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## **Support for First Nations Students: The Significance of the Aboriginal Resource Teacher's Role**

Jody Alexander, Judy Hewitt, and Thérèse Narbonne

### **Introduction**

In June 2005 the Ontario government released a report entitled “Ontario’s New Approach to Aboriginal Affairs” (Ontario 2005), which directed the Ministry of Education to create a framework that would help to improve achievement, reduce the learning gaps among, and increase graduation rates for students of Aboriginal ancestry who attend publicly funded schools throughout Ontario. The report addressed the 2001 census data that 28% fewer status Indian band members complete their high school educations compared to the general population. As level of education is linked to economic well-being and social status, the census information painted a bleak picture of the future for the Native population. Aboriginal leaders and organizations advocated for more services for children and youths, and for more coordination among the federal and provincial governments, local agencies, school boards, and communities (Ontario Native Affairs Secretariat 2005, 1).

In light of this information and direction, the Renfrew County District School Board, in partnership with the Algonquins for Pikwàkanagàn Community, the Renfrew Catholic District School Board, and the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS), established a Native student resource teacher in each of the two medium-sized rural elementary schools located in Eganville. The Native student resource teacher was funded as part of the Learning Circle Project.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the project was to enhance the literacy and numeracy skills of Aboriginal students who attend the community’s public and catholic schools.

This chapter will examine the beneficial effects of a Native student resource teacher in the public elementary school that includes a Native population. In particular, it will focus on the roles of the Native student resource teachers who were to:

1. provide support to Native students to allow them to better demonstrate what they understand and thereby narrow the achievement gap. The teachers would see students’ potential instead of focusing on deficits;
2. promote Aboriginal students pride of their culture;
3. assist students in “walking in both worlds” (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal);

4. build bridges between home and school, and school and First Nations community;
5. provide the non-Aboriginal population with a positive appreciation of Aboriginal culture.

## **Background<sup>2</sup>**

The school in this study is a rural public elementary school with about 440 students. The school draws students from five small, rural neighbouring communities, as well as from an Algonquin reserve. As there isn't a school on the reservation, the elementary children from the reserve attend either the separate or public school in Eganville.

To support the academic needs of the children living on the reserve, the Pikwàkanagàn education office has in the past paid for a part-time Native student tutor, educational assistants when required, and a part-time Native second language teacher. Even with these supports in place, the students were proportionately under-represented in high academic achievement results in elementary school, and experienced social and emotional worries. Some teachers' comments seemed to indicate that they believed the myth that Native students are lazy and lacking the capability to achieve high results. Many Native students reported enduring teasing and negative comments from the non-Native population. The exiting Native second language teacher reported to the educational officer that only a few of the school's staff members were collegial and supported his work with the Algonquin students. It was evident that more than a part-time tutor and a marginalized Native language teacher were needed to have a long-term positive effect in terms of reducing the gap in the achievement and graduation rates of Aboriginal students, and to support a paradigm shift in the perception of the Native culture.

The staff as a whole needed to have higher expectations of the Aboriginal students. At the same time, it was equally important that the school adopt strategies to assist in the achievement of these expectations. In addition, it was also important that all staff demonstrate respect for the students' culture and beliefs, and that the curriculum and school program include lessons that highlight the positive contributions made by Aboriginal people both past and present.

## **The Learning Circle Project**

The Learning Circle Project began as a one-year project with the hope that funding would continue to flow for at least three years. In an intuitive move during the first year, the Algonquin community committed to supporting a third year of the project. With this offer in place from the community it was difficult for the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) and local boards of education not to fund the project for the full three years. This funding provided salaries for one full-time resource teacher in each of the two elementary schools, money for resources, special activities, and cultural field trips.

In January 2006, a classroom teacher, Ms. Alexander, was hired to support identified Aboriginal students. She was in her third year of teaching. Having grown up in a similar home and academic environment as her students, she had a deep appreciation for and knowledge of their challenges and potentials. Ms. Alexander was an intuitive teacher who made many positive contributions to the school's activities, and she was respected by staff and students. She began her work with Native students during the last term of the school year (in March 2006). As a Native student literacy and numeracy resource teacher, she played a key role in the Learning Circle Project. Her role encompassed far more than teaching students; she would act as guidance counsellor, student advocate, and community liaison.

