat, it is likely that she will not be very welcomed by the other students, possibly even shunned. If a student has to couch surf because he was being abused by his parent/guardian/partner but was afraid to report it, he will

likely be unable to concentrate, if he came to school at all. If a student was unable to attend because she was required to stay home with the little children or tend to the elderly in the household, she would be behind in her lessons and perhaps unable to catch up. Silver and Mallett (2002) also write to these issues in their paper on *Aboriginal Students in Winnipeg Schools*. They provide similar examples and go on to quote a participant in their study that:

Housing problems mean that rates of mobility are extremely high, so that children are constantly leaving one school for another. Drinking and drugs are sometimes a response by the adults in the household, and when day-to-day life simply gets to chaotic and overwhelming, school is the first thing to go, it's a pressure they can do without (p. 28).

I believe, that in a sense, privilege is also a factor in wellbeing. For example: I was teaching a lesson on budgeting and there was a group of middle-class to wealthy non-Aboriginal students who were talking about how they couldn't believe how over budget they were when asked to hypothetically build or maintain their lifestyle as they saw fit; the only person in class who had a surplus in his budget was an Aboriginal student who actually understood the value of money – he knew how to live within or below his means even in a hypothetical situation, because that is what he has experienced in his day to day life; while the other students were talking about getting the newest iPhone, he was busy trying to figure out how to get a meal for the day. His physical need was his prime concern at that time, while their unnecessary wants were theirs. This example demonstrates the different economic factors that can influence our students' educational paths as well.

Another way to look at the issue of social factors is the amount of cost associated with Aboriginal students not completing high school. In 2001 it was estimated that “the cost of allowing 11,000 poor youth to leave school over a 20 year time span was \$23 billion in lost

income and productivity, \$9.9 billion in lost taxes, and \$1.4 billion in unemployment and social assistance payments” (Silver & Mallett, 2002, p.9). Silver and Mallett (2002), although discussing Aboriginal graduation rates in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, make a strong case that investing in Aboriginal education is an investment in both the economic future of the province and of Aboriginal people themselves.

Student success can also be enhanced by allowing for attention to health and wellness and including Aboriginal perspectives for all students (Kitchenham et al., 2016). If students can find a sense of belonging and desire to be at school, the likelihood of completion is increased and further success in society is also increased. “When students from marginalized cultures see themselves and their values positively represented in the school, the impact is exceptional” (Silver & Mallett, 2002, p. 51). Schools and students may also find benefits from furthering relationships in and with the community or other outside agencies in order to assist with volunteer work, counseling, sports and other extra-curricular activities. This will ensure a well-rounded student who will have the ability to contribute to society. Richards (2006) surmises that limited formal education means fewer job opportunities and wages, therefore, completion is key, and school does matter.

Cultural Considerations. Cultural safety is necessary for learning. Ball and Pence (2006) define this as: “feeling safe to express one’s perspective and behave in accordance with one’s own culture...” (p.81). Often there are different curriculum expectations for Aboriginal vs Non-Aboriginal students; whether it be intentional or unintentional is another question, however, it may be due to some of this inconsistency that Aboriginal students also feel left out or left behind and have little desire or knowledge of strategies to catch up. The absence of cultural safety results in low participation and completion rates (Ball & Pence, 2006, p. 79). A Saulteau

social development officer was quoted as saying “First Nations people have always been so laughed at, so put down, and have dropped out of school so often that when they do want to continue their education, they can’t even get in – and if they do, they’ll give up too fast because it’s not culturally relevant” (Ball & Pence, 2006, p.79). This statement is relevant to lifelong learning, and is something I strongly believe in. I think it is a key factor in determining supports for Aboriginal student success and completion of high school.

Holistic Learning/Medicine Wheel. Many Aboriginal people look at the world from a holistic point of view, and while a blanket statement or one size fits all does not work for many Aboriginal groups in Canada, progress has started for policy makers and government funding to recognize the need for revision and review of the very Eurocentric system currently used in Canada. Holistic learning is the interweaving of the mind, body, spirit, and past and future; it is based on balance and requires recognition, nurturing, guidance, and respect (Ball & Pence, 2006). Battiste (2002) talks of this as education for wholeness; the harmony between individuals and their world, which is a theme common in all heritages, not just Aboriginal learning or knowledge. Blackstock (2009), says that this Indigenous holistic worldview “holds that we are part of an interconnected reality created by everything that came before us.”(p. 138). “Traditional Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal delivery models tend to differ in that the Aboriginal delivery tends to focus on the world as a whole and how something affects the entire person and entire community. Non-Aboriginal teaching addresses the details first and connects to the larger picture in the end” (MacLean, 2006, p. 31). In Prince George, the school district has incorporated the Medicine Wheel into its handbook for Aboriginal Education Workers. It is important to utilize this framework within each task for the students and workers so that they learn about the importance of balance (Aboriginal Education Worker Handbook, 2013). Because

each quadrant of the Medicine Wheel is related to the other, they must all work in harmony or it will be out of sync, much like a bicycle wheel will not work properly if a section of spokes is broken or the rim is bent. Blackstock (2009) states that “Indigenous peoples believed that a balance of cognition, emotion, spirituality, and physical knowing created the optimal climate to cultivate valid and useful knowledge” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

Self-Regulation/Mindful Learning. Self-regulation consists of knowing one’s triggers and how to calm down. It is the ability to recognize that something within may be “off” and trying to rectify that before emotions get out of control. Resilience is the ability to get back up when someone knocks you down; it is recovery. Focus implies that although there is room for distraction, the student is dedicated to learning and the lesson at hand. Mindful Learning is knowing when to take a break and when to push through the lesson; acknowledging the learning environment, relevance of the lesson, and working through the experience. Each of these themes can be the basis for specific and relevant supports that Aboriginal students in high school need to achieve success and obtain their Dogwood Diploma for graduation. For example, a program called MindUp by Scholastic Inc. maintains that if a student can monitor his or her senses and feelings, he or she will be able to respond to the world more reflectively rather than reflexively by being more self-aware.

Teaching techniques to children for dealing with stress may be particularly important in schools surrounded by environmental stressors such as violent neighborhoods, unsafe or dilapidated housing, and worries related to obtaining adequate resources to meet basic needs. Stress reduction skills are critical for children who experience stressors related to classism, racism, and religious oppression (Napoli, Krech, and Holley, 2002, p. 104).

In the later educational stages, I believe that this awareness can lead to higher levels of academic success and societal inclusion, therefore increasing graduation rates and further success for First Nations' students including careers, health, and overall wellness.

One goal of Mindful Learning is to increase students' capacity to pay attention, however, other benefits have been associated with it, such as: reducing anxiety and disruptive behavior, and improving behavior and self-control (Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005). Dr. Karen Ragoonaden (2015) is a strong proponent of mindful learning, she believes that mindfulness can enhance academic performance, as well as support well-being in the educational environment. She also notes that an educational framework specifically aimed at developing mindfulness in education would add validity to the area of scholarship in teaching and learning. Napoli et al (2005) add that "if students develop their attention skills, teaching and learning can become more meaningful." They go on to say that:

Implementing mindfulness for Indigenous children appears to be culturally congruent. This congruence may result in children's cultural qualities being supported and encouraged. This encouragement may assist them in feeling valued in a school environment that may in other ways feel unsupportive or hostile toward their communities and cultures... this may lead to a stronger attachment to school. If effective, such techniques may be one component of efforts to reduce the rate of youth who leave school before graduation (P.114).

Curriculum/Instruction Quality. Current literature says that Aboriginal students will be more engaged if the lessons are related to their own experience (MacLean, 2006). In January 2013, the Ministry of Education in British Columbia published *Exploring Curriculum Design*, which made recommendations for changes to the current curriculum. They acknowledge that if Aboriginal perspectives are integrated into the curriculum, the likelihood of gaining

understanding of Aboriginal cultures and steps toward gaining mutual respect can be garnered (BC Ministry of Education, 2013). The move towards mandatory, integrated, Indigenous education has begun in both British Columbia and Saskatchewan, as it has been seen as a means to increase Aboriginal student high school completion which has been noted as a concern that is echoed throughout the literature (Kanu, 2005).

Based on Battiste's (2002) research, the Eurocentric style of schooling does not work for Aboriginal students. She states that when forced upon Aboriginal learners, this becomes a system of control that does not allow for Aboriginal students' abilities to shine through. This is recognized in most districts; however, blame is still often placed on students, families, or society for the lack of success in classrooms (BCTF publication). Therefore, it is important to gather as much information as possible and teach Aboriginal students in their traditional holistic methods. Kitchenham et al. (2016) state that "the inclusion of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogical practices does more than simply address academic achievement, it honors the whole individual (e.g. emotionally, culturally, intellectually, and physically)"(p.7). Aboriginal students need to be able to experience levels of learning, rather than regurgitate texts. It is important to learn with our whole beings and use all of our senses to completely understand lessons (Battiste, 2002).

In Aboriginal learning, observation and doing are important, as well as experiential learning and individualized instruction. In addition, the component of enjoying what you are learning is key (Battiste, 2002). In general, students will learn more effectively if they are not bored and find their lessons relevant. Teachers also tend to be more effective in reaching students when they are teaching subjects/lessons that they are passionate about. A student can be very successful in some areas, for example, fine arts (woodwork, band, art, to name a few), while

not being able to engage in others, such as math or science; this should not be an indicator of whether that student is going to graduate or not, but rather to show that perhaps tying math into his woodworking class might make it a more workable/real world situation for him to gain competency. Kitchenham et al (2016) use Battiste's (2002) words by saying that the holistic approach "aims to end the fragmentation of Eurocentric educational systems imposed on First Nations students and facilitate the goal of wholeness to which Indigenous knowledge aspires" (p. 8). It is important therefore, that Aboriginal curriculum written by Aboriginal people become part of the overall curriculum, not just non-mandatory, add-on lessons or one offs, as so often happens. Verna Kirkness further clarifies this point: "The materials and subjects used for teaching are largely designed for and by non-Aboriginal persons with little or no regard for the cultures, histories and realities of Aboriginal life" (Kirkness, 1992, p. 94). As such, the move toward mandatory integration of Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum has begun in both British Columbia and Saskatchewan, for example, and the onus is on not only teachers already teaching in schools and curriculum writers, but also on the teacher education programs to prepare the new teacher candidates to be competent in presenting this perspective and making it a part of their everyday teaching practice (Kovach, 2010).

