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## A CULTURALLY RELEVANT PROGRAM IN A FIRST NATION CLASSROOM: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

Mackenzie Ann Sayers

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A CULTURALLY RELEVANT PROGRAM IN A FIRST NATION CLASSROOM:  
AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

(Spine Title: Culturally Relevant First Nation Classroom Program)


(Thesis Format: Monograph)

by

Mackenzie A. Sayers

Graduate Program in Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Education

  
The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

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**A Culturally Relevant Program in a First Nation Classroom**

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## ABSTRACT

In contrast to the negative era of residential schooling during which efforts were made to extinguish Aboriginal languages and culture, cultural revival is now regarded as a positive and desirable aspect of First Nations education. Through the use of an action research methodology, this thesis explores the development and implementation of a culturally relevant program in a First Nation classroom. The research is presented as a story of the journey an educator took, thereby respecting the First Nations' tradition of story telling as a teaching and learning method designed to promote understanding.

The research demonstrated that implementing a culturally relevant program in a First Nation classroom requires the use of a teacher-guided approach that utilizes community resources to ensure a program compatible with the community's culture. Programming ran most smoothly when it allowed students to be active participants and engage in hands-on activities. Teacher reflections reinforced the findings of others that a culturally relevant program could instill confidence in students, improve classroom management, and provide growth for an educator in a First Nation classroom.

Keywords: action research, culturally relevant programming, First Nations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is a story telling about an action research based project that looked at effective implementation of a culturally relevant program in a First Nation classroom. This story could not be told without identifying the community where the school is located, and the resources that were offered by various organizations. The writing of this thesis was a personal journey that brought forth knowledge not only in how to deliver a culturally relevant program, but also in how I saw myself as a teacher that could better serve my students, present and future. It allowed me to see how the education system has changed for the better for First Nation students who can now embrace their culture in a formal educational institution.

I would like to thank Dr. Rebecca Coulter for all her input into this thesis since day one when it was just a thought and seemingly unattainable. I would also like to thank Dr. Carol Beynon who helped me from the beginning of my journey in the Master's program and for being patient with my sometimes constant emails.

Without family and friends to offer guidance and support, this would have been an unattainable dream. Thank you to my mother who always fought for our education and my father who was always there with a corny joke to make me smile through the hardships. For three amazing sisters who were always there through thick and thin. Finally, I would like to give an acknowledgement to my unborn child who, without knowing it, has pushed me through to the end to attain my dream of completing this thesis.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Castagno and Brayboy (2008) summarize research on the implementation of culturally responsive schooling programs and provide convincing evidence such programs improve the academic achievement of First Nations students. The research suggests that First Nation schools ought to provide a program that meets academic requirements, while offering a curriculum that is culturally relevant to the First Nation and respects traditional knowledge and ways of life. Hence, the purpose of my research is to explore effective ways of incorporating a culturally relevant program in a First Nation classroom. I sought out and developed resources to provide such a program and implement it in a manner that I believed met the needs of the students, the school, and the community. By introducing changes in my classroom and reflecting on the success of various approaches, it became possible to suggest ways to develop a school wide program that is culturally infused.

Because of the history of First Nation education, many students in the region where I teach do not understand what it means to be Anishinawbek and as the literature reveals, this affects both their perceptions of themselves and their performance in everyday life, including in the classroom. Hookimaw-Witt (1998) argues that "education itself not only has not helped to prevent the social problems we have today, but has actually created them, and that when we do not change the basis of the education for Native people, the process started by residential schools will continue" (p. 160). Without self-identity, students may face difficulties with

attendance and tardiness, fail to complete homework, exhibit a lack of engagement and create discipline problems. Because of a lack of cultural knowledge, students may be struggling with identity questions and wondering who they are as individuals and this may affect their overall behaviour. By teaching young people their history and offering them culturally relevant curriculum and resources, students can learn who they are, where they are going, and what they need to do to achieve their goals.

My research provides a classroom based study of ways to develop and use culturally relevant curriculum materials and in doing so, contributes to and supports on-going efforts to strengthen the capacity of teachers in First Nation schools to deliver appropriate educational programming. My research also contributes to the growing body of literature that examines the “best practices” that facilitate success for Aboriginal students.

### **Background to the Study**

As a teacher in a First Nation school I noticed that many of the students were aware of their culture, or background, but did not have the opportunity to celebrate it on a consistent basis in the classroom. Bell (2006) states that:

Anishinaabe education has always been about ‘survival’ in any environment that existed for them. ‘Survival’ today requires that our children have the skills necessary to provide for themselves in the dominant Canadian and global culture, while being strongly grounded



in who they are as an Anishinaabe person and ensuring that the culture of the Anishinaabe people 'survives.' (p.1)

Bell's research demonstrates that implementing a culturally relevant program for First Nation students provides them with an environment that fosters their growth as individuals and in academics.

I identified the need for such programming based on personal growth throughout my time as a student in the education system and subsequent findings that backed my personal insights. I entered the education system in a Roman Catholic separate school board and it was not until I was nine years old that I was introduced to the Anishinawbek traditional way of life. Through personal experiences in school as an elementary student, I have the memories of not being given the opportunity to celebrate my own culture within a school setting and of being forced to adopt the 'dominant' cultural practices of the school. I was subjected to racism and my peers identified me as a 'devil worshipper', or 'pagan' because I did not take part in the school's Catholic ceremonies. Being in such an environment made me feel isolated and de-valued because my own beliefs had to be set-aside for those of another. Having lived through this, I do not want to make my own students feel this way. Now, as a teacher, it is important to me to value students for who they are because "Spirit is the first standard of Indian Education" (Graveline, 2002, p. 13). I do not want to inflict any damage on the spiritual wellness of my students. I want them to be comfortable with who they are as

Anishinawbek and realize that this part of their lives could be celebrated on a daily basis and in a classroom setting.

My experiences in elementary school were not always bleak and there were times when I was able to share my culture and practice my own beliefs and I will forever remember those educators who allowed this. Some examples include encouraging me to learn the Seven Grandfather teachings while the other students were learning about the Ten Commandments (and we all had to present afterwards so this allowed for a learning that included all), or praying and smudging when it was my week to lead the students in prayer, or having a school wide pow-wow to acknowledge the culture of the Anishinawbek since there was a high population of First Nations students. I aspire to become an educator who can create an educational environment that acknowledges diversity while also allowing personal growth to encourage confidence because I know this approach personally affected my own ability to succeed.

With opportunities that allowed me to delve into the history of the Anishinawbek, I came to realize that “almost every ancient story does not explain; instead it focuses on process of knowing” (Young, 2003, p. 101). I was given the opportunity not only to understand, but also know what it meant to be an Anishinawbek, thus allowing for confidence to build within myself and for spirituality to be honoured. This is significant because “Spirituality is the very element that Aboriginal educators say enables students to become critical participants in the genuine edges and boundaries of a complex history because they

know and understand themselves and fellow students” (Doige, 2003, p. 155). With the assistance of educators in my own educational journey I was able to understand myself as an Anishinawbe Kwe (woman) and today I have a responsibility to assist my own students. The program I developed and delivered for this action research project gives the opportunity for a culture to be shared while still respecting the diversity found within the community as not all members practice the traditional Anishinawbek ways.

