

# Casting a New Light on a Long Shadow: Saskatchewan Aboriginal High School Students Talk About What Helps and Hinders their Learning

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*What do teachers do (or not do) that makes you want to go to school? A team of Saskatchewan researchers asked Saskatchewan Aboriginal high school students this question about the aspects of instructional practice that helps and hinders their learning. While responses pointed to several aspects, teacher relational instincts and capacities were the most influential in school engagement for this group of Aboriginal students. Students in this study described three relational capacities of effective teachers: a) empathetic responsiveness to the student as whole being, b) the degree to which teacher disposition influenced the relational dynamic with students, and c) teachers' responsiveness to the full context of the student's life (including a sensibility of the student's Indigenous culture). Through a case study process, focus group interviews were conducted in six Saskatchewan schools. The study included 75 Aboriginal high school students from six schools (urban, rural, provincial, and First Nations band schools) in Saskatchewan, Canada. The qualitative case study research design was informed by Indigenous principles, and the theoretical lens employed in the analysis relied predominately upon an Indigenous theoretical perspective, as articulated by Smith and Perkins (as cited in Kovach, 2014). The findings point to the teaching attributes of relationality, responsibility, and understanding of contextuality identified within an Indigenous theoretical framework as influential in fostering engaged learning environments for this group of Aboriginal high school students.*

*Que font, ou ne font pas, les enseignants pour vous donner envie d'aller à l'école? Une équipe de chercheurs de la Saskatchewan ont posé cette question à des élèves autochtones au secondaire pour connaître les aspects de la pratique pédagogique qui aident ou qui nuisent à leur apprentissage. Les réponses ont dévoilé plusieurs aspects, mais ce groupe d'élèves autochtones a indiqué que les instincts relationnels et les capacités des enseignants étaient les facteurs les plus influents dans leur engagement scolaire. Les élèves qui ont participé à cette étude ont décrit trois capacités relationnelles d'enseignants efficaces : a) leur réceptivité emphatique face aux élèves comme êtres entiers, b) la mesure dans laquelle le caractère de l'enseignant influençait la dynamique relationnelle avec les élèves et c) la réactivité des enseignants devant tout le contexte de la vie des élèves (y compris une sensibilité à la culture autochtone des élèves). Suivant un processus d'étude de cas, des entrevues ont eu lieu auprès de groupes de discussion dans six écoles en Saskatchewan. L'étude a impliqué 75 élèves au secondaire dans des écoles en milieu urbain et rural ainsi que des écoles de bande en Saskatchewan, au Canada. Le plan de recherche de cette étude qualitative de cas tenait compte de principes autochtones et la perspective*

*théorique de l'analyse reposait largement sur une optique autochtone, telle que formulée par Smith et Perkins (citée dans Kovach, 2014). Les résultats indiquent que les caractéristiques de l'enseignement portant sur la relationnalité, la responsabilité et la compréhension de la contextualité telles qu'identifiées dans un cadre théorique autochtone jouent un rôle influent dans la promotion de milieux d'apprentissage actifs pour ce groupe d'élèves autochtones au secondaire.*

Tell us what teachers do (or don't do) that motivates you to learn? We asked Saskatchewan Aboriginal high school students this question. This question was asked in an effort to cast new light on the educational achievement disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students from a student-insider perspective. The research, upon which this article is based, arose from a Saskatchewan-based project that sought a deeper understanding of this disparity from the perspectives of Saskatchewan Indigenous high school students, their parents, and their teachers. The project was a partnership between local school divisions, the University of Regina, and the University of Saskatchewan; it was called "Seeking Their Voices." The project led to "Following Their Voices," a professional development program introduced into the Saskatchewan school system. The research team consisted of field-based practitioners and academics, the majority of whom were Indigenous. Three members of the team are the authors of the article. Bonnie Stelmach has studied Indigenous education issues in northern Alberta, Canada. Margaret Kovach is of Cree Saulteaux heritage from southern Saskatchewan. Her ancestors were signatories to Treaty Four. Larry Steeves has worked to support Indigenous education as a researcher and senior administrator. As authors of this article, we are acutely aware of the deficit theorizing found within research, policy, and practice and its impact on Indigenous peoples and communities. As Tuck (2009) states of research in Indigenous contexts, "For many of us, the research on our communities has historically been damage centered, intent on portraying our neighborhoods and tribes as defeated and broken" (p. 412). That being said, we argue that so long as disparities exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, as demonstrated through the educational achievement gap, we must continue to cast light on such inequities. In Canada, the statistics on Aboriginal education outcomes show that Aboriginal educational achievement is not on par with the non-Aboriginal student population. The last national reported rate of high school completion for students between 18 and 19 years of age was 76.9% in 2009/2010 (McMullen & Gilmore, 2010). For Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> students, however, this rate is almost 30% lower (Raham, 2010). More concerning, perhaps, is that Mendelson's (2008) comparison of Census data and the data provided by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada demonstrates inertia in the negative statistics regarding Aboriginal educational achievement.

The national statistics on the Aboriginal achievement gap are mirrored in Saskatchewan. High school completion rates for Aboriginal youth in Saskatchewan was 32.5% in 2010 compared to 82% among their non-Aboriginal peers (Government of Saskatchewan, 2010). This is significant for Saskatchewan because in 2011 34% of the province's total Aboriginal population was under the age of 15, while the corresponding non-Aboriginal population was less than 17% (Government of Saskatchewan, 2011, 2013b). In fact, Saskatchewan is the province with the second highest population of Aboriginal people (19.8%) aged 15–24 (Statistics Canada, 2006),<sup>2</sup> which makes this province instrumental for exploring students' perspectives as a way to improve their school experiences. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education has been a leader in responding to the persistent achievement gap. In 2007, treaty education was mandated in the

provincial curriculum (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2013). Yet, only six years later, *Voice, Vision and Leadership: A Place for All—The Final Report of the Joint Task Force on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes for First Nations and Métis People* (Merasty, Bouvier, & Hoiium, 2013) re-emphasized the discrepancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on educational and economic measures.