Education and/or Training of Instructors. A difficult task is to find teachers that are qualified to teach these holistic lessons. Many times Elders are brought in to teach language and culture lessons and even though they are the highest wisdom-keepers within the Aboriginal community (McIvor, 2010) and should be shown the utmost respect, they are not certified teachers in the Eurocentric view (Battiste, 2002). The number of qualified instructors who are able to teach these lessons are minimal, due to a number of reasons, including, but not limited to: loss of traditional language and lack of understanding. MacLean (2006) states that "There is a

need for educators of Aboriginal ancestry in schools, in part to lend credibility to an education system that has an ever increasing First Nations student population” (p. 26). In relation to this, there are programs from a variety of institutions available across the country specifically for Aboriginal people who would like to become certified teachers; they are called the Native Indian Teachers Education Program (NITEP), or Indigenous Teachers Education Program, respectively. At the University of British Columbia, the NITEP program began in 1974 with elementary education and expanded in 2004 to include a high school teachers certification option. The program was developed due to an increasing need for a more “effective and relevant” teachers education program. A shortage of Aboriginal teachers has been noted in BC, as well as an increasing desire by Aboriginal people to become teachers (NITEP homepage, 2016) thus the continued need for this program and ones like it across the country. Preparation for teacher candidates to adequately and confidently integrate Indigenous perspectives into their pedagogy is an essential task, and requires the involvement of both the Indigenous academic community as well as the non-Indigenous faculty (Kovach, 2010). Further to this, the University of Alberta in Edmonton, offers a First Nations Graduate Education program where Aboriginal instructors teach from the Indigenous perspective. More Aboriginal people have graduated from this university with doctorate degrees in the last decade than had done so in the whole history of the university (Wilson, 2003), which is a significant accomplishment, and shows much progress in the right direction and can hopefully contribute to more Aboriginal role models in visible positions.

In my own experience, I think it is not very believable to have a person who is not Aboriginal, no matter how much they know or are engaged, to be teaching certain courses, as the students may find it almost fake. In my experience, being a Metis person with a lighter

complexion, it was difficult for me to have the students “buy-in” when I was teaching Aboriginal Studies in Alberta; they could not understand why this “white girl” was teaching them about their culture; it was a difficult semester. Because of this experience, I believe that it is important for Aboriginal people to be represented in schools in a positive way. Students need to have role models in the school that they feel are more like them so they are comfortable to go to them for assistance, feel a connection to, and ask for guidance.

The whole school climate can be affected if Aboriginal students are improperly dealt with in regard to classroom placement, understanding of cultural norms, or lack of positive role models. Students need to be shown what success looks like, to see it from their point of view, and to understand that anyone can find success if determination outweighs negativity. Furthermore, by being engaged and sharing experiences and stories, students can be role models and mentors for each other and their representation can help to lead others into the field of success. Students and educators need to learn to be tolerant and accepting of others and find appropriate ways to deal with differences, but it has to be a change that is system wide, or it likely will not work.

Looking at Grade 8-12 Intervention/Supports. Finding support within the school at the early stages of grade 8 is a critical factor in retaining Aboriginal students. If the high school can keep these students engaged by using various interventions, providing a positive role model or support network, they are more likely to continue their education (Richards & Vining, 2004). If students can be reached in their grade 8 year and continue to work in a partnership with them, they may gain the determination to achieve good grades and complete high school. More funding would allow for a more consistent resource for students, such as Aboriginal Education Workers, who would then be available throughout their high school years.

As students get older and further into the grade levels, there appears to be a progressive disconnect with school. For example, in Prince George, there is a gap between the number of Aboriginal students who start grade 8 and who complete grade 12 (District Achievement Contract, 2013). There may be many reasons for this, ranging from self-involvement and the need to focus on other issues like family or medical, to community issues, to school factors like being isolated, disengaged, feeling unwanted, or comparing to others. These factors do not suddenly appear, rather, they are noticed at a gradual rate and often too late. If the school can be a place of engagement and feeling understood, successful completion is likely, even if the student does not have a stable life outside of school. As educators, if we can provide supports for these students to pull them in and keep them there, they may find the confidence and desire to succeed and complete high school and remove themselves from the potential cycle of poverty they may be in. The District Achievement Contract (DAC) is a public statement made by the Board of Education regarding the commitment to work toward achieving success for each student in the district by wanting to improve the conditions for student learning and by recognizing that action is needed to support individual learners. The DAC of 2013 has a specific focus of improving success for early learners and Aboriginal students (District Achievement Contract, 2013).

School districts and Aboriginal groups have also identified parent or family involvement as vital to the success of students; lack of involvement can be a factor in both social and academic development (BCTF Publication, date unknown). If a child has support at home, the transition to high school and post-secondary life will be much easier. Unfortunately, due to circumstances that took place decades ago and belief systems of various stakeholders, there is often a disconnect between the school and home. One main reason for this is the after effects of

the Residential School system – parents who are intimidated by the school as an institution or ashamed of their own schooling experiences; lack of understanding of cultural norms from both parties, and feeling unwelcome by the school system as a whole. Even if parents did not experience the Residential Schools themselves, they have been directly or indirectly affected by it and it may have left years of scars and the need for whole community healing that the institution of education may have difficulty providing. Some ways of reaching out to parents or the community as a whole are: having community feasts, providing access to programs like Head Start and Adult Literacy programs, and by having educators meet with parents at their homes or other places where they feel comfortable, rather than at the school (Silver & Mallett, 2002). On the other hand, it may be because of the Residential School experience that some Aboriginal students are trying to find success – they would like to break out of the cycle of poverty and are determined to be strong and resilient people.

Conflicts and limitations. Conflicts and limitations have also been mentioned by a variety of researchers. These include: each First Nation has differing beliefs, people can't agree on where to start or what is most pertinent, there isn't enough funding, restrictions and lack of access to those who could be most helpful (experts in language, culture, and experience are unwilling or unable to participate), meaningful learning and instruction comes at a cost that not all are willing to work with or for, etc. (Richards & Vining, 2004). Although these issues have been recognized, little appears to have been done or set in motion for remediation.

Current measurement approaches typically focus on the discrepancies in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal youth (in particular, high school completion rates) and often overlook the many aspects of learning that are integral to an Aboriginal perspective on learning. As a result, conventional measurement approaches rarely reflect the specific needs and

aspirations of Aboriginal people. The situation is not unique to Canada. In a recent report, the United Nations states “it is of utmost importance that Governments, indigenous peoples, donors and civil society organizations work together to ensure that special (measurement) approaches are devised to coincide with the aspirations of indigenous peoples (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).”

Data restrictions and gaps are noted in studies and have been suggested to be a factor in overgeneralization and complete availability of data, and therefore only relevant to certain groups of Aboriginals, for example: First Nations people living on-reserve (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

Comparisons with other provinces in Canada, as well as other countries throughout the world, including the United States, Australia, and New Zealand were included in some of the articles reviewed and consensus was generally the same, with no contradictions found. In November 2007, the Canadian Council on Learning released a report called *Redefining How Success is Measured in First Nations, Inuit and Metis Learning*, which described some of the reasons that current measurement levels showed only a partial picture of Aboriginal education in Canada. It stated that conventional frameworks often show the negative rather than the successes in Aboriginal learning. These include: being oriented toward measuring learning deficits, do not account for social, economic, or political factors, do not monitor progress across the full spectrum of lifelong learning, do not reflect the holistic nature of First Nations, Inuit and Metis learning, and do not reflect the importance of experiential learning (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

Overwhelmingly and repeatedly stated are the recommendations from educators, reformers, and Aboriginal people who would like to be involved with change in the education system.

Recommendations include, but are not limited to: supporting and encouraging innovation in First Nations education, government funding and commitment, recognition of traditional ways of knowing and implementation into the school system, education, training, and acceptance of Aboriginal people to work with and for themselves, Aboriginal control over Aboriginal education, affirmation of Aboriginal languages, and acceptance and invitations to Aboriginal Elders/knowledge keepers to be involved in reform, teaching, and support of traditions and curriculum within the schools and communities (Battiste, 2002).

Summary

As Aboriginal education continues to rise to the forefront of educational research in Canada, we are more likely to recognize what is already working and what is not. The statistical information provided by the Ministry of Education in British Columbia, as well as individual school boards and education authorities can help with determining where future resources should go and where research needs to be done. Much of the current research is generalized with what appear to be band-aid solutions and lacks specific suggestions for support or meaningful solutions. Educational, societal, and personal themes were also identified which relate to factors helping and hindering these completion rates. Teachers and administrators are caught in the beliefs of this very Eurocentric system just as much as the students themselves. Some examples of this are: teachers are often told that a child has been placed in their classes, rather than being spoken to and asked for recommendations; administrators often do not have the funding to ensure students are placed in the classes they need – but instead tell the counselors to place them where there is room; students are often not tested appropriately or are generally placed in a Special Education program when they actually are deficient in only one area (ex. Math or

English), or are not at all, but that is where most of their peers are placed, and so they are put in a classroom based on assumed comfort level, not on academic ability.

Using the Medicine Wheel from the Aboriginal Department of School District #57 as my framework for this research, I explored self-regulation, physiological needs, social needs, academics, and culture needs. Self-regulation and monitoring were discussed as tools so that students can become self-aware and recognize supports and triggers for success, or lack thereof. With the ultimate goal of attainment of the Dogwood Diploma for First Nations students in British Columbia, school boards and communities can work together to create a positive environment which includes specific supports to address the issue of successful completion for Aboriginal students in special needs courses. I believe that Aboriginal students should be placed in classrooms based on their abilities, and that supports from the community and school for health and societal needs should be included in their education programs in order for attainment of their diplomas within a six-year timeframe. As new research continues to arise, it will be very important to look not only at statistics, but to include the stories of past and present students so that we can give them a voice and really understand their experiences. If specific supports can be identified and implemented, the statistics should show an increase in the rate of completion for Aboriginal students in the coming years, which can lead to increased participation in society and personal wellness as well.