Prior to this study, I had worked at my current school for four years and noticed that the school staff sporadically incorporated cultural events and materials into their programming. Some school administrators or teachers suggested various events with the majority of them being planned and executed by teacher volunteers. Examples of such activities included organizing a school wide powwow (at the end of the year), or, as in my first year at the school, holding weekly workshops with local cultural teachers, artisans, and story tellers who assisted students in making various projects or learning new stories. Unfortunately, the weekly workshops were not continued due to financial burdens, but the powwows still occur on an annual basis and the school has now adopted a clan system where the entire student body is divided into clans (based on the Anishinawbek clan system) and participates in a monthly activity that individual teachers prepare for visiting clans. Many teachers feature a culturally relevant activity including drumming, singing, or leadership skills. On some ‘Clan Days’ the students participate in socials where traditional drumming and dancing take place. During these days, I noticed that my teaching went more smoothly and students were more apt to be in better spirits,

and their academic performance improved. For this reason, and after reviewing the scholarly literature, I decided to give the students in my classroom the opportunity to be introduced to a more culturally relevant program. I wanted to see whether offering such a program would affect my own methods of teaching and the type of environment I provided for my students.

The students in my class live within their home community (a reserve), and among other First Nations members, but were not immersed in a culturally relevant program that reflected the culture of the community. Marsden (2006) states "more recently, people are questioning not only who is delivering the curricula to whom, but also from whose world view the curricula and processes are being created" (p. 136). I became one of those questioning people. In the school community where I work the educators within their own classrooms determine what their students learn and whether to implement a culturally relevant program. For the most part, the school follows the Ontario provincial curriculum for elementary schools but many teachers do try to make it more culturally rich. However, the question really is, "How does one go about this while not compromising academic expectations?" By utilizing local resources and personal knowledge, I believe it is possible to provide a more culturally rich environment but as an educator who was not from the community where my school is located, I had to search out the resources. Luckily, many were more than willing to help in this great endeavor, making my plans possible to carry out. Once I knew the resources were available, it was my task to piece all the resources together to make a viable culturally relevant program while not compromising the content of the provincial curriculum I also was

expected to follow. I believed that by allowing my students the opportunity to engage in a more culturally relevant classroom, I could provide an academically rich class. In addition, the students would learn about what it means to be from a First Nation and where they come from as a people, thus positively affecting their behaviour and my classroom management and teaching techniques.

### **Literature Review**

In this literature review I focus on the history of Aboriginal education, the need for culturally relevant curriculum, and teacher efforts to develop and introduce this type of programming. I begin with the history of Aboriginal education. It is important to understand where one comes from, in order to know where one is going and how this also applies to the field of education. As educators we also must know the history of our field to understand how we are going to grow as educators and assist our students. It is important to reflect professionally upon previously applied methods of teaching, our own and others, to ensure growth is evident not only in the student, but in educators as well. To do this, one must know the history of education. This literature review then moves into an exploration of different types of knowledge that are beneficial to the implementation of a culturally relevant curriculum. Because of the nature of the research, it is important to look at the need for culturally relevant curriculum and how it has evolved. I look at the many ways culturally relevant curriculum is needed whether from an individual standpoint or an entire community's. Finally, I conclude with a look at teacher efforts to develop

and introduce this type of programming and how it is applied in various academic environments.

### *History of Aboriginal Education*

In the past, many First Nations students began their formal education behind the walls of residential schools, where abuse was common, efforts at assimilation were ongoing, and where teachers “actively and aggressively suppressed students’ identities” (Oberg, Blades & Thom, 2007, p.114). However, Canada’s “first attempt to ‘civilize the savage,’ the residential school, not only failed, but also left us with the legacy of problems that prevail in our communities today” (Hookimaw-Witt, 1998, p. 159). First Nations students were not accustomed to the harsh, formal, rote learning of the residential schools, because their education had been based on an oral story telling foundation and was done within the homes, communities, and natural settings that surrounded them. The original educators were people found within the community but the beginning of formal education brought in outsiders, and today we still deal with the issues of bringing in not only foreign curriculum to the students, but also “qualified” educators who are strangers to the community (Miller, 1996; Schissel, 2003). Even students who attended day schools on the reserves experienced educational practices very foreign to them. As residential and day schools closed, Aboriginal students were integrated into provincial schools where a provincial curriculum that ignored First Nations or was racist was mandatory.

This form of education continued until First Nations took control of their own education in the last decades of the twentieth-century and band-operated schools were established. However, it must be noted that even to this day not all First Nations students are taught within First Nations' schools, as my own personal band, for example, buses the children into the nearest town's schools and many First Nations students live in urban centres. The decision to move to band-operated schools marks the beginning of schooling that is more culturally responsive and offers the "ability to create an inviting climate and positive atmosphere in a facility that reflects the culture of the students" (Fulford, 2007, p. 85). In First Nations' schools the expectation is that "the Aboriginal knowledge paradigm and the Western knowledge paradigm must be incorporated into the teacher's pedagogy such that one is not regarded as superior to the other" (Doige, 2003, p. 148). Today's education can involve "recovering historical and collective memories of culture and spirituality, as well as positive memories of resilience, resistance, and tradition that affirm a positive sense of identity" termed 'remembering' by Nadeau and Young (2006, p. 94). A further development in the history of schooling of First Nations students occurred on June 11, 2008. Prime Minister Stephen Harper gave a formal apology that acknowledged the abusive treatment of First Nations people in residential schools and recognized the harm that had been done to successive generations through the loss of languages, cultures, and parenting (CBC News, 2008). The challenge now is to ensure that the education provided to First Nations students helps them reclaim their cultural backgrounds and provides them with the education they need to be successful. Castagno and Brayboy (2008) found that "a

substantial number of studies have shown that when local knowledge plays a dominant role in instruction (usually in combination with use of the Native Language) improvements are seen in various performance and attainment measures” (p. 956). With these types of findings it is possible for First Nations organizations to back up their case to implement such programming. Furthermore, the Assembly of First Nations believes that “First Nations education must be grounded in First Nations languages and cultural values, and must be properly funded so that education outcomes meet or exceed those of the general Canadian population” (Assembly of First Nations, 2005, p. 1).

#### *Application of Knowledge*

It is important to identify potential types of knowledge that educators can utilize to gain familiarity with the culture of the First Nations community. There are two types of knowledge that teachers may look at-- traditional knowledge and Indigenous knowledge. “Traditional knowledges are unique tribal customs, practices, and knowledge systems including environmental, herbal, medicinal, spiritual, architectural, cosmological, as well as ceremonies, songs, and dances” (Nadeau and Young, 2006, p. 89). Traditional knowledge is beneficial to a culturally relevant curriculum because it provides the educator with the knowledge of the First Nation’s customs and traditions that are a part of the past and still practiced today, however the practice of Traditional Knowledge varies from community to community. It is important not only to acknowledge traditional knowledge but also Indigenous knowledge to ensure that the cultural component of a classroom is



relevant to current needs of the First Nations. "Indigenous knowledge is seen to include contemporary forms of knowledge that may not have a pure traditional source or may be derived from a combination of contemporary sources" (Nadeau and Young, 2006, p. 89). The ability to acknowledge change, including changes in the culture of an Indigenous society, is an important element that must be understood by educators working with First Nation students.