Upon being hired, Ms. Alexander began the work of having families and students identify themselves as Aboriginals so that they would be able to receive academic and social/emotional support and guidance. The first group of identified students were predominantly Algonquins of Pikwàkanagàn, but also included some "town" students. The self-identified town students included both Algonquins and several Ojibwa students. Because the school has a tuition agreement with the neighbouring Algonquin reservation, the majority of the first-year participants were Algonquins from the First Nations reserve. The remainder of the students were mainly relatives of these students.<sup>3</sup> However, throughout the three years of the Learning Circle Project, the school promoted the project to its school community, asking parents of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students to identify so that the children could receive support from the resource teacher and through personalized small-group instruction. By the second year, the self-identified population also included Métis and Inuit, and every year the numbers increased. By September 2008, the original 52 students had grown to 63 students receiving support from the First Nations student resource teacher.

During February and early March 2006, Ms. Alexander assisted the principal in collecting baseline data on the students and began making connections between the Algonquin community and the school. The purpose of the baseline data was to inform instructional strategies, highlight strengths and identify areas of concerns, illustrate student success, and report on the progress of the Learning Circle Project.

Due to the time of the hiring, specific academic support for the Native students was provided for only the last three months (April to June 2006) of the first school year of the project. Ms. Alexander's support was primarily for literacy with the primary students, and for a mixture of mathematics and language with the junior and intermediate students. This decision was based on the initial data collection and discussions with teaching staff.

During the initial three months and the following school year, Ms. Alexander, with support from the school administration and key staff members (including the Native second language teacher), worked to create structural change in the way the knowledge and culture of the First Nations, such as the significance

of the various dances, regalia, and the importance of the role of the elders, was valued and celebrated in the school. One example of this was the Day of Caring, celebrated on February 15, 2007. This was a day of activities to promote kindness, sharing, and inclusiveness. Included in the schedule were two First Nations cultural workshops, focusing on Native crafts and the Seven Grandfather Teachings. These two workshops were organized and presented by members of the Algonquin community. All students had the opportunity to attend either one or both workshops.

A Native student resource room was established by Ms. Alexander. This room was modified with culturally appropriate books, posters, and mats. During the second year of the project, the junior students designed and painted a mural for the wall. The following year the room was used by the school support counselor, thus the mural could be viewed by more of the general school population. Throughout the three years of the project, Native culture certainly became more visible and valued. For example, in addition to the aforementioned inclusion of Native culture in school-wide activities, Ms. Alexander guided the purchase of culturally appropriate books for the school library, teacher resource room, and the kindergarten, grade six, and early literacy classrooms. Furthermore, Ms. Alexander, with assistance from various staff members, planned and arranged cultural activities, such as presentations by the Algonquin community, to enhance the First Nations students' self-concept. These school-wide events helped foster inclusion of artefacts of the Aboriginal culture in the school culture, and helped broaden the learning strategies presented by the Native student resource teacher.

During the Learning Circle Project, the students received additional support through withdrawal from their classes into small, focused learning groups. The students in the small groups had more time to think about their responses and greater opportunity to participate in oral discussions. With the small group size, the teacher was better able to scaffold and adapt learning opportunities for the students. Many of the strategies used, such as read-alouds, think-pair-share, and think-alouds, are designed to enrich students, not just remediate. Connections to home were well established throughout the year. To continue to support literacy skills development and support the work of parents as a child's first educator, bookbags containing journals, books, playdough, and printing and colouring tools were sent home with the students at the end of June. During the third year, the project moved Ms. Alexander's role into providing coaching and mentoring for teachers. She continued to withdraw students for small group support, but she also began modelling her teaching strategies in the classroom with the classroom teachers.

**Table 2.1** chronologically outlines the major events, projects, and presentations that were part of the Learning Circle Project. All of the activities were organized and planned in such a way that they supported the work of the student and developed the teachers' deeper understanding of the Aboriginal learner.