Chapter Three: Indigenous Methodology (The Project Plan)

Chapter 3 outlines and includes the procedures and methods of my study, such as: questions guiding my research, barriers and ethical concerns, as well as: recruitment, consent, interview procedures, and coding and analysis. Qualitative research is best suited to this inquiry because it relies heavily on the views of participants. This type of analysis focuses on narrated experiences, conversations, or broad questions that are answered by participants in verbal or text form. It is essential in using this method that researchers adhere to Indigenous ethical standards, therefore, “researchers will nurture and maintain a respectful relationship with the Indigenous peoples who are subject to the study (Blackstock, 2009,p. 137).” Key issues have been identified through a literature review and interviews with current and former students. I was able to work with participants to tell provide personal accounts of what worked and what did not work for each of them. After the interviews were complete, I described and analyzed the data for themes and, subjectively completed the inquiry (Creswell, 2012) which included checking for validity and reliability. My analysis of their stories used the Medicine Wheel as a holistic framework to enhance my understanding of specific needs for these students. Additionally, suggestions for future research, considerations, and improvement on current systems are discussed. I have summarized and documented effects of placement in Special Education programs and common barriers to completion rates of high school Aboriginal students as well as interpreted commonalities between themes that have emerged from my interviews and research. Finally, the project will be disseminated so that it can be viewed by others; this will be accomplished in both formal and informal ways, such as submission of the project to the appropriate agencies, and by presentations to colleagues (Berg, 2009). By using this approach, and being culturally aware, I

intended to add to the growing research in the area of Aboriginal student success in Special Needs classes and retention rates for completion and graduation.

For the purposes of my research, I did a qualitative analysis using Indigenous Methodology to report on the experiences of First Nations students, illuminating through their shared experiences the effects of improper placement of Aboriginal students in Special Needs programs due to lack of specific and meaningful supports which can have an effect on graduation rates. These tie in with the repercussions of an ineffective Canadian schooling system for Aboriginal students that is based on Eurocentric learning rather than traditional Aboriginal Ways of Knowing. This project is a three-fold opportunity that allows me to: 1) discuss traditional methods and practices, for example: storytelling, 2) incorporate my own experience into this method because I am of Aboriginal descent, and finally, 3) offer myself as a Metis researcher a chance to narrate storied experiences. I believe that when ideas are recognized and strategies and interventions are put into place, a significant number of Aboriginal students will find success in mainstream classrooms and complete the graduation process within the same time frame (5-6 years) as non-Aboriginal students. Now that this research is completed, I hope this study will provide knowledge that school boards, education authorities, and communities may find useful for increasing Aboriginal student completion rates of high school.

Methodology is defined by Wilson (2003) as “the theory of how knowledge is gained, for example: How do I find more about this reality?” A paradigm is “a set of underlying beliefs or assumptions that guide our actions...based on theory and as such are intrinsically value-laden” (p.175). Indigenous Methodology can be defined as approaches and methods used in the study of Indigenous peoples by Indigenous people. The goal of using Indigenous Methodologies is to be sure that research is carried out in an ethical way, employing respect and usefulness as seen from

the Indigenous point of view; it is using the Indigenous method of storytelling to capture ways of knowing. It is necessary for researchers to use critical analysis in their processes to ensure that Indigenous peoples' interests, experiences, and knowledge are the center of the research (Porsanger, 2004). Indigenous Methodology is useful for my project because it allows for Aboriginal voice to be heard. The understanding that knowledge is relational is the integral component of this methodology (Wilson, 2003) and using storytelling methods fit in with this epistemology because of the relationship that has formed by telling and analyzing the stories (Wilson, 2001) that have come out of the time spent together. Margaret Kovach (2010), another distinguished researcher and scholarly resource, surmises that the conversational method is important within Indigenous Methodologies because it "involves a dialogic participation and holds a deep purpose of sharing story as a means to assist others. It is relational at its core" (p.1). She goes on to state that "a decolonizing theoretical perspective is necessary within Indigenous Research given the existing social inequities that Indigenous peoples continue to experience" (Kovach, 2010, p.42). And McIvor (2010) describes how Archibald (2008) "uses storytelling as a way of further developing Indigenous education approaches and integrating the whole self into one's work" (McIvor, p.141).

Stories are a powerful means of teaching and learning. The use of narrative within both research and instruction is significant. Kovach (2010) says that "it has a holistic nature that provides a means for sharing remembrances that evoke the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental" (p.43) and can be part of the method used for distributing education as a whole. Thomas (2005) states that another key component of Indigenous methodology is to create new Indigenous Knowledge: "Storytelling [also] uncovers new ways of knowing" (p. 245). It is through combining qualitative research approaches that both researchers and participants "have

the potential to respond to epistemic challenges and crises, to unravel and weave, to fold in and unmask the layers of the social life and depth of human experience” (Smith, 2005, p.103).

Therefore, the intent of this project is to help inform Indigenous and Non Indigenous teachers by providing additional research in this area, and by enabling the students to “tell their stories in their own ways and give testimony to their collective histories and struggles” (Smith, 2005, p.89) thus, putting forth a different perspective on these issues. There are many positive outcomes to using Indigenous Methodology for this study; including: self-awareness, empowerment, connectedness, and overcoming some racial aspects of misunderstanding as well as integration of Aboriginal cultures into school cultures (Aman, 2008).

Description of Research Project

Research Questions: The guiding research question for this study is:

- 1. What are the specific supports that First Nations students in Northern British Columbia who are placed in Special Education courses believe are needed to help them complete their high school education?**

Research Procedures (Process)

Types of data collected. Interviews and a reflexive journal were used as the primary sources of data. Interviewing is defined by Berg (2009) as conversation with a purpose; to gather information. Interviews, using open ended questions, were conducted after participants gave consent, and were at various locations throughout Prince George and one out of town location for a former student who had moved away.

Procedures. Indigenous Methodology using an interview approach was used to gather data. Exploratory and descriptive research methods were utilized so that preliminary data could be

explained, and areas of Aboriginal Education already being investigated could be described (O'Neill, L. personal communication (class), 2012). Use of a conversational approach is important within Indigenous Methodology, as it focuses on the relational factor; the researcher must have a certain amount of credibility and trustworthiness in order for people to participate in the study using this method (Kovach, 2010). Hence, I interviewed past and present Aboriginal students from one high school in Prince George to gather data and then used a reflexive journal to continue with my thoughts after the interviews were complete. This is a respectful and ethical piece of Indigenous Methodology and it is a way for the researcher to process the interviews/stories (Kovach, 2010). Interviews were audio recorded while participants discussed their stories and experiences. As stated by Wilson (2001) "it was like mixing information, gathering, sharing, and analysis," (p. 178) it wasn't just about gaining knowledge from participants – it was a relationship that had formed and was being built upon.

Participants and recruitment. Recruitment of participants was done by purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012). I had in mind people I wanted to interview regarding this topic, and others had been suggested via other educators within the school. I approached these students, informed them of my research by discussion and provided them with a letter asking if they would be willing to participate. I discussed the research with their parent/guardian if they were under the age of consent. I had 6 participants for this research. Because I knew these participants, the relational factor was present, and there was a sense of trust. This led to the interviews being dialogic, and reflective (Kovach, 2010) which allowed for the building of ideas and relationships based on the mutual gaining and sharing of information (Wilson, 2001). A token of my appreciation was offered, such as a beverage or snack. Also an individual copy of the final project will be provided to each participant, if they so desire.

Consent. Consent was garnered via verbal and written methods. Discussion regarding my desire to complete the research and then written participation forms were necessary to be sure of informed consent. It is understood that with consent, each participant has the opportunity to withdraw participation at any time, and his or her information will be destroyed and not used in the project, however, I did not run into this issue. I asked for personal and parental consent from those students that were still attending school. Research consent includes approval from the Research Ethics Board, the signed consent of participants, and on-going consent throughout the process. Informed consent includes explaining the purpose of the research, how long it will take and how it will be used, procedures for the research, the participants' right to decline to participate or to withdraw once the research has started, and the consequences of withdrawing. Also included are: risks and reasons that may impact on their ability/willingness to participate, the outlining of potential research benefits, possible limits to confidentiality, incentives for participating, and contact information to reach other persons to ask further questions about the research. (See Appendix)

Community Agencies. Because I was able to have access to students due to my employment with the school board, some interviews took place on school district property, I needed to have permission from the school district to conduct my research. Also, a list of outside counseling agencies was provided to participants with their consent forms in case anything from our interviews triggered an emotional response for that participant.

Interviewing. Personal interviews were one-on-one and were scheduled at a time and location convenient for the participant. I tried to make the process as easy for participants as possible by meeting them at the place of their choosing or a mutually agreed upon location. School classrooms and a university meeting room were used. Creswell (2012) states that the reason for

interviews varies, but benefits to interviewing are that the researcher can still collect data if she cannot directly observe the participants in the environment/situation they are speaking about, and there is the potential for participants to provide more detailed personal information than one might share if writing it down on a questionnaire. Finally, personal responses helped to give opinions of successes and barriers to each individual's specific experience.

During the scheduled interview time it was important for me to recognize the body language and comfort level of each participant. I planned to alleviate any potential anxieties by using Creswell's (2012) method of starting with some icebreaker conversations as well as incorporating the purpose of the study, reminders for both parties, and thanking the participant after the interview for participating in my research. Participants had up to 45 minutes to discuss the interview questions; then there was additional time of 15 minutes for each participant to further discuss, ask questions, or bring up points that they may want to add or feel that I have missed. However, most participants did a quick look over my notes and said they looked good and were done. As I am not an expert in this area, I had hoped that in the final part of the interview, some suggestions would have been forwarded to me to continue to research and include in my final write up to promote Aboriginal completion rates of high school; unfortunately this only happened once, in a limited fashion.