### *Need for Culturally Relevant Curriculum*

Developments in First Nations schooling are leading to more culturally responsive environments for many and culturally responsive schools are providing school settings for students that are beneficial. For example, the Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon offers a spiritually based education program with two goals: "to provide a high quality secondary school experience for Native students, and to encourage the physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional growth of every student and staff member at the school" (Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2000, p. 1; see, also, Haig-Brown, Archibald, Regnier & Vermette, 1997). These developments are based on the assumption that a

Firm grounding in the heritage, language, and culture indigenous to a particular tribe is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of culturally-healthy students and communities associated with that place, and thus is an essential ingredient for identifying the appropriate qualities and practices associated with culturally-responsive educators, curriculum, and schools.

(Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998, p. 4)

Students flourish in an environment that acknowledges their individuality and where the Aboriginal knowledge paradigm thrives. Within the communities, not only do the educators realize this could be beneficial to the students, but also so do many community members. In research completed by Agbo (2005)

all community members expressed that they would like to see a school administration that promotes a traditional First Nations ethos by respecting the opinions of community members, while at the same time enhancing achievement for the students to become successful in mainstream Canadian society. (p. 310)

Experiencing culture in the classroom also assists in the students developing a “relationship between the ecology of their community and its social framework within a global context” (O’Connor, 2009, p. 418). Not only does research illustrate the positive effects of a culturally responsive school, but it also illustrates the demand for it within communities realizing that this approach is beneficial to their children and their future well being. “Indigenous communities desired an education that would bring them ‘not just empowerment as individuals but empowerment as bands, as tribes, as nations, and as people’” (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 949). Communities are recognizing that education must not only meet the expectations as laid out by the province but also offer what they need as an independent community to allow their future generations to flourish.

The Alaska Native Knowledge Network has established the following cultural standards, alongside the strict, local academic standards:

1. Culturally knowledgeable students are well grounded in the cultural heritage and traditions of their community.
2. Culturally-knowledge students are able to build on the knowledge and skills of the local cultural community as a foundation from which to achieve personal and academic success throughout life.
3. Culturally-knowledgeable students are able to actively participate in various cultural environments.
4. Culturally-knowledgeable students are able to engage effectively in learning activities that are based on traditional ways of knowing and learning.
5. Culturally-knowledgeable students demonstrate an awareness and appreciation of the relationships and processes of interaction of all elements in the world around them.

(Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998, pp. 7-10)

This example of standards implemented in a culturally relevant curriculum provides a helpful model for guidance. The educator must remember to never give up academic standards for cultural standards, but to create a balance between the two so students can meet academic and cultural expectations put forth by themselves, the teacher, their home community, and society in general.

The need for culturally relevant curriculum is evident in recent findings with Young and Nadeau (2006) believing that there will be a “movement from being present and responding to self and others as an individual into the process of expressing publicly, in community, before others, one’s pride in one’s identity” (p. 96). The community hopes that the student will take knowledge acquired in the school and apply it to keep the culture alive, as well as become an active member in society. Friedel (1999) believes that “in order to effect real change, it is critical that historical patterns be reversed and that schools begin to work in partnership with communities, promoting a respect for language and culture” (p. 152). The current board of education and community are actively involved in creating a language-based program at our school, and community involvement in our cultural gatherings illustrates the community members’ agreement with infusing the culture into the school.

With the community realizing the need for culturally responsive curriculum, the individual students may also see positive changes within themselves. Students may be able to identify individual behaviours that reflect a more positive outlook to education. Educators may be able to “understand the root causes of lateness, poor attendance, and underachievement, phenomena... resistance to classroom life and routines... to frame it as resistance to the dominant society’s ideology, rather than individual rule breaking or personal psychological dysfunction” (Berger, Epp & Moller, 2006, p. 183). Culturally infused classrooms could potentially build the confidence of individual students, thus alleviating the strain of having to conform to dominant society’s rules without understanding why. Berger et al. (2006) identify

the “influences of culture clash, poor current practices, and colonialism, which help to explain lateness, poor attendance, and underachievement” (p. 186). As with any students, First Nation students need to feel that their individual knowledge and gifts are able to flourish in the education system, in order for them to respect the rules put forth in such institutions. Corbiere (2000) states, “fostering a positive self-image and forming a healthy identity are inherent in wholistic education” (p. 114). Attitude reflects leadership, and without leadership that acknowledges the students’ gifts and background, a continuation of negative student behaviour may continue to occur.

In a culturally relevant classroom students can build confidence that will not only affect their behaviour towards the schooling system but also help them identify their personal goals. Nadeau and Young (2006) identify that with spiritual resources students “can use their own internal knowledge, intuition, and vision instead of looking for external validation from the colonial gaze. This involves a process of reclaiming the sacredness of the body, grieving collective losses, and celebrating collective gifts and strengths” (p. 89). Once students identify with their internal strengths, their personal goals may also reflect this newfound confidence they have found within themselves. With this newfound strength, students experience a “sacred vitality which refers to the feeling of energetic connection with one’s own sacredness, with the earth, and with others in the community, a feeling of being alive” (Nadeau & Young, 2006, p. 90). This feeling can flourish within the teacher, as well, in a culturally relevant classroom, as she works through her way to support the children in their academic surrounding and succeeds at being the best

educator she can be. Nadeau and Young (2006) believe that this “sacred vitality supports transformation; affirms individual gifts, collective strength, and sacredness in the face of oppression; and creates new forms of power and nonviolent, embodied ways of being self-determined in this world” (p. 90). These are all possible positive effects on the students found in a culturally responsive classroom but the focus of this research will be on the development of the educator. A story will be told of how implementing a new culturally relevant program affected the teacher and her immediate surroundings, including her students.

### *Teacher Efforts*

In implementing a culturally based curriculum, various areas need to be considered including:

How the people relate to each other and their environment, how children are educated and how they learn, what place punishment has in educating children, how discipline is implemented in relations between young and old, how men and women relate to each other and their roles, and how people see the world secularly and spiritually.

(Witt, 1998, p. 263)

The Aboriginal knowledge paradigm outlined by Doige (2008) also emphasizes consideration of factors such as “whether parents are or are not speakers of their tribal language and participate in traditional activities, and whether this way of seeing and understanding the world is transmitted from one generation to the next” (p. 149). As an educator implementing a culturally relevant curriculum, awareness

must be brought to the possibility that within the students' homes the culture may not be practiced or even known to exist. Because of this, the educator must bring in cultural components and not be forceful about students participating. For those not wanting to participate, the option to be observers should still be there so students can be a part of this portion of the class. Overall, culturally relevant education "is an attitude toward students, a concept of learning, a whole way of life within the classroom and, hopefully, throughout the school" (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 962).

It is important to recognize that culture is "not static; traditional ways change over time" (Berger et al., 2006, p. 186) and that not all Aboriginal peoples and cultures are the same. Just as culture evolves, so does the way we present it in the classroom. The educator must be knowledgeable not only in the history of the culture, but also how it has evolved into what it is today. An educator in a culturally responsive classroom has to nourish the student's individual cultural knowledge and introduce new cultural knowledge.

