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## **Reflections of Indian Teacher Education Program Graduates: Considerations for Educational Policy and Research**

Randolph Wimmer, Louise Legare, Yvette Arcand, and Michael  
Cottrell

### **Introduction**

In the early 1970s, as part of a larger national and international trend among indigenous peoples, Aboriginal groups within Saskatchewan began to assert their right to control their own education. The band-controlled school system was established both to improve educational attainment among Aboriginal peoples and to serve as a vehicle for the revitalization and transmission of languages, cultures, and world views of Aboriginal groups in the province (National Indian Brotherhood 1972): “Thus began the proliferation of Aboriginal teacher education programs across Canada; in particular, Saskatchewan became the site for at least four distinct Aboriginal teacher education programs” (St. Denis, Battiste, and Bouvier 1998, 4). The Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP) was established in response to the demand for qualified Aboriginal educators and is one of these four programs. To date, ITEP has prepared over a thousand graduates who now form a considerable part of teaching and administrative staff in band-controlled school systems in Saskatchewan and beyond. Despite its longevity and influence, little academic research has been conducted to date on ITEP or the experiences or accomplishments of its graduates (Legare 2007).

### ***Purpose of this Chapter***

This chapter is based on a research project that explored the experiences of ITEP graduates during their first two years of teaching in band-controlled environments. By recording and analyzing their reflections on their experiences after their first years of teaching, we identify some of the issues and challenges faced by beginning Aboriginal teachers in making the transition from the academy to the classroom and in applying theory to practice. The project from which this paper comes is situated more broadly within the following goals: (1) informing educational research that will affect the policy and practice of the community education of Aboriginal people and university-based teacher education; (2) advancing Aboriginal scholars’ research careers and modelling how research efforts may

be organized for, and by, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars to meet the needs of Aboriginal communities; (3) helping to fulfill the need for scholarship aimed at the academy to be better informed and better positioned to respond to the reality of current and future demographic patterns and community needs; and (4) better appreciating and understanding the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and their respective intellectual and cultural traditions through collaboration between scholars and partnerships formed by Aboriginal communities and universities.

We specifically intend this work to add to the multiple sources of input that faculties of education are collecting in their efforts to revise and reform their teacher education policies and practices.

### ***Why Study Aboriginal Teacher Education***

The reality of current demographic patterns in Canadian schools points to the need for higher education, including teacher education, to become better informed and more responsive to the needs of Aboriginal peoples.<sup>1</sup> Tymchak (2001) stresses that a significant change is taking place in many parts of Canada with respect to the growth in the number of school-aged children of Aboriginal ancestry. For example in the province of Saskatchewan, it is estimated that by 2016, Aboriginal people will represent 46.4% of the population. There is also a growing universal demand for well-prepared professionals more generally (Cochran-Smith 2003; Cross et al. 2000; Ralph, Walker, and Wimmer 2008). Society and communities delegate to those responsible for professional education, the task of preparing its teachers, doctors, lawyers, etc. The status and responsibility of today's professionals is acquiring an increased sense of importance and urgency (Aguayo 2004; Cochran-Smith and Zeichner 2005; Ziv 2002). This imperative is particularly evident in the preparation of indigenous teachers or in the preparation of non-indigenous teachers who may be teaching an ever-increasing, diverse Aboriginal population (Herbert 2003; Heimbecker, Minner, and Prater 2000; Hill 1998).

### ***The Indian Teacher Education Program***

The ITEP was established at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S) in the College of Education in 1972. Over the years, ITEP has responded to this mandate by developing a unique program within the existing College of Education at the U of S. ITEP follows the existing program for completion of the bachelor of education degree, but it is also unique and different in several aspects.

Specifically, ITEP is a direct-entry program with admission policies that encourage access for Aboriginal students. Once in attendance, ITEP focuses on student retention and persistence by providing many different types of support and services. For example, ITEP students take classes as a cohort, especially in the first two years of the program. ITEP classes offer First Nations Aboriginal course content and perspectives. Elders from the First Nations Aboriginal community participate in the program in many different ways. Students are also supported

with ongoing personal, academic, and advising and counselling services. ITEP students participate in a student council, which maintains a connection with the Aboriginal community and provides for many cultural activities and events throughout the school year. The overall structure of ITEP is based on a relationship-building model that meets Aboriginal students' spiritual, emotional, and physical needs, as well as developing their intellectual abilities.

Field experience placements consist of 2-week blocks of student teaching in students' second and third years of the program, followed by a 16-week internship taken in the last year of the program. These field experiences take place in both band-controlled schools and in provincially operated schools. Teacher candidates are provided with personal and professional support by the ITEP staff during their school experiences. Field experience placements are arranged by the same staff responsible for all placements in the college in consultation with the ITEP staff.