Alongside the quantitative statistics, culture has been emphasized as a qualitative condition for Aboriginal student success in school (Deyhle, 1995; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; McInerney, Hinikey, Van Etten, & Dowson, 1998; Mendelson, 2008; Raham, 2010). But many studies are conducted within a Western paradigm, motivated and controlled by non-Aboriginal researchers (e.g. Claypool & Preston, 2013). Of concern are the deficit theorizing overtones within research on Aboriginal education (Garakani, 2014). This may be because insights into Aboriginal education tend to be based on non-Aboriginal educators (e.g. Laramée, 2008). More recently, however, non-Indigenous researchers Claypool and Preston (2011) have conducted research in Saskatchewan in the areas of assessment, giving us insight into grandparents' perspectives alongside those of educators. Moreover, Clayton and Preston's (2013) study of grade 12 Aboriginal student motivation in urban Saskatchewan is perhaps a beginning point in honoring student voices and Aboriginal worldviews as a conceptual approach to interpreting data.

Recently, the *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015b) was released with 94 *Calls to Action* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015a), including a section directly addressing educational inequity. While the *Calls to Action* offer invaluable direction for the way forward, equally significant is that the *Calls to Action* have ascended from the voices of the students who attended residential school. A message from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission resounds: if Canadians wish to understand Aboriginal experiences, then Aboriginal voices must be heard. It follows then that if there is a desire to understand the myriad reasons for the Aboriginal educational achievement gap, then hearing what Aboriginal students have to say has particular relevance. The aim of our research and this article is to present the voices of Saskatchewan Aboriginal high school students regarding their learning experiences and engagement.

We asked Saskatchewan Aboriginal high school students what aspects of instructional practice help and hinder their learning. While responses pointed to several variables, the relational capability of the teacher was unequivocally central for these students. They described three relational capacities of effective teachers and how it affected their learning experiences: a) empathetic responsiveness to the student, which foster student-teacher connection; b) teacher dispositions which influenced or impeded the relational dynamic with students; and c) teacher consideration of student lives, including Indigenous cultural sensibilities and sensitivities that made students feel wholly accepted and understood. In this article, we present an Indigenous-informed research design with the findings interpreted through an Indigenous framework theory. This design guided the data collection and structured the findings of the study. The findings section of this article intersperses Aboriginal student voice with a review of existing literature as a means to offer insight into Aboriginal high school student experiences. Rather than presenting a literature review as a discrete section of this article, the literature is integrated with the findings so as to juxtapose existing research with the voices from this group of Aboriginal students.

## **A Note on Delimitations and Limitations**

All research is limited, and it is critical to acknowledge what our interpretations can and cannot answer with respect to Aboriginal students' schooling. At the time of our research, there were over 170,000 students attending 28 provincial schools (Government of Saskatchewan, 2013a), and 19 band-operated schools (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], 2013) in Saskatchewan. We included six provincially-funded schools and one band school in our study. This enhanced the emic perspective into Aboriginal students' schooling. We also note these participants were socioculturally located and temporally bound by an arbitrary data collection timeframe, and they represented their own perspective rather than the perspective of all students in Saskatchewan for all of time. We insist, however, that our study answers a call to listen to Aboriginal students. Focus groups have their own set of limitations (Morgan, 1997). First, the groups may not have been representative in all cases. Second, despite reinforcing our wish to hear from all students, dominant voices sometimes emerged. Because focus groups are not fully confidential, and anonymity is jeopardized, it may have discouraged students from speaking their truths. We cannot be sure how these factors biased the outcomes.

## **Indigenous Research Design**

In the design of this research, we were informed by an Indigenous research approach. Indigenous philosophical and community knowledges and experiences (Smith, 2012) were acknowledged through the selection of the research team. The use of story as method (Archibald, 2008) was chosen to hear the students' voices. To conceptually shape and assist in the interpretation of the findings, an Indigenous framework theory (Kovach, 2016) based upon the Plains Cree and Saulteaux cultures of Saskatchewan was employed. The following offers an elaboration of these three processes.

## **Indigenous Framework Theory**

Indigenous framework theory (Kovach, 2016) is relatively new to academic research; thus, there is not a cannon of literature to cite. We have relied upon the work of Indigenous academic scholars Perkins (2007), Smith (2005), and Kovach (2014) to assist us in clarifying the parameters of the Indigenous framework theory used in this study. Indigenous framework theory reflects "an ancient, but ever evolving, set of beliefs and practices arising from tribal culture" (Kovach, 2014, p. 101). To appreciate Indigenous theory, which is based upon Indigenous tribal knowledge systems, one must agree that tribal knowledges exist as a valid philosophical paradigm that exists among differing Indigenous tribal groups. An appreciation of Indigenous theory requires recognition that differing tribal groups will manifest practices of this knowledge system in differing ways (e.g. language, ceremony, relationships with land). However, this does not negate a unifying Indigenous philosophy. With respect to a unifying Indigenous paradigm, Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear (2000) states, "there is enough similarity among North America Indian philosophies to apply concepts generally" (pp. 79). It is from this perspective that tribal communities such as the Māori from New Zealand, Pueblo from the United States, and the Plains Cree from Canada, for example, identify as having a shared Indigenous paradigm though language and cultural practices may differ. It is from this shared Indigenous paradigm that Indigenous theory emerges. Within Western qualitative approaches

the paradigm, theory, and methodology are interconnected (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 2005) as they are in Indigenous research (Wilson, 2008). However, if an appreciation of a contextually specific but unifying Indigenous knowledge systems or paradigm is contested, there will be attempts to problematize the existence of Indigenous theory. We, the authors, concur with Little Bear (2000) on the existence of an Indigenous paradigm, and we see the existence and valuing of Indigenous theory as a decolonizing proposition.