Interviews were conducted using a conversational method, which is important in Indigenous Methodology. It is an approach based on "Indigenous relational tradition" and uses "open-ended, semi-structured interview questions to prompt conversations where participant and researcher co-create knowledge" (Kovach, 2010, p.44). My intent was that these be more in line with personal stories than answers to specific questions, however, again, only one participant really started to tell some stories of experiences at school. My hope was that a sense of

empowerment due to self-reflection would arise for each participant from these interviews as the intent was for them to be more participant led than researcher led but I found myself prompting a lot more than I had hoped. Two participants were pleased though, as they expressed relief that they were able to discuss some things that had been on their minds, but were unsure of where they could talk to someone about them. I tried to maintain a focus on student placement in appropriate courses, the graduation process, and what worked and what didn't work for each of these students. Using open ended questions such as: "How did you feel about school?" or "What worked best for you?" provided the participant the opportunity to focus on what they felt is the most important, and not be directed by myself, my beliefs/bias, or past research, which is important, as Creswell (2012) has stated. I also used prompting questions, that were very necessary, such as "can you please tell me more..." or "can you please clarify..." or "what I'm hearing you say is..., is that correct?" to restate and be sure I was fully understanding the participant's meaning. (See Appendix for interview questions) Permission from each participant was obtained so that I could record each interview. I used my iPad and had a small microphone attached to my iPod as a backup recorder and placed it in the space between the participant and me.

After each interview, it was important for me to reflect on our discussion and make observations so that I had a working document of potential themes, problems, notes to change for the next interview, what worked and what didn't during the interview, and interpretations of our feelings – what I observed from the interviewee, and what I had felt myself. I wanted to be attentive during the interviews and make the participant feel as comfortable as possible, so I took minimal notes, but did try to document my observations within a reasonable timeframe so that

little, if anything, was lost. Critical subjectivity during research and reflection has assisted in this final writing process as well.

After transcription, I offered to return the printed out interviews to each participant and asked that they review them within the week and return to me with any changes or additions; if I did not hear from them after that time, my assumption was that there was nothing to be added or changed, and I went ahead with my analysis from the interview as it was. I heard back from four of the six participants, and only one added information to his answers White et. al. (2009), following Strauss and Corbin's (1990) coding process, state that coding begins with open categories and builds to more specific schemes, then selective categories, showing relations among categories, and validating the relationships with the data is the final step. By using this process, I was able to describe my arguments for conclusion and provide recommendations in detail.

Ethical Considerations I had to be aware of my own predispositions to this research and ensure that my beliefs and thoughts were transparent in this process. I had to keep an open mind to ensure that my research and results were reflective of transparent subjectivity and not omit any information or be insensitive of cultural expectations and understanding about my research. Smith (2005), posits that "most indigenous researchers would claim that their research validates an ethical and culturally defined approach that enables indigenous communities to theorize their own lives and that connects their past histories with their future lives"(p.90). I did my best to be sensitive to the norms of the Aboriginal participants I came into contact with as a result of my research and tried to ensure that I conducted my research in an ethical and respectful manner. I tried to have a minimal influence on the interviews, however, for some participants, it was necessary to prompt for more information regularly and to stay on topic. As the comfort level of

the participants increased, some opened up to share both positive and negative memories and experiences. I do, however, understand that, for some of the participants, I was still perceived as the person of authority in this process no matter how I tried to extinguish the potential power imbalance, and it was difficult and somewhat impossible to overcome. I have done my best to allow the participants' voices to be heard and limit my influence on the analysis.

I had to make an extra effort to not prompt the interviews in leading ways so that participants could answer with their own thoughts, rather than my underlying beliefs about this topic. I especially needed to be aware of my position as a teacher, that I placed myself in a position to either extend knowledge, or perpetuate ignorance (Smith, 2012). In conducting this research, my goal was to assist with extending the knowledge around this topic.

Confidentiality and Anonymity. Confidentiality is the job of the researcher to remove any identifiers that might indicate a participant's identity and anonymity is keeping the participants nameless (Berg, 2009). Confidentiality and anonymity were addressed and maintained with each participant involved with the study. Berg (2009) states that when doing qualitative research, it is easy to have participants remain anonymous in taking surveys since no identifying markers are needed, but it is nearly impossible with other qualitative research as the participants are usually known to the researcher. I provided full disclosure of my methodology and research to each participant. I was transparent with my intentions and was as respectful of cultural protocol as my knowledge allowed me to be. Also, to protect anonymity, I asked that participants choose aliases to ensure that information had no identifiers linking the information to them (Creswell, 2012).

Vulnerable Populations. One of the main tasks I have as researcher is to ensure no harm comes to my participants throughout the research (Berg, 2009). Because my study involved participants

that can be considered “at-risk,” I needed to be aware of their moods and body language and ensure that we debriefed at the end of our session and determine whether they were in need any assistance, counseling, or further explanations for the questions and procedure that had taken place during the interview (Berg, 2009). A list of agencies, should assistance be needed, was provided to each participant when signing the consent forms.

Data Analysis. Data analysis was done by analyzing themes, generating codes, and creating meta codes from interview transcription, then interpreting and appropriately representing the data for presentation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). From each interview I was able to highlight key words that repeatedly arose. I used the words “supports,” “completion,” and “wellness” as my umbrella terms and put the key words under those categories. From there, I looked for more similarities and specifics from each participant in analyzing their interview and determined the category under which these words would fit. I continued to further break them down until I found my themes for analysis. These tasks were done in order to assist in determining the main barriers to Aboriginal high school completion rates, specifically in Prince George, BC. My belief that certain themes would be brought up, such as: supports, connectedness, socioeconomic status, family, and health – both physical and mental, were reiterated, for the most part, however, as the participants provided the direction for the research, other categories did arise, for example: student ownership of their own learning and experience.

Evaluation of the study

Validity. Validity is the evidence that demonstrates the interpretation of the data and the data analysis used, matches its proposed purpose; it requires that the researcher ensure confidence in the findings of the data (Creswell, 2012). This can be done in a number of ways,

which include: critical thinking, reflection, analysis, and participant checks and rechecks.

Validity often goes hand in hand with reliability, which is the measure of consistency within the research (Creswell, 2012). Reflection on the information and stories provided to me was done by having a reflexive journal so that I could record my feelings, frustrations, questions, and strengths and weaknesses in my progress. This was different from the short notes taken during the interviews. It was important that I did my analysis of the data collected during the interviews within a timely manner so that I could modify the interview structure and questions, if necessary, and continue moving forward with each participant, much like a scaffold builds upon itself. Use of critical thinking was an important component, in that it helped further my inquiry as my project continued. Finally, each participant had the opportunity to check and recheck my transcripts and final draft for additions, interpretation, and accuracy. The purpose of this was to allow the participants to have confidence that I wrote their experiences as though they had written them themselves, therefore, they became part of my research team, rather than just a participant (again, only one participant reworked his interview though); this also is a major contributing factor to ensure validity of the study.

Reflexivity. Self-reflection is an important part of the research process. A reflexive journal was a great way to ensure that I acknowledged my beliefs, emotions, and inferences from the interviews and during my research. This being a qualitative study, subjectivity is a natural part of the process and I needed to continually locate where I was in all steps of the research. My personal experiences with this topic, and my perceptions about the topic are included in the data as well. I needed to be able to recognize my own predispositions and responses to the research. Using detailed notes to acknowledge my responses based on past experience with the participants (if there was a past interaction) and experience during and after the interview with

each of the participants definitely assisted in analysis of the data and having a deeper understanding of my own responsiveness as the researcher of this topic. Creswell (2012) states that being reflexive during research may mean that questions from multiple perspectives need to be answered. Keeping this in mind, questions I asked myself were: Am I comfortable discussing both positive and negative aspects of previous students' experiences if it may question my own teaching methods? How do I feel about past experiences myself? What part of the success or lack thereof of former students do I own? Am I being conscious of the needs of each participant? I also needed to be aware of the potential for new questions to arise at the end of the study.

Although I am the researcher, this project provided me with a different experience as well; my story has been partially reflected around the stories of the participants as I transcribed and interpreted them. I needed to be careful that this did not come through in their experiences, especially since I know many of the participants on a personal level. It was extremely important, and sometimes difficult for me, to not let my own thoughts or feelings direct the outcomes of the interviews and I needed to continue to self-monitor throughout the process.

Finally, to ensure that I did interpret the data from the interviews correctly, I spoke with each participant about clarification of cultural norms and issues that I was unfamiliar with. As a person of Aboriginal heritage, but without official Status, I have some knowledge of accepted practice within the community, however, being raised as a "white kid," I am still unsure of many rules and beliefs, and do not want to betray the participants or my research by reverting back to Eurocentric views and oppression of my Aboriginal participants. On that note, all of the participants were unaware of or chose not to mention anything I should be aware of myself before starting and continuing with this research.

Summary

Indigenous Methodology utilizing a narrative approach was the basis for this project. A literature review in conjunction with student interviews provided key issues and categories of importance to conduct research on. I was able to utilize the process described by McIvor (2010) of “writing, rewriting, (and) checking the words of participants...” (p. 141) to check for validity and reliability. Discussion surrounded suggestions for future research, considerations, and improvement of current systems. Ethics and evaluation of the study conclude the chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

Many factors can be attributed to the lack of completion of high school for Aboriginal students. Based on a review of the literature discussing the reasons for Aboriginal students not obtaining educational success and based on the participant interviews, I found that this could vary for each individual. However, on the whole, there were similar factors that played a role. By using personal experience and the literature review findings, questions for participants were developed to gather the most insight possible.

The six participants, using their pseudonyms, included David, Jordanna, James, John, Leanne and John Smith. The interview responses of these six participants were used to develop the findings for this project. Each participant was asked a series of questions surrounding their beliefs about school and Special Education programs. Based on my interview questions the findings are best presented in the following four categories: 1) beliefs around school/Special Education, 2) factors contributing to the completion of/or lack of success in high school, 3) impact on the future, and 4) evaluation of oneself in regards to success in high school.

Category One: Beliefs About School and Special Education Programs

Participants were asked what they thought about school in general and if/how school impacted their families in the past. Most participants answered that they thought school was important for life in the real world, but also some of them wished that school taught them more useful things about life. One participant stated that “I hear all of these kids talk about how we don’t learn anything from school that we actually need in life, like taxes and all that, but I feel like most of it benefits us,” while another said “it’s the most important thing to have in your life, like education, as far as work or anything goes.”