A critical part of ITEP's original mandate is the preservation and revitalization of Aboriginal languages and culture through the preparation of teachers who are well grounded in these areas. A teaching area in the Cree language has been offered at various times. One of ITEP's proudest accomplishments is the role played by its graduates in the incorporation of Aboriginal culture into school curriculum and the development of Cree language programs, including Cree immersion programs, in many band-controlled schools and in some public education systems in Saskatchewan.

## **Research Methodology**

There are two conceptual frameworks that guide how our research is designed, how information is analyzed, and how we present and discuss findings. One framework engages indigenous knowledge systems and the other comes from a more mainstream research tradition. We see the two as commensurate and complementary, but also stress the existence of some fundamental differences in these approaches. The Wilsons (1998) remind us that "the more we work together, the more we realize that Native researchers and scholars work from a different framework from that of their mainstream counterparts" (155). In later work, Stan Wilson describes that "the identity of Indigenous peoples, whose concept of self is rooted in the context of community and place, differs strikingly from many Euro-Canadians whose concept of self is frequently encapsulated in independence of the individual" (2001, 91). In earlier work, Eber Hampton (1995) explains that "the depth and breadth of misunderstanding and differences in perspectives between Native and white is little understood" (40–41). In bringing together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars, we acknowledge that our different ways have presented us with perhaps the greatest challenge in our work together. We also proudly admit that this has been the most powerful part of our learning. We describe the theoretical orientations to our work in the following ways.

Our work is built on the principle of connectedness or relationality which is central to Aboriginal epistemology. Here, Stan and Peggy Wilson (1998, 57) describe a world view where the individual is related to all living organisms. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Battiste (2000) both tell us that indigenous peoples identify themselves in relation to their ancestors and situate themselves in relationships to their relatives or even the geography of their traditional lands. La Duke (2005) goes so far to say that we are nothing on our own.

We are invited and permitted to conduct this research because of the respectful relationships we have established with ITEP students who are now beginning teachers, school administrators, graduate students, and community leaders. Our research intentionally engages indigenous knowledge systems in its approach. In keeping with the respect that is due to the knowledge holders—the beginning teachers—it seeks to let the knowledge be told, to reflect on it and understand it, and then to integrate that learning into Aboriginal teacher education and teacher education more generally. We believe our approach to be fundamentally different from more mainstream academic paradigms in which it is researchers who discover or create new knowledge, based on their inquiry with research participants. Rather, we believe our approach acknowledges First Nations beginning teachers as experts in how beginning teaching, both in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal contexts, is experienced and how it can be supported and improved. Moreover, the knowledge held by “knowers” is seen as a gift that they give to us. As researchers, we do not know what these beginning teachers know and can only access this knowledge by listening with respect and humility.

From a more mainstream approach, our research is qualitative, drawing on the principles of narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

While represented in a different language, there is much alignment, but not sameness, between what we describe above as indigenous knowledge systems and how we understand constructivism. “The central purpose (of constructivism) is that educational research should consider the participants’ views, describe it within a setting or context (e.g., a classroom, school, or community), and explore the meaning people hold for the educational issues” (Creswell 2002, 49). Guba and Lincoln (1998) describe constructivism’s methodology as dialectical. In relation to our study, and phrased in simpler terms, constructivism recognizes multiple realities, although Guba and Lincoln acknowledge that “elements are often shared among many individuals and even across cultures” (206). From an indigenous perspective, Wilson remarks that “all knowledge is affectively loaded: there is no such thing as objective truth where truth is always interpreted from a personal perspective” (67). As researchers, our “findings” come as we listen and consider what these beginning teachers tell us. Guba and Lincoln provide support to this approach. They state, “the investigator and the object of investigation are linked so that ‘findings’ are *created* as the investigation proceeds” (207). They go on to say that “individual constructions come only through interaction between and among investigator and respondents” (207). Finally, for Schwandt, a

constructivist approach has an emphasis on “the world of experience as it is lived, felt, undergone by social actors” (1998, 236). Taken together, these methodological perspectives underpin both how the research project was designed (more elaboration is provided next), as well as how we make sense of what we are learning.

## **Methods**

### ***Ethical Approvals***

Respecting the protocols of the Cree-speaking people of Saskatchewan, our work began with an offer of pipe, a sweat lodge with an elder and community members, followed by a feast where our work received much guidance, approval, and support. We begin our collective work time with prayer. Willie Ermine (1995) tells us that “in Aboriginal epistemology, prayer extracts relevant guidance and knowledge from the inner-space consciousness” (109). The project received approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board.