The Indigenous framework theory informing our study encompasses tenets such as balance, history, place, experience, process, practice, holism, collectivity, and the temporal and genealogical nature of time as articulated by Perkins (2007). Kovach (2014) identifies personal self-situatedness (Debassige, 2010; Iwama, 2009), or self-in-relation, as central to Indigenous theory. Alongside the tenets identified by Perkins and Kovach, Smith (2005) defines Indigenous theory in terms of cultural and community situatedness, emphasizing it as change-orientated, flexible, transferable but not universal, critical (including critical analysis of systemic structures and critical self-reflection), and accessible. In taking up this research, we view the integration of Indigenous theory as a decolonizing process. While this study did not center Indigenous-settler power relationships, we were motivated to redress the overwhelmingly negative statistics characterizing Aboriginal education, and so Smith's notion of criticality was of particular relevance in this decolonizing imperative.

The research team included academic researchers from faculties of education at the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan, field researchers from the Saskatchewan schooling system, and a Project Director. The Project Director was of Aboriginal ancestry with professional experience in First Nations educational policy and leadership. The academic members of the team were well-versed in Indigenous and Western qualitative research methodologies. As a collaborative body, the research team possessed knowledge and familiarity with Indigenous research methodologies. Team members were knowledgeable about the Saskatchewan Indigenous context and Saskatchewan schooling context from both professional and lived experiences. Several members of the team were well-versed in research, including students generally and Indigenous student engagement specifically.

As mentioned, the study took place in Saskatchewan and the Indigenous research design was guided by teachings emerging primarily from Plains Cree and Saulteaux cultures and traditions. To assist in guiding the project, two Plains Cree and Saulteaux Saskatchewan First Nations Elders were offered tobacco and formally consulted for their guidance on the research project. Their assistance was sought to ensure the research process was respectful, ethical, and beneficial to Indigenous peoples. The Elders highlighted the importance of honoring the students and listening carefully to their words. The Elders were available to the team at any point during the process; however, they did not participate in the formal research design, data collection, or interpretation of the findings. In addition, Indigenous members of the research team (Plains Cree, Saulteaux, Métis, and Māori) had access to their own Elders through connection to their communities.

In Indigenous research paradigms, not only does it matter how research is conducted, but it also matters who the researchers are in the doing of it. In an effort to ensure that this research was imbued with an Indigenous sensibility inclusive of Indigenous community knowledge (Smith, 2012), the composition of the research team was given due consideration. As mentioned, the majority representation on the research team were individuals of Aboriginal ancestry. Non-Aboriginal team members held experience either working with Aboriginal peoples or conducting research in Aboriginal contexts. The team was comprised of five Aboriginal and three non-

Aboriginal members.

### **Hearing the Stories: Data Collection Methods and Analysis**

While this study was informed by Indigenous principles and with the integration of an Indigenous theoretical lens for the interpretation process, the study equally integrated elements of Western qualitative design including the use of focus groups. Seventy-five students from six schools shared their perspectives with the research team through a focus group (circle) process. The First Nations with which these students identified included Cree, Dene, and Salteaux. Upon receiving school division approval to conduct the research, a counselor or Aboriginal liaison officer from each school assisted with recruiting students. The Project Director arranged and facilitated the focus groups (circles) and necessary consent (i.e. students' and parental consent) with each school. In each school, we conducted two focus groups (circles) with 4-8 students from grades 9-12 in each group.

The Project Director along with the Aboriginal field researcher led the focus groups (circles). The individuals leading the focus groups have particular relevance in light of an Indigenous research design. The Project Director and field researcher were of Indigenous ancestry, with an understanding of Saskatchewan Indigenous peoples including the Plains Cree and Saulteaux. They did not have to learn for this project how to engage the Indigenous students in the focus groups for this study. As insider Indigenous researchers, the individuals facilitating the focus groups had strong and sustained relationships with Indigenous peoples (Saskatchewan Indigenous peoples in particular) alongside experience within Indigenous K-12 education. The researchers were at ease with the research design, the topic of the inquiry, and the participants in the study. As a result, they were seen as credible and subsequently trusted by the students; thus, the students shared their stories.

In the study, students were asked four things.

- Tell us about your school experiences. What do you want to get from your school experiences?
- What helps you with your learning?
- What kinds of things get in the way or hold you back from learning?
- Describe to us what it is that good teachers do. If you were given the power and authority to tell teachers what they should be doing to be awesome teachers what would you tell them? What would you tell them to stop doing?

The interview guide was drawn from a New Zealand study with Māori students conducted by Māori researchers Bishop and Berryman (2010). Focus groups (circle) were conducted using a research design consistent with epistemological principles found within an Indigenous methodology which included an open-ended conversation approach (Kovach, 2009). We reconvened with the students to give them an opportunity to read the transcripts to verify and/or edit the information recorded to ensure we reflected their stories.