The incorporation of cultural knowledge in the classroom is identified as being positive in nature, and "many of the teachers see themselves as the students' connection to the knowledge of the elders, standing between the wisdom of the past and the possibilities of the future" (Friesen & Orr, 1998, p. 195). It is important for educators of First Nations students to continue to participate in these developments and place First Nations culture into the schools in order to provide students with the best education possible and one that acknowledges their core being. Castagno and

Brayboy (2008) believe that “becoming a culturally competent educator is a constant learning process that requires flexibility and adaptability on the part of the educator depending on the particular students and contexts with which they are working” (p.947). The educator must be aware of each unique classroom’s needs, which are built up upon the collection of students. What may work for one culturally relevant program may not work for another but with more findings from educators, adaptations or modifications can be made to suit each classroom’s needs.

With all this information in mind, there are more and more cases of implemented cultural programs in First Nations communities with positive responses. At the Chief Jimmy Bruneau School, located in the Behchoko community in the Northwest Territories, Fulford (2007) observes “its student-centered basis means that it must build on the beliefs, values, culture, and language that a student brings from the immediate community” (p. 71). The educators at Chief Jimmy Bruneau School are

Taken ‘on the land’ for several days in the fall to experience a traditional caribou hunt. The goal of this orientation is for new teachers to gain an understanding and a respect for Tlicho culture that will be translated into the way they work with their students, the parents and the community.

(Fulford, 2007, p. 76)

At the Chief Jimmy Bruneau school where a fully-fledged cultural program is implemented in the school, in more recent years their graduation rates have



increased and “in 2005/06, the graduation rate exceeded 50% for the first time” (Fulford, 2007, p. 85). To illustrate their success the Chief Jimmy Bruneau School had an “overall attendance rate of approximately 92% for the 2004/05 school year. This exceeds the average school attendance in the Northwest Territories of approximately 88%” (Fulford, 2007, p. 86). These simple facts about the Chief Jimmy Bruneau School illustrate the positive outcomes that can occur when students have a piqued interest in their studies and are encouraged by a school that takes pride in the culture found within the community.

Another school with a culturally relevant environment is the Elijah Smith Elementary school found within Whitehorse, Yukon where “the rediscovery and teaching of First Nation culture and language heads the list of identified goals of First Nations in the Yukon” (Bell, 2004, p. 138). The school is home to Native and non-Native students as it is in the city of Whitehorse and not on a reserve. Although this is not an on-reserve school, staff still take the time to incorporate the culture because they realize “that these students shine in familiar surroundings like culture camps and that they would also shine in classrooms with access to more First Nations resources” (Bell, 2004, p. 139). Because many educators in the school are not from the surrounding First Nation communities, they acknowledged that bringing in Yukon Native Teacher Education Program students is important and “spoke of the positive experience of having student teachers in their classrooms for two-week to four-month practicums” (Bell, 2004, p. 140). Although this is a small step, it is a great opportunity for students to identify with educators who are Native, knowledgeable and who can implement cultural programming. The school

implements culture into their environment as best they can with the resources that are available. This is a good example of a culturally relevant curriculum and has illustrated positive outcomes. "When the topic of spirituality came up for discussion, a school council member said that she believes that the children are spiritual because they have pride and are well-adjusted here" (Bell, 2004, p. 141).

Every culturally relevant program has a starting point and the two examples just cited illustrate the development of programming that becomes more inclusive. However, patience is necessary because change takes time. Just as the history of First Nations education demonstrates that the loss of a culture and language did not happen overnight and took decades to inflict, so, too, will it take decades to reverse the damage.

### *Change is Coming*

Teachers should not get discouraged if immediate improvements are not observed. Greenwood and de Leeuw (2007) acknowledge that "colonial processes have worked diligently for several centuries to erode Indigenous cultures and identities, so it must be understood that equally long expanses of time will be needed to (re)build these cultures and identities" (p. 52). The educator must practice patience and empathy for the students in a culturally relevant classroom to ensure that students can flourish and believe the educator is there to help them reach their full potential. This will also become a "decolonization project that involves 'the unmasking and deconstruction of imperialism and colonialism in its old and new formations alongside a search for sovereignty, for reclamation of

knowledge, language and culture and for the social transformation of colonial relations between the native and settler” (Nadeau & Young, 2006, p. 98). The culturally relevant classroom can provide all this for the students and the teacher, with a main goal of producing “students who are bicultural and thus knowledgeable about and competent in both mainstream and tribal societies” (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 953). With this ability to flourish not only in their own community but also society as a whole, students will be able to meet individual goals and give back to a community and to the education system that provided them with the essential tools they needed.

### **Methodology**

For this research, I used the qualitative method of action research.

Cunningham (2008) states that “action research gives us an iterative, systematic, analytic way to reflect on what we are doing in class, to evaluate our success at achieving our classroom goals, and to chart the direction of future classroom strategies based on what we have learned” (p. 1). My research began with written observations tracked through the journaling of current practices including management strategies, daily activities, and examples of lessons. Critical analysis of these observations occurred and suggestions for improvement and development were made based on research findings and professional self-reflection about how the classroom changed to welcome a more culturally relevant program including lessons, daily activities, and management strategies. The revised, culturally relevant program is based upon resources that reflect the culture of the community in which

my school is located and includes materials prepared within the community by various cultural organizations, and by individuals knowledgeable about the Anishinawbek culture.

Changing the classroom to become more culturally relevant allowed me to assess whether changes in student behaviours including absenteeism, tardiness, and overall classroom participation occurred. Throughout the implementation of the new program, written observations were made at the end of each day with stories about how the day's activities went, especially in regards to the culturally relevant programming. Based on observations and journaling that occurred during the course of the research, accommodations or modifications were made in the programming if there was found to be a more effective way to deliver a culturally relevant program. The format for gathering and recording information included teacher observations and field notes about ongoing activities in the classroom. As Hendricks (2009) notes,

One method of collecting observational data is through observational records or field notes. Field notes are kept throughout the study and include detailed information about implementation of the intervention, participant responses, and surprising events. Field notes are best kept in a journal, and they should be entered each day of the study or of each day the intervention takes place. (p. 91)

I followed these useful suggestions in my work. At the end of the research, using my field notes, I reflected on the effectiveness of culturally relevant programming in

promoting school success, assessed if such a program was viable and considered some of the more useful ways of implementing a culturally relevant program in a First Nations classroom.

Using this reflective approach, I tell a story about how the changes that occurred in my class to make it more culturally relevant were implemented, and I evaluated whether they were effective at making positive changes in the classroom. Story telling is a part of the traditional Anishinawbek culture and journaling is a form of storytelling that is comfortable for me as a member of that culture. Ultimately my thesis is a story of how I implemented changes in the classroom, what I observed about the impact on students, and how it affected me as an instructor in the classroom.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Research**

My study is guided by the Indigenous approach to research outlined by Saunders and Hill (2007) as a "mode of practice or cycle that includes the use of an authentic community voice used to produce a product that is returned to the community for their benefit" (p. 1019). The research incorporates local voices, culture and traditional ways of life that give the community an authentic voice in the classroom. The study also provides the community with feedback from the research to offer insights into how to integrate cultural knowledge practices into the school. As such, my research fits the model outlined by Saunders and Hill (2007) who state that "a researcher must be seriously engaged in grounded critical and political work

for transformation and write from a particular cultural, community or tribal position" (p. 1020).