### ***Participants***

We agree with Clift and Brady’s (2005) assertion that the voice of students needs to be heard in educational policy research. Forty-four participants were invited to participate in this study and initially all agreed to participate. In the end, 30 teachers took part in the study. They are all First Nations graduates of ITEP. Each has been teaching for two years and each is employed in a band-controlled school in north-central Saskatchewan.

### ***Gathering Information***

Information was gathered from the teachers through what we describe as conversations rather than interviews. In most cases all four researchers were present and each person took an active role in the conversations. This is consistent with how other research in Aboriginal education has been conducted, where “conversation with Aboriginal teachers is a useful way to gain insight into the stories about their lives and how their lives impact upon their teaching because it is based on a two-way flow of ideas and does not place the researcher in a position of privilege (St. Denis, Battiste, and Bouvier 1998). Hampton (1995) admits how his first efforts to “interview” American Indian Program participants were problematic. He goes on to describe how after the first two interviews, “The happy solution was to drop most of the interview questions and encourage the participants to elaborate by ... active listening and co-participation” (12).

Each conversation was framed around three points that we asked teachers to talk about. These included: (1) their experiences, as students, with ITEP; (2) how their first two years of teaching were going; and (3) in what ways did ITEP prepare them well for teaching and in what ways did they feel unprepared for their beginning years of teaching. We talked about the three points with the teachers at the time of inviting them to participate in the study. This gave the teachers a

sense of what our research was about and a framework for thinking about the conversations. While we reviewed these points during the conversations, they did not take the form of interview questions. We sat in a circular format and followed no particular order in terms of who spoke. All teachers told us that they were comfortable in having the conversation audio-recorded. This approach is consistent with St. Denis, Battiste, and Bouvier's (1998) research in Aboriginal education; they explained that while "an interview protocol was used to guide, ... the atmosphere could be characterized as a conversation between colleagues, informal yet directed" (19). Each conversation lasted up to two hours and most of them took place in the school where each participating teacher was employed. In most cases we met with one teacher, but in a few cases it was the desire of two teachers to meet with us, namely because of time constraints.

### **Analysis**

We took the information and knowledge shared by the teachers and developed four themes through thematic analysis. These were developed during extensive discussions of the tapes. After all conversations were completed, researchers listened to the tapes and created notes containing key points they had heard. The tapes and these notes became what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe as *field texts*. Through a lengthy collaborative process we identified four themes.

## **Themes (Results)**

Our overall finding was that the participating teachers spoke very positively about their experiences in ITEP. One of the teachers began our conversation by stating: "You did an excellent job ... I wouldn't be here otherwise. You stood by me through thick and thin." Many identified the cohort dimension as being most important, in that it provided a critical mass of Aboriginal students to create a degree of safety and security, akin to a sense of family in "learning with your own people." Another teacher remarked, "I've loved my first year of teaching and have nothing but good things to say about where I am and how I got here." Others mentioned that the small class size and the close personal relationships with ITEP staff provided academic and personal support, which were critical to success. During one conversation a teacher said, "I enjoyed my one-on-one time with professors and I knew exactly who I could go to for help. Just knowing this got me through a lot of my struggles." Many mentioned that the overall environment of ITEP was culturally affirming and helped the beginning teachers to be more confident in asserting their presence and feeling proud of their culture within the larger campus environment. Several of the teachers made comments such as, "I like how the Aboriginal protocols are a part of how ITEP works." Many identified their peer relationships and the friendships that developed as an important supportive legacy for their beginning teaching careers.

The four specific themes we identified are discussed in the following section. We have intentionally reported our findings in a general way, opting not to include



many of the very rich personal quotes (particularly the overly negative ones) made by the teachers. In mainstream qualitative research, we would say that adding such quotes from individuals and including more of their personal stories would add depth and richness to how we report our work. However, in doing so, we would run the risk of identifying the participants and making them even more vulnerable as beginning teachers and community members. We make explicit to readers this delimitation of how we present these findings.

### ***Preparedness***

In general, the teachers felt that ITEP prepared them well for the academic aspects of teaching, but all said that they experienced difficulties in adjusting to the day-to-day realities of teaching in band schools. They explained that teaching on a reserve presents unique challenges stemming from a pervasive culture of poverty; educational disadvantage; scarcity of resources; the complex dynamics of small, close-knit communities; and the pressures of working in an educational environment that is often highly politicized, where teachers and administrators rarely enjoy stability or security. Consequently high teacher turnover is common. During a conversation with two teachers, both agreed that “if you work in a school where you have relatives, things quickly can become sticky.” In a similar way, another teacher said, “It’s like a family in these schools but that gets people into trouble as well. It’s easy to get sucked into things.” We note here the use of family as metaphor, as described later, was used often by the teachers. In another conversation, a teacher described that “teachers know the politics but don’t know how to work with the effects of politics in the classroom and school.”