In their answers to the questions about beliefs and impact on the family, only three mentioned the impact of the residential schools and three mentioned stereotypes/prejudice. The rest focused on how it prepares you for life after high school and how they like or dislike school. Participants all shared their stories, and quotes will be shared from each of them, starting with James: “I think it was terrible for them to take them out of their homes and try to turn them into something they are not” and John said “all I ever heard was my sisters talking about was their teachers in a negative way – I guess like not helping them as much as the other kids or anything, like maybe looking past them,” whereas others spoke about the immediate effects on their families, and had no mention of residential school at all. For example, Jordanna said that both her mother and grandmother both were unable to finish school because of having babies in their teens and Leanne said “my brother just dropped out... seeing what my brother has gone through and what he’s going through has made me want to do good in school and get a good job...”

Category Two: Factors Contributing to the Completion of/or Lack of Success in High School

Overwhelmingly, the major response to factors that contribute to the completion of high school for Aboriginal students was the need for more supports. Supports come in a variety of forms, but the major one mentioned from all participants was one on one support from the teacher. Use of Education Assistants and doing a self-paced curriculum were also mentioned by nearly all participants and others mentioned use of community supports and role models, as well as utilization of more people in school such as peer tutors. James said: “I go at my own pace instead of with the class cause sometimes they go a little fast and I miss half the assignment.” Jordanna mentioned that having a peer tutor really helped her, “She was very helpful. I felt like I was able to push myself more to graduate.” And John mentioned that having community

representatives and role models involved could be beneficial “we need more people like that to come and talk to us about education.” More one on one time was mentioned by all participants as a huge factor in contributing to their success. Students often felt that even in a special education class, they were part of the group and that having a Peer Tutor, or additional Educational Assistant support played a significant role in their completion and success. Additionally, being able to work at one’s own pace and having a relationship with the teacher were other answers that were given by more than one participant. David stated that he thought that “ I think instead of trying to teach Aboriginal kids, I think that most teachers should learn about the person... I felt like if they just had more of a connection with the teacher, and if the teacher would learn how to teach them, it would improve...” He is right, I believe that in a lot of cases, over generalization has led to stereotypes involving our Aboriginal students. Friesen and Friesen (p. 26) agree with this idea in their book *Aboriginal Education in Canada A Plea for Integration* by saying that “teachers should be encouraged to learn as much as possible about the background and culture of their First Nations students and take the initiative in getting to know individual students.” Interestingly, both students that are out of school shared that they believed it should be more student ownership of success, rather than teacher driven. Both stated in very similar words, that “its not even something on the teacher, that’s on the person.” I made a note wondering if this was because they had had the time to reflect on their school experiences now that they were older, or if they had always believed that the ownership was theirs in the first place.

Lack of completion of high school, although only experienced by one of the participants, appeared to be attributed to numerous factors from their observations, including: stereotypes, motivational factors, and lack of home support. All other students who participated in this project were either still in school or had obtained a school completion certificate, an Adult Dogwood, or

a Dogwood Diploma. John said that “I don’t think anyone in my family has graduated to be honest with you. I always thought I would be the first one – I think I’m still only like two courses away... I think its to do with teachers. All I ever heard my sisters talking about was their teachers in a negative way, like maybe not helping them as much as the other kids or looking past them. Maybe it was because they are native, maybe it was because they just didn’t try as hard as anyone else...” I also know that motivation was a factor in at least one participant’s situation. He was a strong student, but fell in with some students who did not have the same background as he did and they were able to scrape by or be pushed through, while he was not; he got into drugs and began skipping and, unfortunately, wasn’t able to recover.

For home support, John said “I think parents are huge.” He wished he had a parent that would have forced him to go to school rather than just let him stay home if he wanted. John Smith said that his parents only gave him rides to school if they had the time and that they stopped asking about if he had any homework or if he had completed his homework because they thought he was old enough to take care of it himself. He did say that they still woke him up to go to school though. David said that while he was brought up to be respectful of teachers and others, he knew of other students who had parents that weren’t involved in their lives and that reflected a lot in their self-esteem and treatment of teachers and others in class; “I think having good parents impact in school life greatly, like a lot.” And Jordanna said that she too had supportive parents, and was also able to get some band sponsorship to obtain a bus pass and supplies, which helped her out a lot with getting to school and being able to complete her assignments.

Category Three: Impact on the Future

All participants agreed that the impact of completing their education was very significant for their future. Some of their aspirations were different, however, all stated that it was very important to complete school so that they could do well in post secondary life. One participant stated that he wants to get a good career and that school will help him with the tools he needs to get a job “like math for money, skills from other classes, English to understand... If I skip right now, I wouldn’t be able to get anything – I wouldn’t be able to get a house or a job.” Upon reflection, one participant said that even though he didn’t graduate, he would eventually like to, because he wanted to get a job in Human Resources. He says that graduation means more money and a sense of accomplishment. He has done quite well for himself without graduation, but knows that he will have difficulty moving up the career chain without some formal certificate, and does not want to stay in the same position forever. He has felt the way the lack of graduation can affect him, both financially and personally. Another participant said that he just hoped to gain enough information to prove that he could get a job: “Nothing too fancy, my best guess would be working in a store of some sorts.” I noticed that I found myself impressed with most of the answers of the participants; no one really expressed aspirations such as becoming a doctor or lawyer or veterinarian, which I have had previous students do before. I felt like each of these participants were very realistic in the path they believed they should follow and I believed that they were honest with themselves and me in their answers to these questions.

Category Four: Self-evaluation in regards to success in high school

Of the six participants, two admitted that they could have improved; one participant was also the one who did not graduate, the other did with minimal grades. One said that he thought

his success and participation could have improved by listening to others: "... me being younger thinking I had everything figured out, cause I skipped a lot of school and I figured if I just tried hard at the end that I would barely get by, and I did... but I think if I actually put in the effort that I did at the end during the whole year, I would have done a lot better." I asked if he had a bit of a change in perspective, and he said "I think that happens with everybody though, its just part of the learning either early on or at the very end..." The other five shared various answers as to how they are doing or had done in school and why their level of success was where it was.

Jordanna said that with the help of a peer tutor, she was able to push herself more to graduate; I felt that she was trying to express that she gained confidence in her abilities and in herself.

Leanne shared that she believed her schooling would improve next year as her boyfriend would no longer be at school and he would not be a distraction for her to be late or skip. I found myself wondering a lot about her and this answer, as I feel like she may decide to skip more to go see him, and may jeopardize her seat in class. She shared that she was excited that she was able to get an extra block of a special education class, so I hope that continues and she stays on track.

The other two participants shared that they usually do their work in class and that they rarely have homework. I found this statement inaccurate from one of the participants, as he had been in my class, and had to often be reminded to stay on task and hand his assignments in, however, he had never been an aggressive or obnoxious student, just one that sat at the back and hoped to be unnoticed. My own reflection with this student was that I wondered if he purposely wanted to be unnoticed because he didn't understand, that he had outside issues distracting him, or that he just didn't want to do the work. When I spoke with him, I assumed it was a combination of all of them, however, he assured me that it was just his choice. When I tried to go deeper into this part of the conversation with him, he alluded to one of his answers in the interview that he believed

that students could find more success if teachers took time to get to know them individually. I made notes in my reflexive journal about how this made me feel upset and like I had been inadequately doing my job, because he was right, I did not get to really know many of my students, except for on the surface. One of the reasons for that was that I felt very burned out from my earlier career where I think I cared too much, therefore the pendulum swung, and now it is as if I don't allow myself to get as attached to my students; I need to work on my own happy medium in this regard. As previously mentioned, this project was as much about the students telling their stories as intermingling with mine as well.

Summary

The main belief surrounding school was that it is necessary to assist with life skills for later in life and that sometimes supports were positive and in other cases they were lacking. Familial support was hit or miss with participants, whereas most felt that supports in school were available, however, not always utilized or provided in the best fashion required for each student. Suggestions for future success by providing more supports included: community resources and role models such as Elders, role models, volunteer work, and cultural activities. Participants also felt that more one on one and self-pacing were important factors that could enhance success for themselves. Finally, all participants insinuated that while a variety of supports are currently available in schools, not everyone has the ability to utilize them, and having more access to the supports that already exist may be a good start to enhancing supports for Aboriginal students on their paths to graduation.

Chapter 5: Discussion of the Findings

Findings of this research suggest that while some supports are available in schools, not all are available to all students, and often, even if students do have access, not all will utilize them due to the perceived stereotypes or ridicule associated with them, be it real or imagined. Some Aboriginal students are very open to using supports so that they can reach their highest level of success, and others are determined to not need to utilize supports for fear of being labeled even more than they already feel they have been. I was able to find four major categories from the interview questions, reflection, and process. These are: beliefs around school, and Special education, 2) factors contributing to the completion or lack of success in high school, 3) impact on the future, 4) self-evaluation in regard to success in high school. Personal experience as an educator has brought me to want to uncover reasons for the lack of Aboriginal student completion of high school, and to assist in providing supports for greater success rates, therefore, recommendations for the future will complete the chapter.

Limitations

The purpose of this study was to identify supports needed to assist with increasing the high school completion rate for Aboriginal students. Indigenous Methodology was used to obtain storied experiences, however, for most of the participants the majority of interactions were structured interviews, rather than unstructured, as I had hoped. I found with some participants, a lot of prompting was necessary. Also, while the students that had already graduated felt more at ease and I felt that way with them as well, I found myself a bit awkward at first with the students that are still in school, and perhaps they felt that way with me as well; it may have been due to the fact that they could potentially have me as a teacher in the future or

have had me in the past, or didn't want to offend me by discussing my previous teaching with them. I realize that this may have had an effect on the type of answers that were given, as well as the quality and depth of the answers. I wonder if my previous experience with the participants influenced their answers, whether it be positive, or negative, or not at all. Only one participant was someone I hadn't previously taught, and his answers were comparable to the others', so I am not convinced either way. Another limitation may have been in the type of questions that I had asked; I should have tried to keep it more of a story format, rather than questioning them. Also, I should have had less questions in number that were stated as simple, open ended questions – for example: "Tell me what it was/is like for you as a student?"