**Table 2.1: Timeline of Activities**

2006	
<b>April</b>	Parents as Partners workshop at Algonquins of Pikwàkanagàn Presentation to SEAC (Special Education Advisory Committee) on the successes of the project
<b>May</b>	Interim report on Learning Circle Project; includes parent and teacher feedback Staff view “Unlocking the Potential in Native Students” after school (LNS)
<b>June</b>	Aboriginal assembly including drummers and dancers from Pikwàkanagàn, as well as the students Summer activity bags project to support learning
<b>September</b>	Participation in Aboriginal Education Policy Forum
<b>October</b>	School action planning includes supporting and monitoring the literacy and numeracy success of Eganville and District Public School’s (EDPS) Aboriginal students MISA project—“My Story,” a research project to enhance and develop Aboriginal students’ writing skills First Aboriginal student to run for EDPS student council Year two of Learning Circle Project supported by the Ministry of Education (EDU) and Algonquins of Pikwàkanagàn Native student resource teacher was included in the school special education professional learning community (PLC) group meetings (professional collaboration)
<b>November</b>	Parents as Partners workshop offered at Pikwàkanagàn
2007	
<b>January</b>	Principal and Native student resource teacher’s presentation to program committee
<b>February</b>	Inclusion of Seven Grandfathers teaching in EDPS’s Day of Caring activities Opening ceremonies for Native second language in gym—chief, elders, and drummers participate in ceremonies
<b>March</b>	Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) project begins at EDPS—Native students resource teacher was included (professional collaboration) Principal presentation to MISA in Toronto
<b>April</b>	Visit to maple bush
<b>May</b>	Ms. Alexander’s presentation at Eastern Ontario Symposium on Aboriginal Education, Ottawa EDPS library reopening included grade two First Nations and Métis students reading their book, <i>Click, Clack, Ruff</i>
<b>June</b>	Student participation in Ottawa Aboriginal Youth Summit
<b>September</b>	First Aboriginal-student-authored book is published and placed in EDPS library School improvement plan includes supporting teaching excellence with regards to Aboriginal students’ needs
<b>October</b>	Second MISA action research project on learning styles funded
2008	
<b>June</b>	First Nations students from grade four to twelve attend Native Career Day at the Muckwuk centre— Learning Circle joint project Superintendent-sponsored drum ceremony to celebrate the work of the school for the success of the Learning Circle Project

## Walking in Both Worlds

Cleary and Peacock (1998) cite narratives by various American Indian educators and researchers of the difficulties faced by Native persons attending a non-Native (majority society) school. These difficulties include mistrust of the non-Natives, bigotry, racism, and stereotyping. When the Native students return home at night it is difficult to share their academic day, when this might not be of value to peers in their Native life. In order to succeed in school, “students need to feel comfortable with both worlds and need to possess the necessary skills and attitudes to moving in and out of these worlds without sacrificing their ... Indian ways” (Cleary and Peacock 1998, 98). The students need to be grounded in their Native culture before they can comfortably move within the Native and non-Native world. The Native student resource teacher and the Native second language teacher acted as elders in that they were the facilitators of lifelong learning (Chabot nd). The Native student resource and Native second language teachers in our study often worked through the children’s school issues by talking about responsibilities and the Seven Grandfather’s teachings, as well as referencing the importance of building positive relationships among family, community, and creation. The two teachers reinforced intergenerational connections and identities for their Native students and helped the children navigate between the Native and non-Native worlds.

Over the three years of the Learning Circle Project, Native students became significantly more involved in school activities. For example, in the third year of the project, the percentage of Aboriginal students participating overrepresented the non-Aboriginal students participation rate in the primary spelling bee. Most of Ms. Alexander’s students participated, in contrast to the first year when none felt confident to stand in front of the primary division and try to spell. In addition, the Aboriginal students began to join in a variety of team sports, even when the practices were after school and arrangements needed to be made to get rides home.