Many of the teachers expressed concern about the volume of extracurricular activities that was expected of them both in the school and the community. A striking comment made by more than one of the participants was that “teachers are expected to be slaves to the community.” Others remarked: “If you work in a band school you are paid less to do more.” This high level of demands on Aboriginal teachers appears not be unique to teaching in band-controlled schools. St. Denis, Battiste, and Bouvier (1998) state, “this unrealistic and insensitive demand is reported widely” (4). They cite the earlier work of Bouvier, where she notes “that Aboriginal teacher are held to very high expectations, and are expected to be able to solve all the issues facing the community” (4). Monsivais (cited in St. Denis, Battiste, and Bouvier 1998) “found that Latino teachers surveyed felt that they were ‘typecast into activities related to their ethnicity and these activities increased their workload beyond that of the average teacher’” (4).

Despite these challenges and frustrations, all of the teachers expressed high levels of job satisfaction, felt that teaching was the right career choice for them, and took great satisfaction from contributing to the development of the youth in their community or in First Nation communities generally. Either directly or indirectly, many of these teachers expressed a belief that teaching in a band school was part of a larger project of decolonization for Aboriginal peoples. As



we concluded a conversation a teacher said, "I love being with the kids. I take my energy from them and they rejuvenate me. I know this is what I want to do even though teaching wasn't my first career choice." The love, care, and respect of these teachers toward the children they worked with was clear and consistent in every conversation and did not differ between female and male teachers. We can understand these teachers' notions of love. They care for children beyond what we've come to expect from teachers in general. Like St. Denis, Battiste, and Bouvier (1998) we found these teachers described their relationship to students as "special." Here the metaphor of family and the role of advocacy are particularly helpful. Again we draw on the work of St. Denis, Battiste, and Bouvier, who found "Aboriginal and minority teachers describe their work as a form of advocacy" (7). They go on to say, "The family serves as a source of inspiration and understanding in the work of Aboriginal and minority teachers" (7).

There were many valuable more specific comments in the area of teacher preparation that came forward from our conversations with the teachers. Their suggestions and concerns were expressed in the following ways. While most of the beginning teachers said that they felt well prepared in the areas of lesson and unit planning, they could not say the same about preparedness in creating yearly plans. In this part of the conversation, we note that in most cases, these beginning teachers were being asked to provide more evidence of planning to their school administrators than is the case for other beginning teachers we have worked with in provincial school systems. One teacher remarked that "we have to write so much down for every class we teach. We are told to do this so I do it not knowing if anyone really reads them. The expectations for writing plans are much higher for reserve schools." In a different conversation, another teacher offered the following: "Planning on a reserve is different than in provincial schools. As teachers, we know that doing so much paperwork and planning is a reality for how our schools are funded."

Many of the beginning teachers stated that a disproportionately high number of students in band schools experience learning difficulties. Many of the teachers felt that they should have been better prepared to work with students with special learning needs, to teach multiple grade levels, and to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of all learners. Assessing and evaluating student learning was identified as a major challenge for many of these teachers, given the wide range of skill levels in a given classroom and the prevalence of "social passing." While ITEP did provide some preparation in the area of student assessment, many of these teachers felt that more by way of assessment would be beneficial to them in their beginning years of teaching. In particular, many teachers said they were not well prepared in terms of how to work with learners who are functioning well below the grade level they are in. In addition, given the high number of students designated as "special needs," many of the teachers have teaching assistants (TAs) available to them. However, most felt unprepared in how to work with other adults in the classroom. Statements from the teachers to support this include: "I found it

difficult to work with TAs and if they couldn't work independently, it was a waste of time and money"; "their role is a little foggy to me"; and "working with a TA was really foreign to me in my first year of teaching." They also acknowledged the complexity of working with teaching assistants who were both parents of the children they taught and also members of the community in which they worked and lived.

In their specific comments about individual courses, the teachers indicated that coursework in educational administration, law, and ethics could have been made more relative to the reserve school system and that these courses did not prepare teachers well enough for dealing with the complexity of professional and ethical issues they encounter both in schools and in the community. One teacher explained: "What I learned in my ed. admin. course didn't happen in reality. Instead, we should have learned about specific protocols for dealing with ethics and legal issues in band-controlled schools." Some of the teachers commented that their beginning teacher education could be expanded to better prepare them to teach in secondary education and in Cree language instruction.