One of the recommendations to improve on my research was that I should have provided the questions beforehand so that participants could have some time to ponder them and prepare themselves for me. I think this was a great suggestion, however, it was on my final interview that it was suggested. I also gave each participant the opportunity to review my notes and make any corrections at the time as well as review the transcriptions of our interviews, however, only one participant actively took the opportunity to enhance his answers after seeing the transcription.

Discussion

Participants in this study answered questions surrounding their beliefs and experiences in regards to school and supports available for Aboriginal students trying to complete high school. All of the participants answered a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 24 questions and discussed their views and personal experiences. Four major categories presented themselves from the interview analysis.

Each participant shared his or her belief of what supports are needed to increase the Aboriginal student graduation rate and the factors they believe influence that. All of the participants agreed on a number of supports, while others were mentioned only by one or two participants. They said that one on one time, community resource/role models, and cultural activities were important. Self-pacing, peer tutoring, and small group work were suggested by one or two. Some thought it would be great to see more Aboriginal role models, community members, and Elders in the schools, while others believed that they themselves needed to have more influence on self- ownership. They felt that it was not necessarily up to the teachers or others to help them graduate, but that they needed to take a stand on their education themselves. An example of community involvement is from Prince Rupert, British Columbia and their First Nations Role Model Program (School District 52), which involves use of successful First Nations role models in the classroom:

The goal is to promote awareness of First Nations cultures and issues for all students and teachers, while promoting self-esteem and pride in cultural heritage. There is a benefit to the school and students as the mentor links the students to the resources of the outside world, and they substitute for the low educational norm context of the parental networks. Not only can the mentor's resources be potentially drawn upon, but they establish a relationship that is grounded in a culturally familiar context (White, Spence, & Maxim, 2013, p. 79)

In the BCTF publication *Beyond Words*, (p. 53) the author posits the question: "Does it matter that Aboriginal students – indeed all students- see so few Aboriginal teachers in their schools? Many think that it does. The schools need more teachers of Aboriginal origin to provide models of success for all students, and to offer particular support to the students of Aboriginal origin." On that note, Battiste (2002) is direct in her statement that "Indigenous knowledge is now seen as an educational remedy that will

empower Aboriginal students if applications of their Indigenous knowledge, heritage, and languages are integrated into the Canadian educational system” (p.5). Participant statements in the interviews touched on this in that many of them mentioned more cultural activities, such as field trips, and inclusion in their lessons and school life.

Research done by Friesen and Friesen (2002) is consistent with Hodgeson-Smith (2000) by saying that native students are field-dependent learners. This aligns with participant answers in that the description used is that “they tend to show a preference for precise guided assignments, and indicate a greater need for a variety of different classroom interaction patterns than their non-Native peers. They also prefer more frequent student-teacher interactions, are more peer-oriented, and more positively inclined towards collaborative and small group learning tasks” (p. 32). This was a suggestion that participants expressed repeatedly; that more one on one time could be a key support along with peer assistance and small group settings. These statements are supported by Kanu’s (2007) research which stated that “inviting Native guest speakers, and field trips to Aboriginal communities; (d) small-group work in which students felt supported, including group projects that provided opportunities for ownership and decision making; (e) ensuring opportunities for one-on-one interactions with the teacher (p. 32).”

I found it interesting that no one mentioned a food program or partnerships with other stakeholders, which was one of my assumptions, as having anything to do with supports for Aboriginal students. In my experience, and as supported by Levin (2009), having a fuller stomach allows for better concentration than one that is empty and thinking about food. He asks and answers the question: “How can we improve success rates for Aboriginal learners? It’s primarily a matter of high quality teaching, good awareness, respect for Aboriginal history and culture, and strong outreach to parents. Because so many Aboriginal families are poor, they

benefit from the same kinds of support services as other poor families, such as nutrition programs” (p.690). In regards to the community partnerships, White, Spence, and Maxim suggest that “through partnerships with institutions outside of the community, such as BC Hydro, BC Gas, Ministries of Fisheries and Forestry, Science World BC, and the University of British Columbia, the reason for education becomes clear. In a way, this initiative connects the students directly to the job market, and makes education seem to have a purpose” (p.259).

Familial history in regards to Residential Schools did not play as much of a role as I had anticipated in participants’ answers. In the Parent and Education Engagement Partnership Project discussion paper, Malatest & Associates (2002) have suggested that experience from Residential Schools often has an impact on generations of students, however, in my interviews, I did not see a huge relationship. This could have been due to the fact that it was not in the immediate view of the participants, or that even though it was something that their families had experience with, it was not something that they cared to discuss or did not seem relevant to them at the time. Direct family history from siblings and parents did appear to play a bigger factor in that students were either encouraged to do better in their schooling to achieve graduation which was something their family members did not do, or family had a negative impact by sharing negative views of teachers and prejudices they had encountered by staff and students along their paths. These too, are supported by the literature.

Beavon, Wingert, and White (2013) discuss negative effects on Aboriginal students that lead to lack of graduation in their paper entitled Churn Migration and Educational Attainment among Aboriginal Adolescents and Young Adults. They provide possible explanations for the lower rate of high school completion for Aboriginal students as “negative attitude toward education as a result of the residential school legacy, fewer perceived returns on education, a

lack of economy within or near community, a disconnect between traditional culture and pedagogical approach, geographical isolation from higher education institutions, and discrimination or alienation within the school system” (p. 198). Some of these ideas, as previously mentioned, also came up during the student interviews. Kanu (2007), summarizes this very well by stating that in a study done in 2007, they “identified and included some values and issues reported as common and important among many Aboriginal communities-for example, understanding the importance of respect in Aboriginal cultures, the vital role of elders, the importance of family and community to Aboriginal identity, the importance of spirituality in learning/education and in the lives of many Aboriginal peoples, the various effects of European contact and settlement on Aboriginal peoples, and Aboriginal contributions to Canadian society” (p.29).

Recommendations

Educators and administrators should be on a continuous path of understanding the needs of Aboriginal students. Supports for high school completion should be available to all Aboriginal students as part of a school wide initiative to increase the graduation rate of these students. Unfortunately, stereotypes still abound, and often our Aboriginal students are placed in Special Education courses based on attendance issues or academic disability in one course that labels them for the future. I believe that this is an area that the concept of self-regulation should arise. Self-regulation may assist with expanding students’ ability to portray appropriate work habits as well as provide an opportunity for all students in the classroom to engage in and maintain a positive working environment. The common stereotype may then be prevented because all students will have the ability to enact their mindfulness training. This would be most beneficial if it was started in the elementary years and practiced throughout all aspects of life, not

just at school, although, even if initiated only at the high school level, it can prove to be an effective strategy to level the playing field. The benefits of mindfulness for both teachers and learners are significant and use of the MindUp curriculum in conjunction with the Medicine Wheel could really enhance the students' achievement. For example, there is: improvement of student self-control and self-regulation skills, a strengthening of students' resiliency and decision making skills, an increase in academic success, a reduction in peer-to-peer conflict, and development of social skills, including: empathy, compassion, patience, and generosity (MindUp Curriculum, 2011, p. 11). Wenger-Nabigon's (2010) description of the Cree Medicine Wheel could also be used to assist with enhancing the teaching and learning of Aboriginal students: "Medicine Wheel teachings in general contain much to assist humans in learning the techniques, methods, and practices involved in making decisions, taking risks, maintaining relationships, handling emotions, learning difficult tasks, practicing caring behaviours and taking responsibility for oneself" (p.156). I recommend professional development in Aboriginal coursework and Ways of Knowing as well as culture for educators and that all environments within the school have visual references to the Medicine Wheel and MindUp curriculum so that they are reminded on a daily basis of the approaches and opportunities to regulate themselves and their environments.

Another suggestion is to have students enrol in mainstream classes for the academic courses they will be successful at, and enrol in Special Education classes for the academic classes they struggle in. If Student A is good at English and can be successful in a mainstream English class, but struggles in Math, let him be in the English class and only in the Special Ed class for Math, not both subjects, as it is unnecessary for him to be there for English. Students should not be penalized for lack of knowledge, but encouraged for what they do know: Student

A should not be labeled a Pre-Employment student based solely on his Math skills. Allowing more fluidity throughout programs may assist with students obtaining a Dogwood Diploma, or an Adult Dogwood Diploma rather than a Leaving School Certificate.

In addition, a student should not be enrolled in a Special Education class based on his attendance. Academic testing should be the determinant of program/course placement. More school personnel should be trained in administration of Special Education testing, and/or utilization of staff that have the training and certification should increase.

Furthermore, I strongly believe that additional funding is needed in all aspects of Aboriginal and Special Education. More supports are needed for our Aboriginal students in the way of culturally appropriate activities and curriculum, additional personnel to work one on one or in small groups with smaller class sizes, assistance with food programs, and inclusionary not exclusionary practices. Increased Educational Assistant availability and one on one time have overwhelmingly been expressed as a support that is desired by these students to increase their success rate.

Finally, I believe that there should be increased encouragement for families of Aboriginal students to become involved with the school. In the past, many Aboriginal families have kept their distance from schools based on previous experiences such as stereotypes and Residential Schools. The new curriculum is a great start to increasing this relationship, as more students and staff will have a better understanding of the trials that so many endured. Having more cultural activities or fluid communication with families may help to continue to open this door and enhance this relationship. Perhaps introducing a relationship with the high school while still in elementary school will build more of a relationship of trust.