As the school took notice of Native culture during assemblies, the First Nation students began participating in assemblies by wearing their regalia. (The active participation of the students from the Pikwàkanagàn community in their regalia for the Algonquin Native drummers and dancers school presentations increased from 50% to almost 90%.) Following one of the assemblies, several junior-level girls were asked by a grade eight teacher to come as Native dance guest lecturers to the gym class. In a follow-up conversation with the dancers, the girls expressed that they had at first been nervous to come and share their culture with students who were not only older, but who might have spoken radical slurs. This initial apprehension was replaced by pride and a sense of accomplishment following the presentation, as they were seen as experts and their culture was valued and respected by the teachers and the grade eight students. The following year, an Aboriginal grade eight student was commissioned by the vice-principal to design an anamikàge (welcome) sign for all Algonquin students and their families. The

sign was framed and hung in the entranceway of the school. The staff became learners and the students found strength in being the teachers.

## **Building Bridges Between Home and School and Between School and the First Nations Community**

The Report on Learning (CCL 2007) and B. Kavanagh (2005) detail the important role that parents and families, as the first educators in the home, play when they are included as central partners with the school and as advocates and key decision-makers for all children and youth. Children first learn values and traditions at home and in their community environment. Therefore, parents and families must be closely connected with the school in order for students to achieve success. This connection is like a bridge that must be built from both sides. Before the Learning Circle Project and the work of the Native student resource teacher, teachers reported that many parents of the First Nations students were often confrontational. They rarely came out for after-school parent information sessions. Parents reported that they did not always feel welcome at the school, and that the teachers didn't appear to understand their children's needs. This is also reflected in the current research (Pushor and Murphy 2004; Pushor 2007).

The Native student resource teacher worked with members of the school staff to build a bridge to the community. A first step taken by the school to welcome parents was to meet them where they lived. The early literacy teacher and Native student resource teacher arranged for a four-evening parent workshop in the Pikwàkanagàn community. The evenings were adapted from the workshop, "Parents as Partners." Parents participated in small group discussions on topics such as communicating with the school, supporting homework, and understanding and supporting children's learning skills. Although the turnout was small, this step of reaching out was a symbolic turning point.

The second step was to provide parents with an advocate in the school's special needs identification process. The Native student resource teacher participated in the identification case conferences, and on the Individual Placement Review Committee (IPRC) as a student and parent advocate as well as an educator. Her understanding of the parents' and children's culture supported meaningful discussion and appropriate placements. Ms. Alexander played a key role in the development of each student's Individual Education Program (IEP).

The third step was to help the staff understand the concerns and culture of the First Nations. The attempt to build a bridge by increasing the staff's understanding of the needs of the First Nations began on February 1, 2006, with a workshop arranged by a staff member, with the financial support of the EFTO. The workshop included a smudging ceremony and learning circle to allow staff to enhance their knowledge and understanding of the history and culture of Algonquins of Pikwàkanagàn. It focused on the Seven Grandfather Teachings, the medicine wheel, and the residual effects of residential schools on the residents of



Pikwàkanagàn. Unfortunately, the spiritual nature of the ceremony conflicted with some of the staff members' own religious beliefs and they asked to be excused. For the majority of the staff members the experience helped build a bridge to understanding the culture of the First Nations students. The power of the discussions and information shared by the two elders cannot be overstated. Staff were left with not only some of the reasons why Aboriginal students struggle in schools and parents appear unresponsive to invitations for shared participation of home and school, but also the urgency of meeting this generation's educational needs.

Three months later, the Native student resource teacher learned about a webcast entitled "Unlocking the Potential of Aboriginal Students," produced by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. Seeing the potential for greater understanding of her students, she invited staff to stay after school and view the webcast and participate in a discussion afterwards. Seventeen of the thirty-five staff members signed up. The webcast gave insights into some of the challenges Aboriginal students face and how they have been marginalized. Following the viewing, the staff discussed the needs of the students attending the school. The staff expressed their continued commitment to supporting the learning of all students and closing the gap for the Native students. In addition, as teachers began seeing the academic gains made by these learners, they became more focused in their resolve to support them. Ms. Alexander was able to team up with several teachers for program planning.