### ***"Hands-On" Learning***

From the literature and from our work in teacher education, we consistently hear from both teachers and undergraduate students that one of the most valuable learning experiences in teacher education is the field-based component, often referred to as student teaching or practicum. At the U of S, the term "student teaching" is referred to as the short, largely observational experiences in schools. The longer (16 weeks), more sustained field experience is referred to as the internship. All of the beginning teachers commented extensively on their field experiences. Here too, the comments ranged from general to specific. Many were offered as suggestions for improving the ITEP. All of the teachers recognized the valuable experience of the internship, but most indicated that there should be more opportunities for "hands-on" experiences in schools. The term "hands-on" was used consistently by the participants. Some teachers said that, in addition to assigned placements, there should be more opportunities to visit a wider variety of educational settings throughout the program; these could be in urban, rural, and band-controlled settings. Pertaining specifically to band-controlled schools, a number of teachers expressed the feeling that, "in addition to the internship and student teaching, it would have been good to visit different communities because we know that there is not one typical reserve." While there was general agreement that there should be early student teaching experiences, the comments specific to the current two-week placements were mixed. There were several comments, such as the following: "To be honest, the two weeks of student teaching wasn't really helpful and I didn't learn a lot. I feel it needs to be a lot longer and earlier in the program. When I did it, I felt more like a visitor at a school and not a beginning teacher." Another teacher offered the following insight: "I knew well before student teaching that I loved teaching and loved working with children

... I knew teaching was my passion ... so let me enjoy my passion as early as I can.” Some teachers indicated that there was too much emphasis on observation in these experiences and that they wanted more hands-on time with students, teachers, and teaching assistants. Some of the more practical aspects of teaching for which some teachers felt they could be better prepared include: how to set up a classroom, find resources, maintain the student register, do report cards, communicate with parents and resolve conflict, and maintain an effective learning environment. Again, while observation may assist in coming to terms with these tasks, the teachers indicated that hands-on time would offer a more valuable learning experience. Moreover, given what is expected from today’s beginning teachers, there was some suggestion that the expectations for the internship and student teaching experiences should be made higher than currently is the case. A more in-depth discussion of the theme of hands-on learning appears later.

### ***Collegial Relationships/Mentorship***

We note many times how the teachers experienced a great deal of support from their peers in ITEP and how this was a significant part of their success in completing their teacher education program. We also note that this finding is consistent with what we learned from similar studies with beginning Aboriginal teachers. We learned that many of the teachers indicated that the relationships developed in ITEP extended to their lives as beginning teachers, although most were not teaching in the same schools. Much of our conversations dealt with the nature of support from colleagues in the school, new relationships they were establishing in schools, and how they were being mentored in their beginning years of teaching. What we learned in this regard is less positive than what the teachers told us about their experience while in ITEP.

The teachers talked a lot about how they would like to have more supportive relationships with other teachers and school administrators, especially in times of need or when the decision is made to transfer to another school. Nearly all of them wished there was more mentoring available to them, particularly from more senior teachers. Some of the conversations we had made mention of a desire for a more formalized mentorship program for teachers of Aboriginal students. One of the teachers explained that “one of the reasons against coming back to my reserve was the way older teachers act in that they didn’t help the new teachers and they seemed to enjoy working by themselves.” Another said that “it was only in my mainstream education courses where they spoke about the importance of having a mentor as a beginning teacher.” We also learned that there is much interest in becoming a part of the provincial teachers’ association; currently, teachers who are employed in band-controlled schools are not a part of the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation. There were many examples of teachers speaking in support of this, including: “In a band school you don’t have the nice big union like teachers do in provincial schools. We really need some kind of professional representation.” Many of the teachers believe that support from school administration and lead-

ership is critical to their success as beginning teachers. Some of the teachers indicated this support was lacking in their situation, and they described their first years as “sink or swim.” Rick Hesch helps make sense of what we learned here. In his study of SUNTEP (Southern Urban Native Teacher Education Program) interns, he found “the sharing culture and relatively egalitarian social relations of SUNTEP were replaced by an unequal binary relationship between intern and supervising teacher” (1995, 185). We note here that Hesch’s work was with interns and not beginning teachers; nonetheless, his work adds understanding to what we learned. Hesch cites Connell as he describes that “teachers operate in comparative autonomy” (185). We recognize that this reality is widely recognized in teacher education. However, given the strength of the cohort experience the teachers in our study had come to know and rely on, the loss of a sense of support from others is significant. Here too, we provide a deeper analysis of cohort support later in this discussion.