A limitation of this study is that I am only doing research in one classroom and this makes broad generalizations to all classrooms impossible. At best, I can speak of what worked in my classroom and why in order to enhance understanding of the benefits and challenges of implementing culturally relevant curriculum. I recognize that things that may work for my classroom may only work for mine and may not be appropriate or useful in other settings or for other teachers. Nonetheless, my research will contribute to the growing body of practical and applied work that looks at how to introduce culturally relevant programs into the classrooms of First Nation schools.

I had to remain critical about changes that occurred in the classroom, in the sense that I had to be aware that the effects may not be as intended. I had to document *all* changes, whether positive or not. I realized that I must question all my assumptions about what ought to occur in the classroom. There was also the matter that students must be given the best education possible. Some parents and students may have felt that culturally relevant programming is not delivering the best education possible, so a limitation is that the program does not meet the expectations of all involved. This can be partly overcome by keeping parents informed before and during the research. To further address this limitation, I balanced the curriculum and cultural components to the best of my ability in order

to meet the expectations of the curriculum, my long term plans for teaching, and the cultural components required by the study.

My action research project began in the summer of 2009 with a new, more culturally relevant program being developed for the classroom and continued into the fall of 2009 with an implementation phase. A research journal of field notes and reflections was kept throughout the period of development and implementation that ended in April of 2010. All information that was recorded was analyzed to assess if the incorporation of the cultural components of the First Nation had a positive effect on the students and this process began in February of 2010 and ended with the writing of conclusions for the study in May of 2010. The new culturally relevant program continued throughout the entire 2009/2010 school year to keep a consistent environment for the students, and one that allowed the Anishinawbek culture to flourish and grow, and be acknowledged as a way of life for a people who have a history of assimilation and oppression.

Within the planning of the new program it was imperative to be aware of the sensitivity of such research. I was bringing in a cultural component, and trying to analyze it from both an insider's and outsider's point of view. I was not only the researcher, but also a part of the research material. This required me to be aware not only of the limitations and possible outcomes of this research, but also how I was going to take these into account with a culture in the balance. It was an inner struggle, as I know how important it is to not analyze the Anishinawbek way of life but accept it as it is, all the while trying to analyze my culturally relevant program to

better the classroom environment and my own teaching practices. I not only used cultural aspects to guide my new program but also how I would approach the analysis of my actions in the classroom, and this included the use of some of the Seven Grandfathers teachings about respect and how they were utilized to develop classroom management strategies for myself to use in the classroom.

Research into how best to provide a culturally relevant program is an emerging theme in First Nations education research as revealed in the scholarly literature discussed above. This research is necessary to ensure continued growth in First Nations education and support the many opportunities it provides for our future generations. It is my hope that this thesis tells a story of how my growth as an instructor occurred as I implemented a culturally responsive program in an individual classroom. I also hope to provide insight and stepping stones for future research in this field.

### **Assumptions**

I assumed an Indigenous approach to addressing the needs of the Anishinawbek students would be successful as it allows for the voice of the community to be heard through the utilization of local teachings. At the same time, I hoped for a positive return to the community in the form of new knowledge among the students who have been involved in this program.

Research completed in First Nations communities has at times historically been only beneficial to the outside researcher, but utilizing an Indigenous approach



allows both for an authentic voice to be heard and for a giving back to the community. Warner (2006) states

Attempts by non-Indigenous social scientists to categorize and subsequently explain certain traditions and practices are confounded by the research lens that attempted to offer explanations rooted in Western, largely male, perspectives, but also by non-Indigenous researchers who for the most part explained all tribes in much the same way. (p. 149)

By providing the community with feedback that will assist in future endeavors to improve education, I intend to contribute to the community and give it the opportunity to continue the program if it is deemed suitable.

While completing the implementation phase of the research I assumed all students were involved in the activities and were learning or reactivating prior cultural knowledge. I speculated that renewing or learning new information would build student knowledge of who they are as Anishinawbek people and provide them with a sense of pride and the ability to break stereotypes that students are familiar with and that wrongly are associated with Anishinawbek people.

I assume this study could contribute to and potentially extend existing work by providing support for the already visible positive case studies of First Nations educational institutions. Schools that incorporate linguistic and cultural programming have the “key to reaching the vision of ‘Strong Like Two People’” (Fulford, 2007, p.87). “Strong Like Two People” refers to the belief that “if children

are taught in both cultures equally, they will be strong like two people" (Fulford, 2007, p. 63). By acknowledging the importance of having both academic and cultural knowledge, the teacher also grows as an instructor and develops for the betterment of herself and those with whom she comes into contact. A better teacher also will assist students in preparing for their future as scholars and as Anishinawbek. Such a program might also move beyond existing work or in a direction that takes the learning process outside of the classroom. It might lead to a new program that is outside the school, allowing students to delve into the culture and language more thoroughly than in the classroom. It might also encourage in certain individuals, a change in lifestyle to reflect a more traditional way of life.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DEVELOPING A CULTURALLY RELEVANT CLASSROOM

In this chapter I describe the process I used to provide a culturally relevant program in my First Nation classroom. The issue at hand was to provide the First Nations students with an enriched classroom environment that allowed growth in their cultural knowledge and practices, because without it, they are being denied an acknowledgement of a part of who they are as Anishinawbek. The objective of the research was to reflect on implementing a culturally enriched curriculum that was derived from the community's traditional practices, taking into account the history of the culture, and what it is in today's present society. This context had to be taken into consideration because just as the dominant society has evolved, so, too, have Aboriginal cultures changed.

Action research was utilized for the project because it involves "a self-reflective spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting" (Simm and Ingram, 2008, p. 44) and is best suited for the study I wished to conduct.. The research was undertaken in my classroom and relied on my ability to reflect critically on my development as an educator while also exploring how teachers generally can introduce culturally relevant programming. Among the changes I watched for were improvements in classroom behaviour and differences in student engagement on days when culturally relevant programming was implemented and when it was not.

The research began by looking at what the culture of the community is and was (in its present and past forms). To accomplish my goals at this stage I visited local heritage organizations, Elders' centres, and the youth centre. Through this process I gathered cultural information and identified individuals to bring into the classroom to ensure the community was involved, and that students were receiving adequate knowledge of their community's culture. My culturally enriched program began with the creation of an environment, lessons and daily practices that reflected the culture, and visits to the classroom from key individuals in the community. Through a daily journal I was able to reflect on my practices by utilizing my observations of the day's activities, which included what I felt worked and what had not. Finally, based on these reflections I made modifications to, and, where necessary, tried different ways of implementing particular lessons or practices to ensure students understood the cultural knowledge and I was sharing it in the best way possible. The research began in June 2009, when I started to research the local culture. The actual implementation of the cultural program occurred from September 2009 to April 2010. Even though the actual research stopped in April, I continued with the program to ensure students were continuously learning in a culturally relevant program and so as not to disturb the classroom management strategies established at the beginning of the year.