In meaning-making of qualitative data, it is our contention that any given research question requires methodological tools best equipped to offer a meaningful analysis. This research asked Aboriginal students about their educational experience. We were interested in who the students were as whole beings and how this totality of being impacted their schooling. This meant finding an analytical tool able to garner insight into their education, life experience, and Aboriginal

cultural situatedness. From this perspective, we believed that an Indigenous theoretical framework was the most applicable given the Aboriginal context inherent in the question being asked and that we were asking Aboriginal students. It was not simply enough to have Indigenous researchers on the team. The study required an Indigenous framed analysis. As Māori scholar Graham Hingangora Smith states, “Just being brown does not make 'theorizing' indigenous” (2005, p. 9).

To analyze the student voices and offer an interpretation for the findings a coding schemata was applied. The themes and categories arising from the student voices were theoretically framed through the lens of an Indigenous theoretical perspective. As noted above, Indigenous theory encompasses myriad aspects; however, there were particular tenets that assisted in giving shape and meaning to the data arising from the student voices. The students spoke about their teacher’s relational ability, their teacher’s attitude and beliefs, and whether their teacher had a sense of who the students were as whole beings. Co-authors Stelmach and Kovach individually coded the transcripts and developed preliminary themes, each specifying criteria to justify quotations selected for themes. These were reviewed together, and similarities and divergences were noted in the process of developing key themes for presentation in this article. In viewing the students’ words through an Indigenous theoretical lens, we organized student voices (the data) into three categorical bundles: Relationality, Responsibility, and Contextuality. We have placed the attributes of experience, process, and self-in-relation within the larger bundle of *Relationality*. Relationality, as put forward by Wilson (2008) implies a personal and community accountability. We termed the second bundle *Responsibility*. Responsibility includes practice and evokes notions of purpose and critical self-reflection. *Contextuality*, the third bundle, is inclusive of holism and cultural and community contextualized knowledge. This allowed us to see each student as a whole person and not abstract-out their words from their community and cultural experience. To assist in the contextualizing effort, we found Grande, Pedro, and Windchief’s (2015) contextualization model useful: “Such a model requires practitioners to (1) learn from and with whom they are working; (2) connect the trajectory of past occurrences to current situations; and (3) incorporate local knowledge and cultures as important frames of reference” (p. 113).

### **Interpreting Stories from an Indigenous Theoretical Lens**

In listening to the voices of the students we considered who they are, their life history as they reflected upon it, their current experience as they described it, and their contextual understanding as they expressed it. The findings were reviewed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers. In considering the student voice in the study, the Indigenous researchers were able to bring a contextual-experiential understanding to the meaning-making process. Bridging literature with themes arising from student voice, the findings are organized according to the three bundles as analyzed through an Indigenous theoretical lens: Relationality, Responsibility, and Contextuality. Given the paucity of Aboriginal student voice in educational outcome research, these findings grant ample space for their reflections. In accordance with the Elders’ guidance, this article seeks to listen, hear, and give space for Aboriginal student voices.

#### **Relationality: Teacher-Student Connection with this Group of Aboriginal Students**

According to the Indigenous framework theory applied to this study, the attributes of experience

(in terms of the experience of feeling connected), process (such as giving time for relational work), and self-in-representation are the key tenets guiding the analysis of teacher-student connection with the group of Aboriginal students in this study. We chose relationality as the over-arching heading of this theme to articulate the importance of teacher connection and caring in the schooling experience for this group of Aboriginal students. It was a thread that, though singled out here, seemed to weave throughout the other two themes. We discuss it first to indicate its overarching presence in the students' examples and stories.

According to Raham (2010) best practices in Aboriginal education indicate that teachers working with Aboriginal students ought to be "warm and caring, hold high expectations, and possess a wide repertoire of instructional strategies and explicit knowledge of culturally appropriate approaches" (p. 6). A project emerging from New Zealand with measurable improvement in learning outcomes for Māori secondary students had a telling conclusion: "The students unanimously identified that it was the quality of in-class relationships and interactions they had with their teachers that were the main determinants of their educational achievement" (Bishop, Berryman, Wearmouth, Peter, & Clapman, 2012, p. 696). We were thus not surprised that these Aboriginal students talked about their relationships with teachers as helping their learning. These students believed if teachers took the time to get to know students, they would also know which students were committed to learning. They were more likely to trust teachers who showed an interest in them personally. One student described it this way: "[when teachers] make more like a friend relationship with you—personal relationship. Like, actually get to know you and your background." This contributed to positive interactions and feelings.

Feeling like an equal with teachers was important for relationality. One student said, "I love when a teacher isn't so much of an authority figure, but they come down on your level." We noted in the First Nations school that students addressed teachers by their first names. One student suggested teachers should. This was equally evident in this statement, "It's almost like they are, you know, friends, good friends, or even uncles or brothers, like a family. That's, I think, how a school should feel." It is interesting to note that students in Claypool and Preston's (2013) Saskatchewan study used the exact description of school feeling "just like family" (p. 266).

Trust was enhanced when teachers also revealed a personal and "lighter" side. Like the students in Cooper's (2014) study, humor inspired these students to "want to go to class more," and they especially liked a teacher who "knows how to take a joke." These students craved an environment in which teachers were "open minded" and willing to "compromise more." The students articulated the importance of supportive, interested teachers: "Feels like they want you here. When you are stuck they want you to get an understanding ... and we should be challenging our creative minds." These students, like Aboriginal students reported elsewhere (Claypool and Preston, 2013), trusted their teachers not to give up on them.