### ***Community/Parent Relationships***

The final theme we wish to address also deals with relationships and is specific to what the beginning teachers experienced in terms of their relationships with parents and other community members. Many of the teachers involved in our study spoke about the complexity and challenge of dealing with members of the community and parents. While dealing with the community and parents is a part of the dynamics of many beginning teachers’ workplaces, band-controlled schools have a unique dynamic given most First Nation communities are small and close-knit. Many teachers bring “relationship baggage” from communities into their workplace. The teachers we worked with recommend that ITEP give much more attention to helping teachers deal with these conflicts and improve the overall professionalism of band schools. They suggested that a “life skills” type of course that addressed the complexities and challenges of working in politicized environments would be valuable to beginning teachers in band-controlled schools. In many cases, they wished for more parental involvement in schools. In cases of conflict with parents, many of the teachers indicated that they wished they were better prepared to deal with these issues as they arose. One teacher explained that this is a reality of teaching in band-controlled schools and offered the following as a way for beginning teachers to cope with this complexity: “I stick to myself when things have the potential to get messy. My teaching and class come first and that’s how I believe I make a difference in kids’ lives and on the reserve. I work hard at being positive and staying away from the bad stuff. We need to remember that kids come first.” We are reminded here of what we described earlier about teachers’ advocacy role for children and the metaphor of family.

From our work with many beginning teachers, we regard the level of expectation for beginning teachers in band-controlled schools as unusually high. On the one hand, many of beginning teachers said this “felt good.” On the other hand, this level of expectation increased the teachers’ workloads, particularly in terms

of the extracurricular activities that were expected of them both in the school and in the community. One teacher explained that “the expectations of beginning teachers to do extracurricular work are so much higher ... we sign in our contract that we will do at least ... hours of extracurricular both in school and in the community.” Again, St. Denis, Battiste, and Bouvier’s work helps us make sense of Aboriginal teachers’ relationships with parents and community: “Teachers are tested in multiple ways by both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents and communities ... in Aboriginal communities they are required to prove themselves as capable as their non-Aboriginal colleagues or they may be challenged in their cultural values and in the personal choices and decisions they make in their own personal professional lives” (1998, 56).

While the beginning teachers were well aware of the expectations outlined in professional codes of conduct for teachers, they indicated that too often these expectations were not met by members of the community or even by other teachers in the school. One teacher indicated that, “even though people are aware of the code of conduct for teachers, many believe they don’t have to follow it. I don’t know how true this is but I think it’s crazy ... both teachers and parents need to be ethical.” Many of the teachers we spoke with felt ill prepared in how to deal with ethical and professional issues with parents and the community. Finally, many of the teachers indicated that teaching assistants and substitute teachers, who are usually also community members and the parents of children they taught, are frequently not adequately prepared to take on their roles. This presents a challenge in terms of how they, as teaching professionals, relate to other staff in the schools.

## **Meaningfulness/Impact**

In reflecting on the First Nations education in higher education, Marker (2004) draws our attention to “a shortage of writing about Indigenous reality in the literature on higher education” (187). We also acknowledge that work such as van der Wey’s (2007) is adding to our understanding of First Nations higher education. While our work is set in the specific context of teacher education, we hope that what we are learning from the beginning teachers will help inform rethinking of policies and practices in teacher education and in higher education more generally. Perhaps less explicitly, we also hope our work informs educational research. Our immediate goal is to take what we are learning and share it with places such as the universities of Saskatchewan and Alberta where, as it is in many Canadian universities, teacher education is being reconsidered. While the following discussion makes recommendations, we are not suggesting these findings alone will be used to make policy and program change. Instead, we stress that we hope these findings will be used to help inform the current processes that universities are undertaking to reconsider and reform their policies and practices of teacher education.

### ***Moving Forward from Our Work***

As noted above, Stan and Peggy Wilson's work has been most helpful to us in terms of how we approached this study and how we understand what we've learned. Their work also guides us in how we share what we've learned and how we move ahead. In doing so, we are committed to a thoughtful, respectful, but cautious approach. Central to this is our sensitivity to what we've learned from the teachers in the study and how we talk about what we've learned. Here, the Wilsons remind us that: "In addition to being related in a kinship manner to all living organisms, there is the added dimension of respect for and taking care of 'all our relations'" (1998, 157). This is consistent with how we understood teachers' care and respect for their students. The Wilsons go on to say that, "every individual is therefore responsible for his or her own actions, but not in isolation" (157). What then, does this suggest in terms of how we move forward?