Recommendations for Future Research

Increasing supports for Aboriginal students in regular and Special Education courses so that they graduate with their non Aboriginal counterparts in a timely manner is important. I believe that because there is such a high population of Aboriginal students in the North, this should be at the forefront of Educational Research. I recommend that more studies with a greater number of participants be done to dive deeper into what is really hindering graduation rates. Including a bigger population of students, and perhaps even families and educators, would be beneficial to see the differences in opinions on why this demographic is having difficulty, as well as what can be done to improve these rates. By including more and different categories of participants, data could be more well-rounded and influential. Perhaps a study that involved only male or only female participants could be done, as I noticed that on a few of my questions, the participants of the same gender had very similar answers – I wonder if this is just coincidence, or if it has some significance. I also recommend that further research be done on Aboriginal Choice high schools, so that we can use their positive results to have more influence across our public high schools. A longitudinal study involving students from grades 8-12 with siblings that have either completed or not completed high school may also be beneficial to see if there is more correlation with family influence as well.

Themes were consistent throughout the literature reviewed. The need for increased funding, specific knowledge of Aboriginal culture rather than a general stereotype of Aboriginal heritage, and implementation of curriculum rather than inconsistent and sporadic lessons are just a few issues that should be addressed. Also necessary is a need to look at and assess current graduation rates for Aboriginal students, placement in special education programs, and to what

extent supports from school or home, socioeconomic status, literacy rates, racism, or any other factors affect high school completion within the typical 6-year time span.

Conclusion

Reform in the Canadian education system for Aboriginal students is overdue. Needs are not being met because of limitations in funding, supports, knowledge/understanding of culture and heritage, and lack of action. We need to allow space for Aboriginal student learning needs. Completion rates for Aboriginal students for high school continue to be significantly lower than non-Aboriginal students. Placement in Special Education programs for Aboriginal students based on the population continues to be significantly higher than the average for non-Aboriginal students. Research is being completed to gather information on these issues and why they continue to happen, however, actions are being done on a limited scale to really address this problem (Battiste, 2002).

This research project focused on the supports needed for Aboriginal students in Special Education programs to graduate high school. I chose this topic based on a personal experience that I had had when teaching in a Special Education program where a student was inappropriately placed due to poor attendance, not due to academic ability. I became his advocate and after years of pushing for change, I was finally heard, only to have it be too late for him to graduate with his peers. It has been a passion of mine ever since to try to advocate for those students who cannot advocate for themselves, to get them into the proper courses. I do not believe that students should be labeled as an “Alt kid” or a “PEP (Pre-Employment) kid” based on attendance or inability in one course. I do believe that academic testing is absolutely necessary and a key component in providing appropriate supports for students. More personnel

should be trained to conduct these tests, and implementation of strategies that arise from the results of these tests should be available to all students so that our Aboriginal student graduation rates can increase. Other strategies that need to be incorporated are: more one on one time, going at one's own pace, mandatory implementation of Aboriginal content in every course, use of Aboriginal Ways of Knowing (for example, holistic teaching methods and mindfulness or self-regulation strategies), alternate seating, a scribe, extra help, etc. Additionally, educators who are Aboriginal need to be in the schools – teachers, education assistants, principals, and counselors should be seen and be available to these students. Proper training for personnel and appropriate delivery and integration of lessons are significant factors as well.

Without increased funding, our Aboriginal students will continue to fall by the wayside and have increased needs which may lead them to be unintentionally categorized and placed in Special Education courses, therefore limiting their ability to graduate with a Dogwood Diploma and therefore impacting their future as well. Action, not empathy and empty words, needs to take place so that Aboriginal students can have the same opportunities to find success and feel comfortable and thrive in society when high school completion is achieved. With high school completion rates increased, Aboriginal people are likely to have higher rates of pay for jobs, more acceptance in society leading to less racism, better understanding of culture and heritage, and less self-esteem issues. The drive for success must be encouraged and modeled so that our Aboriginal students are able to reach their full potential.

It is my hope that this research project will encourage and facilitate more research in the area of Aboriginal Education and implications of placement of Aboriginal students in Special Needs classes on graduation rates. Additionally, I hope that involvement and collaboration between many groups: students, educators, parents, policy makers, and community agencies, will

continue the forward motion of addressing these issues and creating best practices for these students. The need for specific and meaningful supports, for Aboriginal students to complete high school and become contributing members of society is essential in trying to close the gap between them and other Canadian youth. This will require continued research and ongoing partnerships from all stakeholders, especially those working to implement the Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement in the Prince George School District and other school districts around our province. These students deserve to be supported and given the best opportunities available; change can come from within the system, starting with being able to share their own experiences to help with making the experiences of others more positive via change from the bottom up, rather than top down.

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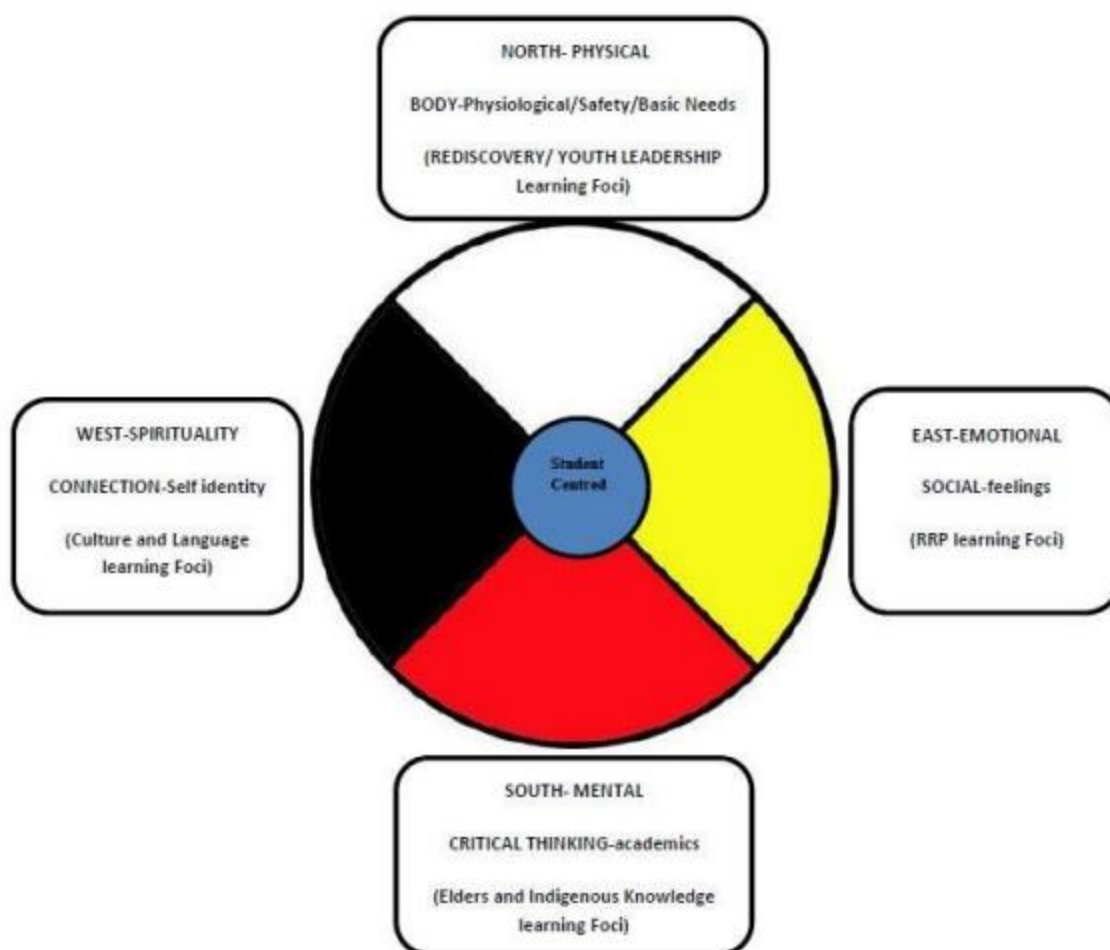
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ABORIGINAL EDUCATION WORKER HOLISTIC FRAMEWORK



(Aboriginal Education Worker Handbook, School District #57, Prince George, 2014)

Informed Consent Form - Students

This informed consent form is for students participating in the following research:

Study Title: Supporting Aboriginal Special Education Student High School Completion

Researcher: Rebecca Abriel, Master of Special Education (Candidate)

Organization: University of Northern British Columbia

Supervisor: Dr. Tina Fraser (Professor, School of Education)

This Informed Consent Form has two parts:

1. Information Sheet (to share information about the study with you)

2. Consent Form (for signatures should you agree to participate)

You will be given a copy of the full Informed Consent Form

Part 1: Information Sheet

Introduction

I am a teacher for School District #57 in Prince George, BC, and graduate student from the University of Northern British Columbia, under the supervision of Dr. Tina Fraser, in the School of Education. I am conducting research on the effects of supports and placement in Special Education programs for Aboriginal student completion rates of high school. The goals of this project are: to assist with improving Aboriginal student completion rates for high school, as well as improve the current learning environment for Aboriginal students so that they may find their highest rate of success, and to suggest areas for future research.

I am requesting your participation in my research via a one-on-one interview, which will take no more than 1 hour of your time. Before agreeing to participate, I recommend that you read the following explanation of the study so that you are fully informed as to the process. As you read, you will see the right that you have to withdraw from this study at any time. The anticipated start date for questionnaire and interviews is June, 2016, and is subject to the review of the Research Ethics Board of the University of Northern British Columbia.

Purpose and Goal of the Research

Completion rates for Aboriginal high school students are low as compared to students of other demographics. I believe that you can help me by telling me about your experience as an Aboriginal student placed in Special Education programs and the supports provided/used/needed in regard to completion rates. My purpose and goal in this study is to understand the reasons for lack of completion, and suggest ways of providing a positive learning environment for students to ensure completion rates increase.

Participant Selection

You are being invited to take part in this research because I feel that your experience as an Aboriginal student in Special Education programs can contribute to the understanding of completion rates for Aboriginal high school students.

Protocol

Explanation of Procedures

I will conduct informal interviews from purposeful samples of students about their beliefs and experiences regarding placement in Special Education programs and completion rates for Aboriginal students.

Risks and Discomforts

I do not anticipate any high risk from participating in this research project, but this is not to say there may be some form of trigger during questioning (for example, memories arising from questions asked or stories told) and due to the fact that there is a small sample size associated with the study, risks may arise in the form of loss of privacy. In this case, I am well informed of the counselling services available within the community and will be happy to provide you with community referrals if support is required.