Personal connections with teachers may enhance students' emotional engagement (Connell, 1990). This affective dimension is important because of the way it intersects with behavioral and cognitive engagement (Cooper, 2014). These students seemed to connect with teachers who accepted them as "whole" persons, with personal lives and responsibilities. In this study there were students who lived on their own, held jobs, and struggled against less-than-supportive home environments, and so when teachers were not only willing to listen to how this impacted their schooling, but to also find ways to help these students succeed, the students were motivated. Importantly, when compassion was balanced with high expectations, students felt like they mattered. Being told to get to class or to be serious was interpreted as teachers' caring



about these students getting a “way better education.” “Good” teachers, according to some of these students, were genuinely concerned that students not only meet learning outcomes, but have opportunities to “utilize [their] skills.” These “good” teachers the students described exhibited a faith in students who, because of personal circumstances, did not follow a normative definition of the “ideal” student. Instead of dismissing their abilities for behavioural reasons, these teachers imposed high expectations on suitable terms. This speaks to the relational component that made the school experience, and students’ perceptions of teachers, positive.

While some researchers focusing on ethnic minority students found engagement to be higher when there were more minority teachers in a school (e.g. Finn & Voelkl, 1993), our findings resonate more with Bingham and Okagaki’s (2012) conclusion that there is no clear-cut connection between ethnic matching between students and teachers. What was conclusive for us, however, was that relationships with teachers were perceived to matter to these Aboriginal students’ experience of and performance in school. It was not surprising that the teacher’s disposition and attitude toward teaching was implicated in the teacher’s capacity to form a relationship with their students. The next bundle—Responsibility—speaks to this.

### **Responsibility: Teacher Disposition and Its Impact on the Aboriginal Students in this Study**

Responsibility and accountability are values identified within the Indigenous framework theory applied here. In this study, the notion of teacher responsibility arose when students referenced how their teacher’s disposition and the subsequent teaching behaviours impacted them. The teaching responsibility carries with it the need for critically self-reflective practice and an understanding of how one’s disposition can impact another. In this case, the abdication of a teaching responsibility arises when a teacher is not able to self-assess their honest feelings about teaching practice and the students they are teaching. The Aboriginal student’s voices were particularly revealing in this regard.

Given that friendly, caring, and light-hearted teachers were perceived as positive influences on students’ engagement, it is unsurprising that teacher behavior, when perceived negatively, was a hindrance. We were unprepared, however, to hear frequent, matter-of-fact descriptions of teachers yelling, displaying inconsistent behavior, and favoring some students over others. These students were blunt about how teachers’ presence or perceived disengagement affected their school experiences, and ultimately their learning. As Cooper (2014) noted in her study, students can detect when teachers are passionate about their job. In our study, students enjoyed learning from teachers who were perceived as investing extra effort to meet all students’ needs. Consider the following example from one student: “I am terrible with math, but [Teacher] could figure out ten different ways to explain a problem ... the fact that she was creative enough to think of something for every student to kind of figure out what she was teaching was really awesome.” The another student indicated something similar: “I loved going to his classroom because he would make sure that if I didn’t know what I was doing that he would take the time and teach me.” Clearly, it was more than pedagogical content (Shulman, 1986), or the teacher’s ability to help students comprehend, but how intentional good teachers were about reaching every student. All of these students had post-secondary aspirations that included further education, vocational paths, and professional careers, and when teachers were inspirational and dedicated, these students were committed and driven.

But a contrary picture of teacher dedication was painted for us as well. Students described

teachers as moody or “grouchy,” and attributed this to them not liking their job. Teachers yelled, and students described incidents of yelling not only as “uncomfortable,” but unfair: “Two minutes late, he is gonna start yelling.” A different student said, “If you get mad at both of them [Teachers’]—office! They don’t even try talking to us about it. Right away—office!” One student said some teachers “get frustrated in trying to teach you when they shouldn’t .... when we don’t understand, they get mad.” In one focus group we heard about teachers who did not bother to challenge students, and just “basically hand[ed] out anything.” In more than one focus group we heard about teachers who were “always on their phones.” We interpreted students as feeling shortchanged in their education; they described themselves as “curious” and were impacted by teachers who displayed a dislike for their work. In contrast to the exciting teachers, it was clear these negative behaviors demotivated students.

And yet, there were a number of stories about teachers’ inconsistent behavior, or what students perceived as inconsistency between behavior expected of them, and teachers’ actions. One student shared this example: “Just because they had a bad day and got into an argument with someone, they don’t need to get mad at us, taking it out on us .... They say, ‘Leave your problems at the door.’ But how are we supposed to do that when [they] are yelling?” Another student explained that rules were indiscriminately applied: “Some teachers are late in the morning .... then you go for a walk and you get in trouble for being late when they finally show up.” In general, it was clear that teachers’ moods “set off” students’ moods, but what was troubling was the repercussions students faced when they emotionally mirrored teachers: “Some of us get suspended for stupid reasons. Like when the teachers piss us off. When they get mad at us, and get us mad, then we get suspended for it. Like it’s our consequences .... they expect us to act like adults when they treat us like children.”

The double standard these students perceived directly jeopardized the relationships they had with some teachers, and negatively influenced their efforts with those teachers. Exacerbating this was the perception that teachers had favorites, and their efforts to conceal it were ineffective. We thought this student’s statement was poignant: “They say they like you.... but actions prove those wrong. They don’t realize that we understand more than they think we do.” Not being among teachers’ favorites impacted students’ ability to get the academic support they needed. Some students perceived academic standing as the reason for differential treatment as explained here, “... a teacher will be helping all the A+ students and then leaving the failed students behind.” Also important was that these students believed the teacher’s pet position was irreversible: “If you are on her bad side, you are on her bad side.”