We honour what our knowledge holders have given us. We also are cognizant of the complex contexts in which they work and live. We are sensitive to what they have given us and how we use that knowledge to make our current programs better in preparing future teachers. We have also committed to the elder and communities where we worked that we would use what we learned to inform teacher education programs. As teacher educators we need not only report what we've learned, but also to take responsibility for taking this knowledge and incorporating it into our practice so that our programs provide better learning experiences for future beginning Aboriginal teachers, and ultimately teacher education more generally. In spring 2009 we will come to a place similar to where we began this study by sharing what we've learned with the elder and community, the teachers involved in our study, and with our two universities. We have a responsibility to take what we've learned and make sure it is a part of current rethinking of teacher education. The Aboriginal researchers on the team say that from an Aboriginal perspective this promotes the teaching of *reciprocity*, a term we understand as similar to the Wilsons' notion of relational accountability. Very clearly, the conceptual frame of "relationality" or "connectedness" we described earlier in this paper serves as key in making sense of the experiences of the beginning teachers in this study and weaves its way throughout this discussion. Methodologically, this has some resonance (but not sameness) to constructivism, which suggests that understanding comes in relation to others. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to this type of teacher knowledge as coming from "social stories."

### ***Cohorts***

From our conversations with beginning teachers, we learned about the profound differences between university learning experiences when the students were in classes with only ITEP students, and in those where there were few if any other Aboriginal learners. Frequently, the former experiences were much more positive than the latter. We also heard there is a need for more preparation for secondary school teachers and more in-depth study of subject matter usually offered outside



of colleges and faculties of education. In large universities such as the U of S and especially in introductory science classes and some areas of study in the humanities, such classes are typically very large and students do not get to know and support one another. In reality many of these classes, where competition and individualism are more common than support from cohorts, are contradictory to what we learned is desirable from the teachers. St. Denis (2004) explains that the term “culture” has replaced the term “race,” and this acknowledgment supports the argument that there is not social equality between cultures. For example, indigenous cultures are positioned on a lower rung in society, at least as the dominant society perceives indigenous peoples. Although called places of *higher education*, many university classrooms are a microcosm of the reality articulated by St. Denis.

We can make sense of the cohort experience of these teachers through the frame of “connectedness and relationality.” We are also aware that this is not unlike what we know about mainstream teacher education, where there has been a move by faculties of education to organize more programs around student cohorts (Mandzuk and Hasinoff 2002; Mather and Hanely 1999; Shapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott 2001 as cited in Mandzuk, Hasinoff, and Seifort 2003). Together, these works tell us, “cohorts provide students with an opportunity to belong to a supportive community of like-minded people” (169). Unlike Mandzuk, Hasinoff, and Seifort, the teachers in our study did not talk about competition within cohorts and instead told us only about how critical the support they received from cohorts was to their success in the program and in program completion.

We also learned the teachers experienced what could be a sense of loss of collegial support as they left the ITEP cohorts for their new lives as beginning teachers. There is a need for more support for beginning Aboriginal teachers and a need for more intentional forms of mentorship during the beginning years of teaching. Here, too, we are aware that this is not new to beginning teacher education. However, given the complexity of these teachers’ workplaces, we stress the need is greater. We know from our work in teacher induction that there are calls for an ongoing role for teacher educators and universities in supporting beginning teachers. Might this idea be applied to places of Aboriginal teacher education? Given the Wilsons’ notion of “relational accountability,” how might a process of community education and engagement and an ongoing role for higher education be brought about and facilitated?

In sum then, for ITEP students, cohorts are supportive rather than competitive. The learning environments within cohorts provide a sense of safety and build confidence in beginning First Nations teachers. As the teachers begin teaching on their own, ITEP graduates experience a sense of loss of collegial support. We recommend that Aboriginal teacher education programs maintain cohort approaches and that a mentorship program for beginning teachers in First Nations schools be established. From an Aboriginal perspective, this promotes *mastery through relationships*.