Completing this research allows for a "shared learning experience where both parties learn from each other which is very important to all age groups because it makes for a learning experience that is a partnership and not one of convenience or mandated hierarchy" (Saunders and Hill, 2007, p. 1033). This action research

allowed not only my students to be shown a new program, but allowed me to make new observations, reflect on them and grow as an educator.

### **Describing Cultural Programming and Current Events**

#### *School Wide Practices*

Within my school, each educator creates the program he/she will deliver to students while utilizing the Ontario provincial expectations as his/her guide. However, "the standardized provincial curriculum lacks understandings and pedagogical methods crucial to effecting a wholistic education as defined and grounded by traditional Nishnaabe lifeways" (Corbiere, 2000, p. 117). In my school, the teachers follow the provincial curriculum, but are given only select resources to include the Aboriginal community in their long range plans and if wanting more culture in their classrooms have to seek out resources on their own. The resources that have been made available include the Aboriginal Shield program, and the D.A.R.E. program (local police officers), with the Aboriginal Shield program being the only program with culture incorporated. Nonetheless, as Friesen and Orr (1998) point out, there are many ways to teach that allow "possibilities for the closer integration of the school with the community and the evolution of curriculum that prepares student to live in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds" (p. 199).

As has already been noted, the school administration and teaching staff delivers culturally appropriate activities sporadically throughout the year and the number of such activities has been increasing over the years I have been with the school because as a staff we are noticing the importance of celebrating the students'

culture. In my first year of teaching there was only one event which was an annual 'social' or pow-wow at the end of the year but the events have increased in number and frequency since then. With the school staff becoming more aware of the importance of bringing in our Anishinawbek culture, each student has been assigned to a clan that they are a part of for the entire year. In the Anishinawbek culture the people were given a system, "a framework of government to give them strength and order... with each of these clans given a function to serve for the people" (Benton-Banai, 1988, p. 74). We utilize these principles to organize the clans or groups for school wide activities which include a monthly 'clan day' where each teacher brings a clan into an activity that will build character, strengthen group work skills, and the knowledge of who each clan member is as an individual. The clans also act as a system of families with each clan member being a part of a much larger family than their immediate (classroom) family. The families of our students are aware of our clan days through monthly newsletters and updates although we rarely have parental participation.

The clans utilized in the school allow for individuals to be divided into groups and although this is a great way for them to acknowledge these groupings in the culture, this is not to say there are no difficulties. There were some potential negative outcomes such as internal conflicts between certain students in clans, causing some students to miss their assigned clan activities, but these were addressed to the best of our ability. There was also minimal negative feedback from parents on the random placement of their children in a group or clan. If there were concerns brought forth by parents, such as peer issues, we would place their

children in groups that were similar to their original groups to ensure fairness for all involved, or else they would be excused from the activities (by the administration staff), especially for those students who were identified as 'runners' who would utilize lack of supervision and movement from class to class as an opportunity to leave school. To avoid this, we were instructed to take attendance when we met up with our identified clans and the office would confirm all students were present. In the Anishinawbek culture individuals are born into clan systems and in the Ojibway culture the child receives their father's clan but for our school we could not base our clans on this because some students are not aware of their clans, or the sheer number of actual clans might not make for equal groupings of students. We chose the main families of clans (fish, fox, deer, loon, bear, eagle, crane, turtle, and marten) found in the Ojibway culture to represent our groupings and assigned the students to the clans to ensure we had groups of students that had a similar make up.

For our first clan day we had an anti-bullying/spirit day where each student participated in workshops that focused on building a better self for each other. The facilitators included local community members as well as professionals who offered workshops on topics ranging from traditional teachings, to anti-bullying behaviour. Some clan days were designated social days and a local drum group would come in and drum for the students. The students could play games and do various dances that were social in nature and win prizes for their efforts. The games played were traditional in nature and student volunteers were numerous as many wanted to participate. The spectators were very respectful and cheered their peers on with rarely any negative feedback about the games played. The students thoroughly

enjoyed these afternoons and once again, were given the opportunity to be active participants or spectators to the day's events.

The administration and teaching staff is making advances towards creating a more culturally relevant program but because these activities are school wide they do not occur on a daily basis. I did notice that during these days we had a majority of the students enthralled with the activities, including those students who were notorious for chronic negative behaviours in the school. And when out in the community at youth gatherings, I noticed these same students were active participants in cultural events. I also noticed a change in behaviours for some when they were reminded of the respect for cultural gatherings and how this respect is applicable to other environments.

This was evident when I was given the role of acting principal on certain days when our principal was absent and I had to deal with a student who was misbehaving out on the school property. When speaking with the student I addressed how she was an active person in the local traditional gatherings and how she should be able to apply that respect she showed the Elders and traditions to the school. When meeting with her mother about the incident, she was told the same thing and we both believed this to be true about showing respect in all types of environments. I made sure the student understood her good qualities in regards to practicing the culture but how this did not mean it just applied to cultural gatherings, but that she had to be a young, respectable Anishinawbe Kwe in all areas of life. Since then, the student and I have had a positive relationship and even



though she may have setbacks, mutual respect is evident by her more respectful demeanor when dealing with authority figures in the school. I became curious about how to show students that the respect they had for their culture could be applied in the school environment, and this was another trigger for doing this research.

When noticing that school wide events appeared to have positive effects on students' behaviours, I realized the importance considering the addition of more events such as these to our school calendar. I believed it was our job as educators to come together to bring more events to the students in order to support their cultural growth. Ignas (2004) states that "educators who fail to recognize simultaneously the legacy of colonialism and the persistence of Indigenous culture and society will ultimately fail in their attempts to educate Indigenous youth" (p. 53). With this in mind, I realized that continuing without a culturally relevant program in my own classroom would add to this legacy of colonialism as I was denying the inclusion of the Anishinawbek culture in my classroom.

### **Creating a Culturally Relevant Program and Comparing Current Practices**

Within my own classroom in the past, although it was in a First Nation school, I did not apply a culturally relevant program and only at times did I think to create lessons and/or activities that reflected the culture. This rut of not incorporating the culture might have occurred because the culture was all around in the community as it had knowledgeable Elders and various ceremonies for community members who wished to participate. The problem with relying only on

this community activity and not introducing it into the schools is that it might leave some students whose parents do not take the time to teach their children what it means to be Anishinawbek without opportunities to experience and/or observe what Anishinawbek life means. Without this opportunity students may not know a part of who they are just as I did not have that knowledge as a child until the culture was introduced to me. With knowledge of the culture and history of the Anishinawbek, it may be possible for students to build confidence and apply themselves more in an academic setting. With this in mind, I looked at my own programming and wondered how I could incorporate the culture and/or practices of the Anishinawbek in my classroom and provide an environment that built upon what was already available in the wider community in order to ensure a truly holistic approach to learning.

When I began my journey to implement a more culturally relevant program, I knew such an endeavor would be a great success because I could draw on the assistance of many community organizations and the contributions of various authors and community members. The programming needed to be conducive to the background and culture found within the community which is home of the Three Fires Confederacy and this entails the majority of members have Ojibway, Odawa, and Pottawatomi tribal affiliations. My own personal beliefs and knowledge of the Anishinawbek culture contributed to a more culturally relevant program as I am Ojibway and have learned the teachings of my people. It was also important for me to understand that although I was aware of my own teachings, understanding the Anishinawbek life and its teachings is a never ending learning process.