Additionally, these students helped us understand that intimidation and humiliation prevents some students from asserting themselves. Since evidence suggests teachers have lower expectations of students from minority backgrounds (Kesner, 2000; Pigott & Cowen, 2000), this is an important finding. If frustrated students exhibit negative behavior, it is this behavior, rather than intellectual capacity, that becomes the focus. As Addo (2011) noted, if teachers do not bother to get to know their students personally and culturally, he/she may misread their reticence for apathy or incompetence. Research on minority student engagement suggests that teachers’ reports of student engagement differ from how students themselves perceive their experiences (Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008). The candidacy with which these students in our study spoke about feeling inferior and the awareness of implied negative stereotyping that undergirds teachers’ actions confirmed our suspicion that educators’ lack of awareness of assumptions that drive their behavior negatively influence Aboriginal students’ school experiences.

## **Contextuality: Teacher Responsiveness to this Group of Aboriginal Students as Whole Beings**

Context was the key tenet guiding the formation of this category. Two major themes emerged within this bundle, and so we have organized this section into two sub-headings. Firstly, a predominant finding was the experience of being racialized. Their experience of being racialized was in direct relationship to being of Aboriginal identity and belonging to Aboriginal cultures. Thus, the findings illuminated the impact on these students of being racialized inclusive of negatively held assumptions of Aboriginal cultures. We understand culture as a broad range of beliefs and practices that are found within Aboriginal communities. Negative assumptions about Aboriginal cultures arose from dominant stereotypical perspectives about Aboriginal peoples and cultures leading to racism. The second main theme that emerged from the findings related to the student home life and the effect of challenging home environments on their schooling including the helpful (or unhelpful) response by their teachers.

### **Racialization (Including Negative Assumptions about Indigenous Cultures)**

St. Denis and Hampton's (2002) extensive literature review illuminates the effect of racism on Aboriginal students. The felt expression of being singled out because of race (as associated with negative assumptions about Indigenous cultures) was most clearly expressed in the Aboriginal students' own words. One student said, "There was a time when it wasn't even us and [teacher] blamed us ... a White kid bumped into me. I pushed him back and we fought. And no one believed me. The principal did not believe me, so I got kicked out." Another indicated, "That is stereotypical to say we are a gang because we are all wearing the same color. Maybe we just don't like wearing bright colors that stand out. We just like wearing what we wear." The above comments are poignant. Gay (2000) noted that when students feel teachers are sensitive to the needs of ethnic minority groups, they are more engaged. Addo's (2011) participants reported a perception that their behavior was misunderstood by teachers, resulting in disciplinary measures in circumstances where students felt it was inappropriate or egregious.

Students spoke about what they perceived as teachers' assumptions of low student ability, which they attributed to their Aboriginal cultures. Some students described experiences with teachers that made these students feel academically inferior: "They acted like we were slower and we didn't understand things." This was further articulated in this student reflection:

I look like a White kid .... What I noticed with the teacher is every time I asked for help I got help right away. But every time this kid behind me—he was Native, he was darker—every time he asked for help he didn't get very thorough help ... it wasn't good help, it was like, here I am going to dumb it down for you because you look like you don't know what you are doing, ya know?

Disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programming has been documented as a persistent problem (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010). This has been clearly noted among African American and American Indian students in the U.S.A. (Losen & Orfield, 2002), as well as ethnic minority students in the U.K. (Parsons, 2008), and more recently, Aboriginal students in Australia (Graham, 2012). In Canada, the British Columbia Ministry of Education published a report indicating the same for Aboriginal students (McBride & Kee, 2001). Most telling for us is that students themselves draw the connection

between deficit assumptions and their Aboriginal cultural identity. Aboriginal student perceptions communicated the felt experience of being a second-class student. In describing the experience of Black youth from Montréal, for example, Livingstone, Celemencki, and Calixte (2014) emphasized that students “struggle to sustain their optimism and self-confidence, especially when confronted with racial biases and stereotypes in the media and other domains of life” (p. 300). While our students were not Black youth from Montréal, the students in our study shared a similar experience of lack of self-confidence arising from racial bias. Both the Black youth from Montreal and the Saskatchewan Indigenous students from this study clearly highlight the denigration that racism causes.

Given some comments from students, we wondered how negative assumptions about students were exacerbated by limited, and perhaps distorted and unbalanced, curriculum about Aboriginal histories, cultures, and identities. Within the discussion of racism and negative stereotyping of First Nations people, students argued for teachers to “Teach us to respect the culture, teach us how to talk so we could help our family with that.” Some students described a complete absence of expression of Aboriginal identity except for a school mascot depicting a “European man ... wearing a headdress.”

Citing her 2009 report *Best Practices in Aboriginal Education: A Literature Review and Analysis for Policy Directions*, Raham (2010) identified Aboriginal cultural inclusiveness as one factor in promoting retention rates of Aboriginal students. She argued a sense of belonging is promoted through “a visible Aboriginal presence in the school and curriculum, positive relationships, opportunities to express their cultural identity, and family involvement in the life of the school” (p. 4). Deyhle’s (1995) study of 168 early school leavers, and 100 enrolled or graduated youth reported that when facing “a vocationally centered assimilationist curriculum” (p. 403), students were more academically successful when grounded in their traditional Navajo culture. When specifically factoring in Aboriginal languages within cultural pedagogy discourse, research suggests a correlation between Aboriginal language and positive student outcomes (Bernard, 2010; Guevremont and Kohen, 2012). In contrast, an absence of Aboriginal community understanding and culture in the classroom may contribute to low self-esteem among Aboriginal students (Kanu, 2011), or what Freire (1970) called self-depreciation. Racism impacts learning outcomes.