### ***Field Experience***

We learned that the beginning teachers in our study would like to have more opportunities for field experience during their teacher education. While not specific to Aboriginal teacher education, from the literature we know that student teaching is a critical aspect of pre-service teacher education (O'Brien and Elcess 2005; Zeichner 2002). Wilson (1999) referred to field experience as the core feature of teacher education. The foundational premise upon which all of these practice-based programs are based is that authentic and deep learning occurs when the learner applies relevant knowledge and skills to solve real-life problems encountered by actual practitioners in the field (Renzulli, Gentry, and Reis 2004; Wilkerson and Gijsselaers 1996). While we are aware of current debates in teacher education around how much field experience is necessary, we recommend that in the case of Aboriginal teacher education, there should be more and varied field experience opportunities. The Aboriginal researchers on our team write that from an Aboriginal perspective this promotes *learning through experience*. This is well supported by research outside of teacher education, where Kolb's (1983) seminal work on experiential learning, together with recent neurological research (Zull 2004, 70–72), has confirmed the tenets of field-based education—that the more areas of the brain learners use when solving relevant and realistic problems, the more meaningful the learning will be. There is evidence that the nature of teacher education itself is changing in response to what Darling-Hammond (1999) and others such as Goodlad (1994) have termed a *changing world*. Our work calls for more opportunities for teacher candidates to have hands-on experiences with children, other teachers, parents, and teaching assistants in a variety of settings both on- and off-reserve.

### ***Teacher Preparation***

We can immediately implement a great deal of what we've learned from these teachers into the current practices of ITEP instructors. We take responsibility for doing this. However, other things we've learned from this study are broader and far more complex. In her article entitled "There Is No Way to Prepare for This," Helen Harper (2000) addresses some of these major challenges. While we are aware that her work is focused on the experiences of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women teachers teaching in northern Ontario, we find that much of her work resonates with what we've learned. Harper speaks to the complex relationships of teachers to the school and community. She writes about teachers' "difficulty in defining or negotiating their relationship to the community and grounds of engagement with the community on educational matters" (149).

In sum, in band-controlled environments, there are complex relationships between teachers, schools, and the community, and even though ITEP graduates are familiar with the issues in First Nations communities, they do not feel prepared enough to deal with these issues as teachers. We recommend that Aboriginal teacher education have, as a part of the program, "life skills" training. Our

Aboriginal members of the research team write that this promotes the Aboriginal teaching of *holistic learning*.

Despite these challenges, we wish to return to what we presented as the first finding in this paper, when our teachers told us how well ITEP did in preparing them for their beginning years as teachers. This is observed by other scholars in the area of beginning teachers in First Nations communities. Duquette (2000) describes Aboriginal teacher education in northern Saskatchewan as “successful in developing graduates who are role models for their community and who are proud of their culture and their ability to infuse it into the curriculum. These programs are seen as a means of building the capacity to achieve Native control over education” (135). On this positive note, we end here with our concluding remarks.

## Conclusion

We’ve tried to convey a few things in this chapter. First and foremost, we’ve provided readers with an overview of what we’ve been given during this research project in relation to both what we’ve learned from the 30 teachers who participated in the study and the tremendous learning about research that has taken place among the four of us. We’ve taken some of our learning and discussed it in relation to what some of the literature says about Aboriginal and mainstream teacher education. Less explicitly, we’ve also attempted to explain how differing world views can come together in respectful and open-minded ways to make sense of others’ and our own experiences. Though outside the scope of this paper, we also begin to share a model of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars and universities and Aboriginal communities working together. We need to stress here that much of what we report as findings are not new to teacher education. What we hope to convey is that in many cases, the weaknesses of our current teacher education programs and the challenges of beginning teachers appear to be even more relevant to the experiences of beginning First Nations teachers in band-controlled schools. We also caution those places currently rethinking teacher education to pay attention to the experiences of Aboriginal people. While most Aboriginal teacher education programs are housed within faculties of education, their relationship with mainstream teacher education varies greatly. Our work serves to add information to the processes of teacher education reform by providing much-needed Aboriginal perspectives to the policy development process.

Like much good learning, we now have more questions than before. We are planning to extend our current work by talking to recent ITEP graduates who are teaching in and around the city of Saskatoon, but not on reserves. There are about ten such teachers, a good-sized group, who have all expressed an interest in working with our project. We feel we will learn a great deal from that group of teachers. We also have plans to extend our current study to continue to look at the experiences of beginning Aboriginal teachers in more contexts, and to include

all of Saskatchewan and Alberta, both band-controlled and non-band-controlled schools, and rural and urban settings. This is an ambitious plan, but we feel there is a great need for such an investigation particularly at this time in teacher education.

We end here by stating our heartfelt thanks to the beginning teachers who were a part of this study. We wish them well in the amazing work they do. We offer our appreciation for the guidance and support we have received from our elder and from the communities. We continue to be guided by their desire to make the world a better place for all children. Finally, we need to thank the staff in the ITEP office at the U of S for their continued support of, and interest in, our work.

## Endnotes

- 1 Editor's note: See Chapter One in *Aboriginal Education: Current Crisis, Future Alternatives*. White et al., 2009.

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