UNBC Community Care Centre Services 250-960-6457
3333 University Way, Prince George, BC
www.unbc.ca/community-counselling-centre

Prince George Native Friendship Center 250-563-0924
1600 3rd Ave, Prince George, BC
www.pgnfc.com

Crisis Prevention, Intervention & Information Center for Northern BC
24 hr line 250-563-1214 250-564-5736
5th Floor, 1600 3rd Ave, Prince George, BC
www.northernbccrisissuicide.ca

Elizabeth Fry Society 250-563-8765
1575 5th Ave, Prince George, BC
www.pgefry.bc.ca

Community Response Unit (CRU) 250-565-2668
#201- 1705 3rd Ave, Prince George, BC
<https://northernhealth.ca/YourHealth/MentalHealthAddictions/ProgramDescriptions/CommunityResponseUnit.aspx>

Intersect 250-562-6639
 1294 3rd Ave, Prince George, BC
www.intersect.bc.ca

Brazzoni & Associates 250-614-2261
 301-1705 3rd Ave, Prince George, BC
www.brazzoni.com

Walmsley & Associates 250-564-1000
 1512 Queensway Street, Prince George, BC
www.walmsley.ca

Wellspring Counselling Svc 250- 561-0410
 1717 3rd Ave, Prince George, BC
www.wellspringcounsel.ca/

Benefits

The anticipated benefit from this study is that those involved with Aboriginal Education will be more informed about potential barriers to student completion of high school and work on revising the current trends and enhance ways for student success. Also, this study will provide a safe, non-judgmental place for participants to discuss concerns, positive and negative responses/experiences, and suggestions for the future of Aboriginal student completion rates.

Confidentiality

The information gathered within this study will remain confidential to the best of my ability (ie: unforeseen circumstances like a break in and theft of my computer). Only the researcher, Rebecca Abriel, and graduate supervisor, Dr. Tina Fraser, will have access to the data. There will not be any identifying names on interview papers or transcripts and will never be revealed as part of the publication of this study; there is no other potentially identifying data being collected. As this is a research project, the results of this research may be published in a professional journal or presented at professional meetings and a copy will be provided to School District #57 and /or other interested groups (specifically, organizations working with Aboriginal students). The knowledge obtained from this study will be considered invaluable for those involved with the education system so that they may be more effective in supporting Aboriginal students in completing high school.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Participation in this study is voluntary; no penalty will be issued with refusal to participate. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this research at any time. You are also free to refuse to answer any questions that may be asked. At the end of the interview, I will give you an opportunity to review my notes and you can ask to clarify or modify them if you believe that I misunderstood you in any way. Should you withdraw from this study, all data will be destroyed through shredding or file deletion.

Results

The completed research study will be presented to the participants in hard copy paper form, if they so desire. The results will be made available to the University of Northern British Columbia and be used to support the future development of the study. Subsequently the study may be shared in future publications or presentations. At all times your personal identifiers will be protected and your confidentiality respected.

Storage of Data

Everything you discuss during and after the interviews as well as the forms you fill out will be kept confidential, although confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed. This means that your information will not intentionally be shared with others. The only people who will have access to the information will be myself (Rebecca Abriel) the researcher, and my supervisor, Dr. Tina Fraser. Your information and tapes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in Dr. Fraser's office for three years. Hardcopies will be shredded and electronic data will be erased from the hard drive upon completion of this study.

Further Questions and Follow-Up

If you have any questions about the study, please contact myself, Rebecca Abriel, at 250-640-2582 or andrewsr@unbc.ca; or Dr. Fraser, Supervisor in the School of Education at the University of Northern British Columbia at 250- 960-5714 or frasert@unbc.ca.

This research has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of UNBC (REB), who are a committee that reviews and approves research and proposals. Any concerns about this research can be directed to the Office of Research at UNBC at 250-960-6735 or reb@unbc.ca.

Research Participant Checklist and Consent Form

	Yes	No
Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?		
Have you read and received a copy of the participant information letter?		
Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate or withdraw from the research study at any time?		
Do you understand the benefits and risks of participating in this research study?		
Do you understand that the interview will be audio recorded?		
Do you understand that some of the actual words may be published in written form?		
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you?		
Do you know what community resources are available for additional support?		
Do you understand who will have access to the information you provide?		
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study?		

This study was explained to me by: _____

Printed name of Research Participant: _____

I agree to participate in this research study:

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Part II: Consent Form

I have been asked to give consent for myself to participate in this research study about the effects of supports and placement in Special Education programs for Aboriginal students and high school completion. This study will involve surveys and audio recording of interviews. I have been provided with the appropriate contact information for those needing to be reached if I have any questions or concerns.

**I _____, have read the above information, or it has been read
(Name; please print clearly)
to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent and freely agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to refuse to answer any questions and withdraw from this study at any time. I understand that my responses will be kept anonymous to the best of the researcher's ability, however, I also acknowledge that this cannot be guaranteed.**

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Witness Sheet

I have accurately read out or witnessed the reading of the information sheet to the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the participant has not been coerced into giving consent, and the individual has given consent freely.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been provided to the participant. _____
(Initialed by the researcher)

Print Name of Researcher: _____

Researcher Signature

Date

Informed Consent Form – Parent/Guardian

This informed consent form is for parents/guardians consenting to their child participating in the following research:

Study Title: Supporting Aboriginal Special Education Student High School Completion

Researcher: Rebecca Abriel, Master of Special Education (Candidate)

Organization: University of Northern British Columbia

Supervisor: Dr. Tina Fraser (Professor, School of Education)

This Informed Consent Form has two parts:

- 3. Information Sheet (to share information about the study with you)**
- 4. Consent Form (for signatures should you agree to allow your child to participate)**

You will be given a copy of the full Informed Consent Form

Part 1: Information Sheet

Introduction

I am a teacher for School District #57 in Prince George, BC, and graduate student from the University of Northern British Columbia, under the supervision of Dr. Tina Fraser, in the School of Education. I am conducting research on the effects of supports and placement in Special Education programs for Aboriginal student completion rates of high school. The goals of this project are: to assist with improving Aboriginal student completion rates for high school, as well as improve the current learning environment for Aboriginal students so that they may find their highest rate of success, and to suggest areas for future research.

I am requesting your child's participation in my research via a one-on-one interview, which will take no more than 1 hour of his or her time. Before agreeing to allow your child to participate, I recommend that you read the following explanation of the study so that you are fully informed as to the process. As you read, you will see the right that your child has to withdraw from this study at any time, by yours or their own accord. The anticipated start date for questionnaire and interviews is June, 2016, and is subject to the review of the Research Ethics Board of the University of Northern British Columbia.

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Brazzoni & Associates 250-614-2261
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www.brazzoni.com

Walmsley & Associates 250-564-1000
1512 Queensway Street, Prince George, BC
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Parent of Participant Research Checklist and Consent Form

	Yes	No
Do you understand that your child has been asked to be in a research study?		
Have you read and received a copy of the participant information letter?		
Do you understand that your child is free to refuse to participate or withdraw from the research study at any time?		
Do you understand the benefits and risks of participating in this research study?		
Do you understand that the interview will be audio recorded?		
Do you understand that some of the actual words may be published in written form?		
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you?		
Do you know what community resources are available for additional support?		
Do you understand who will have access to the information you provide?		
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study?		

This study was explained to me by: _____

Printed name of Research Participant: _____

Printed name of Parent who provided consent: _____

I agree to allow my child to participate in this research study:

Signature of Parent of Research Participant

Date

Part II: Consent Form

I have been asked to give consent for my child to participate in this research study about the effects of supports and placement in Special Education programs for Aboriginal students and high school completion. This study will involve audio recording of interviews. I have been provided with the appropriate contact information for those needing to be reached if I have any questions or concerns.

I _____, have read the above information, or it has been read
(Name; please print clearly)
to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent and freely agree to allow my child to participate in this study. I understand that he or she is free to refuse to answer any questions and withdraw from this study at any time. I understand that his or her responses will be kept anonymous anonymous to the best of the researcher's ability, however, I also acknowledge that this cannot be guaranteed.

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

Researcher Witness Sheet

I have accurately read out or witnessed the reading of the information sheet to the parent/guardian of the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the participant has not been coerced into giving consent, and the individual has given consent freely.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been provided to the parent/guardian of the participant.

(Initialled by the researcher) _____

Print Name of Researcher: _____

Researcher Signature

Date

Interview Questions for Students

1. What is your belief in regard to or surrounding school, assignments, and school work?
2. How has school impacted you/your family in the past?
 5. Is graduation/school completion important to you/your family?
 6. How are parent and/or community involvement are necessary for your success in school?
 7. What do you hope to gain from graduation/school completion?
 8. What do you think could improve your participation/success at school, and how?
 9. What can the teacher do to increase the likelihood of your assignment completion?
 10. Please describe how supports for Aboriginal students in Special Education courses can be further developed and utilized.
 11. Please describe what has worked for you in regards to supports/use of supports in school and what has been difficult for you.
12. Please describe how you would like to use supports to enhance your learning and success for high school graduation.
13. What changes do you think would be useful in providing a better education for you?
14. Do you have any other information/opinions/observations to share or that you would like to go back to and discuss further?

Extra Interview Questions for Students – Probing Questions

1. What do you believe are the barriers to Aboriginal student high school completion?
2. Do you believe you are appropriately placed in courses being taken? Why or why not?
3. What criteria are you aware of or consulted on for course placement?
4. Please describe the type of environment and assignment that is the most valuable for your learning.
5. Are you easily distracted while doing assignments? If so, what are the distractions/what causes the distractions? Is there anything you are aware of currently to utilize to keep you focused?
6. What are some reasons you may not complete your assignments or school work?
7. What are some reasons you might try hard to complete your assignments/school work?
8. What might make an assignment easy or difficult to understand?
9. What supports are needed for Aboriginal students to complete high school in a timely manner (6 years)?
10. Please describe any changes you have noticed with the use of supports.
11. Please describe if and/or how you feel that participation in this research has allowed you to reflect on your learning and success for completion of high school.
12. What do you feel could be improved for this research to be more successful?