The Native student resource teacher was included in all of the school's student-focused professional committees. This afforded a structure in which she could offer important information to staff about the learning styles, and academic and social needs of the Aboriginal students in the school. One example of this is her participation in the CODE Professional Learning Communities (PLC). The purpose of the CODE PLC was to support excellence for all students, especially students who were struggling to meet the expectations of the curriculum because of identified or not yet identified learning difficulties. Ms. Alexander provided staff with observations, as well as suggested classroom and home activities for the First Nations students, which would be welcomed and supported by parents.

By the spring of the following year, the superintendent, director, and a trustee, as well as the Native support worker from the neighbouring high school, visited the school to see Native students engaged in their work. The visit help solidify funding support from the board, as the project was accomplishing its mandate of minimizing the achievement gap of Native students and enriching the non-Native school community.

## Reports

In June 2006, the principal and resource teacher were invited to board committees to report on the success the Aboriginal students were having in reading. In the fall of 2006, Ms. Alexander submitted an action-research proposal entitled "My story: helping First Nations students find their voice in writing" to the Eastern Ontario

Managing Information for Student Achievement Professional Network Centre (MISA PNC). Her project received full funding, and with it the opportunity to receive more resources and to attend culturally relevant events and activities. In the following year, Ms. Alexander reported to MISA PNC about the results of her teaching strategies in relation to the achievements of the Native students with their writing. Several other reports were made to educators of Aboriginal students in Renfrew County, Ottawa, and Toronto, as well as to the Eganville and District Public School council.

The purpose of this reporting was to highlight the potential of Aboriginal students and to counter the prevailing focus on the deficits of Aboriginal learners. The Learning Circle Project, the role of the Native student resource teacher, and hence the reports themselves, aimed to enhance the opportunities for Native student academic learning through the use of teaching strategies that met their needs. The issue facing educators is ascertaining Native student strengths and creating opportunities for them to grow. Not surprisingly, this is common for all educators and all students.

Aboriginal learners have diverse learning styles, though the fact that they learn best holistically is a common variable that has been identified by many people (CCL 2007). For example, when teaching about seasons, Aboriginal culture and traditions should be woven into the lesson. Maria Battiste states that, “consistent with the First Nations traditions, First Nation People believe education must develop the child in holistic manner—intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically” (State of First Nations Learning 2005, 10). Aboriginal students also need to participate in and talk about their learning, as well as have time to reflect (Toulouse nd). The problem faced by the Native students, in this study, was that they were shy about expressing their viewpoints. They often needed additional time to think about their responses. Teachers usually did not build “wait time” into their lesson plans. Not all students were encouraged to participate. Unfortunately, the result was that the First Nations students would often blend into the background.

At the beginning of the project, the students’ academic achievement levels were recorded to provide a baseline and to assist in the focus of support. Their academic achievement was measured on a regular basis throughout the three years of the project. For this paper both the cohort achievement and annual achievement of subgroups is reported. Informed signed consent by the parents was achieved after careful and detailed explanation regarding the use of the data, including the use of the data to report student achievement to board committees and for action-research reports.

The results from the PM Benchmark reading assessment were used exclusively when reporting reading achievement for primary students. For the students in grades two to eight, a wider range of reporting tools was used. They included CASI reading scores, report card marks, Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) test scores, and scores from Brigance and Test of Written Language

(TOWL) subtest scores. The baseline data indicated that reading needed to be a focus in the primary grades. Most of the Aboriginal students from kindergarten to grade two were identified as needing support from the early literacy intervention teacher.

## Findings

The most significant success was seen in the cohort of students who were in senior kindergarten when the project began. At the beginning of the second year of the project, all of the students in that cohort were well below the grade level in the September/October PM Benchmark reading assessment. None of the students were able to read at level one. By January 2007, all had improved by an average of 6.6 levels. The greatest growth measured was 14 levels. Research suggested that the percentage of Aboriginal students reading at grade level would be lower than the percentage of non-Aboriginal students; in fact, the opposite was true with this group of learners. At the time of their second PM Benchmark assessment in 2008, 62% of the all of the grade two students in the school were reading at or above grade level, while 64% of the Native students were achieving at or above grade level in their PM Benchmark score.