Consequently I added to my personal knowledge of Anishinawbek culture through meetings with members of various organizations who assisted with this endeavor. It was necessary to collaborate with community members to ensure the students were "provided with devices that affirmed the ways in which their communities have maintained enduring values and also explore the ways in which their communities have changed" (Ignas, 2004, p. 57). Many of these organizations lent a helping hand to the program and assisted in guiding me throughout the process and continued to do so even after the initial research period had ended.

Teachers must have some knowledge and the resources to apply Aboriginal knowledge in order to share it with students by adopting oral traditions and practices into pedagogical approaches. Unfortunately, many teachers may not know the language and because of this, a culturally responsive curriculum may not include the language of the students. For this actual research, a different teacher in the school taught the Ojibway/Odawa language for a total of 120 minutes/week. The students were escorted to the classroom to participate in language classes to learn the language that is found within the community.

The new program was implemented in September of 2009 and is currently in place for the remainder of the year but for this research my reflections were gathered only until April 2010 to ensure both that adequate data were collected but that I also had time to write the thesis. I kept a daily journal and reflected upon how the class operated throughout the day, especially in relation to culturally relevant programming. I told a story through my journals as to how a culturally relevant

program was implemented and how it affected me as an educator, what worked and what had not, and the changes that were created because of this new programming. Based on my reflections I made modifications to the new program if I felt a portion of the program could be delivered more effectively.

Keeping a journal allowed me to develop a story that acknowledged the classroom's daily activities. I wanted to tell a story with my research because the Anishinawbek people come from a history of oral tradition. We are a story telling people whose rich culture and history was told from generation to generation and to this day we are very fortunate for the storytellers we still have in existence. This research allowed me to tell a story of how I implemented a new program, the changes I observed, and how it allowed me to grow as an educator in a First Nations classroom.

When implementing a new program in a classroom, it is important to acknowledge all outcomes of the new program. It is important to not only notice positive changes, but also acknowledge and be aware of negative impacts to overcome. With action research this is a part of the process to distinguish which methods are effective and which need to be extinguished or modified to better suit the parties involved. One initial concern was the fact that a program had to be cultural, but also not forced on those students who did not wish to participate. It had to be a program that allowed for students wishing to participate to do so, while allowing others to just observe. Observing a more culturally relevant program is just as important as participating in such an event because it allows the observers

the opportunity to see a part of their culture as Anishinawbek. This gives them an opportunity to create a positive image of being Anishinawbek and possibly break negative stereotypes allowing them to be ambassadors for Anishinawbek. It was important to acknowledge that some students come from homes that do not practice the traditional culture, perhaps because some parents confuse spirituality or traditional ways with religion, and offer these students the opportunity to opt out. That meant that throughout the program I had to ensure that when cultural activities were occurring, students were given the option of participating or not. It must be acknowledged that this could have deterred from the effectiveness of my program but with alternative activities for the students, they were still able to engage in the classroom and activities that were relevant to the cultural components. This was very important to address because it was necessary to create an environment that allowed the students to feel safe and not feel obligated to participate in a cultural component or feel forced to comply, just as I had felt years ago. I felt this was necessary because the First Nations have a history of compliance in the education field and I did not want to have this in my classroom with a program that they might not want to actively participate in (but rather just observe).

I created a program by basing my long-range plans around how I could incorporate the teachings of the Anishinawbek in an appropriate manner. For example, I introduced my unit on biodiversity during springtime because that is the time when many medicines used in traditional practices are picked and when Mother Earth brings forth life and a new season is celebrated. Wintertime is a time

of rest for Mother Earth, when life appears to sleep as animals hibernate and the trees shed their leaves, and it did not make sense to place a unit on biodiversity in such a time for the Anishinawbek people. The unit of space (for science) was introduced at the beginning of the year so that my Anishinawbek lessons could begin with how the Anishinawbek people came to be and how we feel celestial beings are important to our livelihood. This included the importance of Mother Earth, Grandmother Moon, and Grandfather Sun where each has a place in the teachings of the Anishinawbek people and is a part of our creation story, which is a fundamental teaching to understand.

My long range plans were to correspond with the other grade six teacher's lesson plans but because I was implementing a culturally relevant program we were delivering the same units at different times throughout the year. To create the first versions of my long range plans I placed them on a large Bristol board to see where I wanted to incorporate cultural teachings based on the life cycle of Mother Earth and then I looked for the best times in the school year to place these teachings into the provincial curriculum expectations. I chose this method because I wanted to ensure students learned certain teachings or parts of the history of the Anishinawbek people prior to learning others because teachings are offered in a certain order to ensure continual development. The teachings are based on the individual's place in his/her life; for example, certain teachings occur during puberty to ensure the individual can understand and apply those teachings to his/her life. This method of learning is the same for academic teachings because without the stepping-stones,

students cannot activate prior knowledge to assist them in grasping new concepts being taught at their current grade level.

This new program was different from the one I used in my previous years in the classroom because previously I had not taken the time or made the effort to implement culturally relevant programming on a continual basis with the students. In previous years we would touch upon the teachings but did not base our classroom practices on them or incorporate them into daily lessons. Now our classroom's management is based on the Seven Grandfather teachings of the Anishinawbek people and we strive to keep them alive in our classroom throughout the year. The students now are immersed in or at least equipped with the knowledge about how to incorporate the teachings into their lives in a meaningful way. Many students at times said they knew about the teachings but did not know how to apply them to their daily lives which was unfortunate as one of our most important teachings as Anishinawbek is about the Grandfather we know as Respect. Respect can be applied to any situation we find ourselves faced with and can provide us with the tools to overcome any hardships with pride and dignity. By introducing this into our classroom I hoped that the students would be able to take this learning with them.

In the beginning I struggled with the challenges of implementing a culturally relevant program without taking time from the already demanding curriculum expectations put forth by the provincial government. I certainly did not want to take away from either part of my program, as they were both important for the

development of a well-rounded student. Not only do First Nations students benefit from understanding what it means to be Anishinawbek, but also from having the ability to be active participants in modern day society. A balance is imperative to achieve to ensure successes. Being flexible is necessary in this field as there are many factors that affect our day-to-day functioning and one of these is timing.

Time constraints were always a factor as I did not want to deter from the curriculum expectations but also did not want to take away from the cultural component. Balance was key to ensure all components were visibly important to our classroom and the learning of all parties involved. To assist in overcoming this difficulty I incorporated discussion of our teachings where appropriate in our lessons. This allowed students to see what the curriculum expected them to learn, while looking at how it was similar to or different from our traditional teachings. Incorporating teachings in this way allowed for students to not only internalize the expectations but also make a deeper connection to what is being taught by both viewpoints.