In our study, one teacher’s unwillingness to discuss *Idle No More*, an important Indigenous-led movement initiated in Saskatchewan, was perhaps a lost opportunity for these students to connect with and develop pride in their heritage. We heard from some students that teachers avoided discussions about residential schools. Contrarily, others felt that Native Studies classes were preoccupied with this, reinforcing hardship as the only hallmark of Indigenous history. Despite teachers’ good intentions, these actions have real effects on students’ ability to understand and identify positively with their Aboriginal culture. Clearly, some of the students in this school craved deeper understanding of political issues, identity issues, and a more authentic understanding of Aboriginal peoples as diverse communities. Cultural understanding has been reported as a kind of grounding which helped students focus on schoolwork (Claypool & Preston, 2013). These students were looking for the opportunity to rescript Aboriginal people’s reputations in light of contemporary, internationally-recognized movements. Given the uniqueness of Aboriginal people’s experiences historically and presently in Canada, we realize a need to theorize the literature on identity formation within our context. In preparing teachers, pre-service education programs have a role in responding to the cultural, political, and identity aspects of Indigenous experiences through its integration into required curriculum.

To conclude this section on racialization of Aboriginal students, we have cause to believe that for many Canadian Aboriginal students, relationships with teachers are thwarted by racism. For example, responses from Silver, Mallett, Greene, and Simard's (2002) interviews with 47 Aboriginal high school students in Winnipeg—a city infamously known as Canada's most racist (Macdonald, 2015)—suggest that teacher-student relationships are perceptively weak. When these researchers asked, "How well would you say Aboriginal students at your school get along with teachers?" (p. 17) only 46.7% had positive responses. When students were asked whether teachers "understand Aboriginal students" (p. 17) less than half (44.4%) agreed. The national attitude may account for these school survey results. For example, a 2014 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) news poll on discrimination of 1500 Canadians showed a persistent theme of racism against Aboriginal peoples: for example, the percentage of people "very comfortable" with having an Aboriginal family as neighbors was 53%. Only 48% reported being very comfortable having their child or sibling married to someone of Aboriginal background (CBC, 2014). Despite the localized or limited data presented here, they point to a troubling macro-systemic problem. The extent to which Aboriginal students' internal dissonance is exasperated by a daily epistemic "myopia" within the schooling environment is integral to this discussion, and was our immediate concern. As Rico (2013) stated, "It is only when teachers see the complexity and myopia of some of their historic, geographic, and political commitments that they can then make such complexity available to their students" (p. 33).

## **Home Life**

In Canada, Aboriginal students are more likely to leave school. With respect to First Nations students, they are also more likely to experience associated negative physical and emotional health consequences, such as higher rates of substance abuse and suicide (Grover, 2002). Further, the literature raises the issue of dissonance, or cultural discontinuity (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012) between the environments of school and home that minority group students must navigate (Davison & Hawe, 2012). Clearly, coping with challenging home environment while juggling their own and others' expectations for them to blaze a successful academic trail is considerable for many Aboriginal students.

Aboriginal high school students in this study voiced this sentiment. One student said, "It's tough to ... put yourself out there for school when you are just trying to survive"; while another stated "It's not our fault that we miss too much school ... some of us have family problems." A different student indicated, "You know, like family-wise, there are a lot of broken families—alcohol and drug abuse"; likewise, one other student declared, "A lot of us can't even get here, you know, like even just visiting [Teacher's] class. A lot of us don't have bus passes to get to school." Some students were not able to circumvent what one interviewer described as the cycle of addiction. Our study provided a snapshot into the challenges some of these students faced with respect to home circumstances. We were concerned to hear about the absence of strong family and community structures in some of these students' lives, knowing through Hare and Pidgeon's (2011) study that family and community can be a way First Nations students navigate through negative experiences in school.

We were struck by the capacity of the students to articulate and unpack the concept and practice of "role-modeling" by family members. In particular, the students spoke about what role-modeling meant to them in a practical, relevant way: "Some family members need to start asking what is wrong and what do you want out of life." There was also the hope and stress of

being the first generation to complete high school: “None of my brothers graduated high school and I wanna be the first out of all my mom’s kids to graduate before my older brothers.” This was tempered by this statement: “My family is small. None of them graduated, which, I don’t know, fills me with anxiety or pressure ... to ... carry on with school.”

In varying ways, the students in this study shared perceptions of pressure to counter preconceived societal notions about Aboriginal students academically and socially, and negative family patterns. The deficit orientation is common in Aboriginal educational issues, so we appreciate our findings are not novel in this regard. We believe these students in this study humanize the conditions that seem widely known and enduring, but perhaps in an abstract or statistical way. It is important to emphasize the persistence of racism, stereotyping, and school failure, and to also demonstrate that these students are not resigned to them. Though disheartening to hear about challenging home lives, there were hopeful moments in students’ resistance and determination.

### **What We Learned from the Student Voices**

In this study we asked Aboriginal high-school students what helped and what hindered their learning. They spoke truthfully from their experiences. We were advised by the Elders offering guidance on this project to listen closely and hear what the students say. Their message is simple, yet is as complicated as the art and science of creating and sustaining caring, invested relationships. These students are asking their teachers to have a trained and knowledgeable mind and a willing heart to create learning environments that invigorate, engage, and sustain their interest. It is complicated given Canada’s history with Indigenous peoples. Moreover, formal Western schooling has yet to interrogate its deep cultural assumptions about Indigenous ways of being and knowing. Further, personally racialized attitudes about Indigenous peoples persist. As such, what should be simple—creating caring relationships with Aboriginal students—still eludes. To conclude this article, we offer a summary of the students’ key messages for the way forward.