The second significant improvement noted was with the cohort of students who began the program when they were in grade one. At the time of May 2007 assessment, all of the students were either significantly or slightly below grade level (grade level in September is 16). At the time they entered grade two, their average score was 10.7. By January 2007, their average score was 16.7 with the greatest increase being 11 levels. Although their grade two writing report marks were all level two or less, by grade three they had made gains in this area of the curriculum as well, and the majority of the students were achieving level three in writing. This group of students was the first cohort of First Nations students in the school to achieve the provincial average on the EQAO test (with the exception of one student who received an exemption from two components of the test—reading and mathematics). While this was a small group of students and the results can't be reliably used for comparison purposes, they illustrate the significant impact the Native student resource teacher had on the academic achievement of these students. For these students, the support given was crucial to their future academic progress.

The achievement levels of the cohorts in the junior and intermediate levels were not as significant, but still notable. All of the students in the cohort that began the project in grade four increased their EQAO scores in reading by one level on their grade six EQAO test.

Just as previous research has shown (Foorman, Brierer, and Fletcher 2003; Ontario 2005; Sloat, Beswick, and Willms 2007), the most significant academic results were noted with the youngest students. Early intervention is crucial to supporting the development of the skills required in literacy and numeracy.

Mykota and Schwean's (2006) research shows that school competence is a positive factor for emotional well-being and recommends that schools provided academic support for First Nations students. They emphasize that early intervention and ongoing support are important to reversing the trends towards failure in a vulnerable population.

Junior and intermediate students are more at risk for social exclusion and disengaging with school. The First Nations resource teacher provided these students with a safe and encouraging environment to discuss their concerns, and to find academic and social support with peers.

## **Conclusion**

The role of the Native student resource teacher was pivotal to the successes achieved by our First Nations and Métis students and to the successful implementation of the Learning Circle Project. She acted as educator, advocate, supporter, encourager, event organizer, and resource person. Students were provided with strategies, based on their strengths, that focused on oral language and high-level instruction in order to support the development of their reading and writing skills. The non-Native majority public school started on a path to becoming a community of caring, and the bridge between the non-Native majority society and the Native community began to form. When Native students struggled with walking in the two worlds, Ms. Alexander acted as their guide and advocate. The Native student resource teacher also became a resource to the staff. She ordered culturally appropriate teaching tools for the teachers' resource room, and provided learning opportunities for teachers through webcasts, assemblies, workshops, and school Professional Learning Community (PLC) contributions. She also supported connections and positive interactions with the First Nations community. For parents, she was their bridge to the school. She provided support at school conferences and meetings, as well as strategies for parents to use at home to support student academic success.

As the province strives to improve future outcomes for Aboriginals and reduce the academic achievement gaps for students in publicly funded schools, educators and administrators need to continue to examine the needs of these students. It is imperative that policies are developed to assist teachers and administrators to develop a positive view of Aboriginal students—a perspective that sees their potential and not just their deficits. It is essential that strategies that build on students' strengths and honour their rich cultural background are developed. For our students, one of the most effective strategies was a Native student resource teacher who was of Aboriginal descent.<sup>4</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 Editor's note: For a discussion of the Learning Circle Project, see Renfrew County District School Board Director's Annual Report 2008 <[www.renfrew.edu.on.ca/RCDSB 2008 Annual Report](http://www.renfrew.edu.on.ca/RCDSB_2008_Annual_Report)>.
- 2 Editor's note: Information for this section of the paper was gathered through personal experience and interviews by the authors. This chapter is an excellent example of community people engaging in projects and bringing their understanding to policy development.
- 3 Editor's note: These would be students living off-reserve in the rural area or town.
- 4 Editor's note: A recently published book on education included an article that looked at "social capital" and how this works to impact educational attainment (see White and Spence 2009). That paper argued that the policy issues involved include the recognition that students in indigenous communities need role models, educational liaison officers, the involvement of their families, and so on. This paper reinforces those conclusions.

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