**Relationality:** The Aboriginal students in this study told us clearly that a central aspect of keeping them in school (and wanting to be there) is contingent upon the following teacher qualities and dispositions:

- Teachers who showed an interest in them personally;
- Teachers who cared about them were teachers they could trust;
- Teachers that showed they had expectations for their students (without being blaming or shaming). Having expectations of the students that was viewed as caring about them;
- Teachers who had the instructional capacity to teach to a topic (such as math) in several ways in an effort to assist students in understanding the topic. This capacity was identified as that which exhibited both creativity, caring, and persistence;
- Teachers who exhibited attributes as open-mindedness, flexibility, and humor; and,
- From a relational perspective, teachers who they could relate to as part of a larger kith and kin network: teachers were like an aunty or uncle.

Closely aligned with relationality is the students’ message with respect to the teaching responsibility. This message concerned the teacher’s own ability to critically reflect upon their

own engagement with their teaching life. Whether teachers were aware or not, the Aboriginal students in this study were telling us that their teacher's disposition was coming through loud and clear. Granted, this focuses on the negative attributes; however, what the Aboriginal students were saying about their experience was quite disconcerting and requires attention. This is what the students noted about what the kind of teachers who do not contribute to their engagement:

- Teachers who allow negative moods to enter the classroom in overt ways;
- Teachers who yell or are hostile do not create effective learning environments;
- Teachers who show impatience with students' ability to comprehend a topic and become frustrated when the student needs extra help;
- Teachers who have given up and do not care about their students' learning, and who may give the impression that they don't care—this discourages student curiosity;
- Teachers who give inconsistent or unclear messaging such as students not being clear for why they may be “getting in trouble”; and,
- Teachers who clearly had favorites.

Certainly, we understand that teachers are humans subject to the full spectrum of human emotions. We do not aim to blame teachers for being human. However, there is an onus upon teachers to critically self-reflect and consider whether the teaching life is for them if they are consistently unhappy and exhibiting behaviors that can turn a student off learning. The Aboriginal students in this study have told us that relationality is important. It is difficult to engage in relationship with someone who is consistently unhappy about being in relationship with you. The relationality and responsibility factors clearly have systemic implications that relate to teacher workload and efficiency mandates; however, if educational leaders wish to hear the student voices then the message is clear: relationship matters. Teachers who are not overworked and are able to teach in an environment that support them are critical here. If there is a desire to close the Aboriginal achievement gap then relationality must be considered. While there was significant focus on the relationship with their teachers, the Aboriginal students in this study were not shy about sharing the societal and familial contexts that impact their learning. Again, teachers' responsiveness made a difference in whether students felt supported or not. Aboriginal students wanted to be heard about the impact of racism, being Aboriginal, and home life had on their schooling. These impacts included

- Being singled out because their Aboriginal identity, ranging from assumptions about whether they were in a gang or being perceived as academically inferior;
- Being blamed for starting fights and causing trouble even if this was not the case;
- The skin color factor. If a student could pass as white they received more positive attention from teachers than if they had darker skin; and,
- Deficit theorizing of Aboriginal culture (mascots) in the classroom rather than celebrating aspects of Aboriginality that students could be proud of being part (e.g. Idle No More).

With respect to their home life, the following are some messages that arose from the Aboriginal students' voices:

- Teachers need to understand that home life can be tough and it's hard to focus and concentrate when students are worried about family members;

- Familial challenges exist including addictions, poverty, and general stress;
- Families disengaged from their child's learning created an environment for students to also disengage; and,
- There are pros and cons to being the first in the family to finish high school. This created both positive and negative stress on the student.

The power of racism to contaminate positive relationship building was addressed by students. Some students confirmed the pain of a racialized world that advantages one group over another based on race and ethnicity. From their own words, those students felt what researchers have theorized regarding the deficit assumption that constitutes teachers' treatment of Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students in this study spoke of being problematized as troublesome students based on their ethnic background. Simultaneously, cultural bifurcation between the home and school may create stress and impact school achievement, particularly for Aboriginal learners who perceive the need to leave their cultural selves at the school door to achieve success within another culturally imbued paradigm (Deyhle, 1995).

In conducting this study, we hoped to offer an infrequently-sought-after vantage point for understanding the complexities that seem to challenge Aboriginal education (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). We are grateful for the candidacy of the Aboriginal students in this study in sharing their experiences and for shedding more light on issues that obviously still demand our attention. This emphasizes the importance of our descriptive work. A secondary, but equally important, aim was to further the "Student Voice agenda" (Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011, p. xxxv). We know this agenda has been taken up elsewhere and in some cases is disappointingly abandoned with change in leadership (Cheminais, 2011). Our own work has been inspired by colleagues' success in New Zealand (Bishop & Berryman, 2010), as well as all Indigenous peoples and allies working tirelessly on behalf of Indigenous educational equity. Mostly, we have been inspired by the Aboriginal students in this study. Our hope is to cast a new light on a long shadow.

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### Notes

- 1 Aligning with the definition provided in Statistics Canada's *Aboriginal Peoples Reference Guide, National Household Survey, 2001*, we include North American Indians, Métis, and Inuit as Aboriginal peoples.
- 2 The Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut have the highest populations of 15-24 year olds as well as Aboriginal peoples, being 30.2%, 57.9%, and 92.8%, respectively (Statistics Canada, 2006).

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