### *Creating a Cultural Environment*

To implement a culturally relevant program I felt it was necessary to create a culturally relevant environment because a classroom should match what is being done within it. I decorated the class with various bulletin boards that were not only about education-based information, but also utilized First Nation themed images. For example, our writing centre bulletin board illustrates First Nations students in their classroom going through the writing centres and is decorated with feathers



and dream catchers. Another bulletin board is informational and the theme is "Our Learning Community: Promoting Positive Attitudes" with various rules to help the students develop a positive learning environment for themselves and their classmates. It is decorated with mandellas, dream catchers, and cartoons of First Nations community members. One mathematics bulletin board has an array of math terminology defined (e.g., perimeter, congruent figures, etc.) with First Nations artwork that depicts the terms defined. I also incorporated the Seven Grandfathers into our displays since this is the foundation of our program. The teachings have their own bulletin board and posters that state their names in English and Ojibway. The final bulletin board with a First Nations theme has a border of the Seven Grandfathers and the posters from the 2009-2010 NAHO National Aboriginal Role Model Program. The reason why I chose this to be the bulletin board at the front of the class is because it illustrates youth across Canada who possess leadership qualities and are designated role models to First Nations youth. Students need to see that their culture is beautiful and can be brought into the classroom through displays, especially when they can visualize youth with similar goals and dreams that act as good role models.

Within the classroom we also have an area where sacred items are kept including a feather, and the medicines of sage and sweetgrass. Smudging was allowed in the classroom at the beginning of each week and whenever a crisis situation occurred. Smudging is a purifying ceremony of the Ojibway people and demonstrates an act of cleansing. The students are aware that this is done to purify our spirits and clear our minds as we enter into the classroom environment to learn.

This will also be done when a crisis arises either in the classroom or in the school to assist the students to open their minds and clear them of the negativity. These are the reasons why the Ojibway smudge is as an individual ceremony many can partake in to help cleanse their mind, thoughts, and feelings.

The images adopted in the displays and the area utilized for spiritual growth (smudging) help to create an environment that brings the culture into the classroom. The images also were utilized in hopes of creating a sense of pride because it took general information found in many classrooms in Canada and either used images of First Nations students or art to bring the messages to life. In our school it is up to the individual teachers to create their own classroom environment and prior to this my own classroom did not have as much First Nations art or images as it does now because I was not aware of such products. As well, I had never thought to incorporate as much art as I do now. I had never thought to incorporate these into my classroom because I believed the students knew who they were as First Nations people and were familiar with the visual artwork of the Anishinawbek. But now I realize that it can be carried over into many environments and utilizing artwork not only instills a sense of pride but also shows students how Anishinawbek art can be used in every day functions, including key subject areas found in the classroom.

### *Classroom Management with the Seven Grandfathers*

The program began with an introduction to the Seven Grandfathers, which are the seven teachings that the Anishinawbek live by. They were implemented into

the classroom at the beginning to create an environment that was based on the teachings of our people, and also to assist in the creation of our classroom rules, thus contributing to the classroom management strategies. It all began as the students entered into the classroom the first day in September. After taking a peek at their new class for the next ten months, a few of them asked why the Seven Grandfathers were posted on the black board at the front of the class. I stated that we would be working with them and invited the students to come and take their seats. It was a bit chaotic but after I had the students in their respective seats I asked them what was on the board and they stated what they were, but did not elaborate on the meanings behind each one. I stated to the class that our rules for the classroom would be based upon the Seven Grandfathers because they are a fundamental aspect to the Anishinawbek lifestyle.

An example of one of the activities I used illustrates my efforts as a teacher. We began a portion of the class with the students being assigned to one of seven groups (2 - 3 students) and each were given a Grandfather to write about on their flip chart paper. To begin this, I read a passage to the students that provided a brief introduction to the Grandfathers (a further, more intensive teaching would be taught upon completion of a round of teachings) with further discussions stemming from the teachings taught through Elders. The students were to state what their designated Grandfather meant to them, how they showed that Grandfather through their actions, and rules they could make that were associated with their Grandfather. I thought this was a good idea, but it turned out to be chaotic because some students struggled to take their prior knowledge of the Grandfather and apply

it to how we could show it in the classroom, and others did not know how to describe their Grandfather, or what it meant exactly, likely due to the fact that they had just simple awareness of the Seven Grandfathers, without knowing what they truly meant. To refocus the students I ended this session early and decided to try an alternative route where the students were given less responsibility and more guidance from the teacher. The students responded more positively to this than to the more independent activity that asked them to reactivate prior knowledge and apply it to gaining more knowledge about the Seven Grandfathers. We began this portion with an outline of what the Seven Grandfathers were based on the teachings of local Elders who provided this information. The students then orally answered the same question as to how we could show each Grandfather to those we find in our school environment and I took their answers and wrote them on flip chart paper. The students could then provide rules they believed would apply to each Grandfather that would be applicable in our classroom (and school environment). From this large list we gathered twenty rules that we believed would be best suited for our classroom to live by. The next step taken was for the students to review what Grandfather applied to the various rules we created and then we posted the rules in the classroom for daily reminders about how we chose to behave in the classroom.

The reasoning behind using the Seven Grandfathers for my classroom management strategies was because these are teachings found within the Anishinawbek culture and do not only apply to ceremonies and a traditional lifestyle but can easily be adapted to daily life, in and out of the classroom. Students need to

understand that the teachings found within their culture can be applied to everyday living and that the Grandfathers can assist them in making life easier. All too often the respect given to Elders and the teachings are forgotten and negative behaviours ensue such as the inability to abide by the rules, which leads to students being reprimanded with detentions, suspensions and unnecessary trips to the principal's office. It was easy to introduce the Grandfathers in the sense that the students were aware of what they were but I wanted to delve further into the teachings rather than just skim the surface knowledge of being able to identify the Grandfathers. In this sense, I hoped that students would eventually realize that Anishinawbek teachings not only apply to cultural ceremonies and gatherings, but to a way of life that can be practiced daily. This was the introduction to our Grandfathers, and the stepping-stone for future and almost daily reminders of how we can incorporate the Grandfathers into our lives on a daily basis.

Within the classroom, all the students agreed that the most important Grandfather in the classroom and life in general, was Respect because without respect it is difficult to find the remaining Grandfathers. There were continual visual and oral reminders of the Grandfathers and I've chosen to go this route because growing up our Elders always reminded me of my teachings to ensure that I remembered them and it was a more polite way than continuous dictation of rules. With such a program it is possible to ask the child "to reflect on the gifts that the child forgot at that moment" (Robinson, 2009, p. 3) if behaviours are contrary to the beliefs and rules of the classroom. Throughout the program I felt it was important

to not dictate, but follow the Elders' lead in using subtle and daily reminders of the teachings because it was conducive to the Anishinawbek way.

### *Teachings Incorporated into the Classroom*

When looking at incorporating teachings into lessons and daily activities, it was important for me to utilize a part of our culture that is often practiced in ceremonies to help the students listen better. I've found that when going through classroom activities that include the culture, it is important to begin this with the teaching that we have a history of being an oral society and that this also entailed certain rules, especially about listening and when to speak. This was implemented through the use of a prop that would act in a way similar to an eagle feather in ceremonies. When growing up and attending ceremonies, I learned that an eagle feather was used to allow an individual to speak. If you were not holding the feather, it was not your time to speak. When someone wanted to speak, s/he would hold the eagle feather and this helped the person speak openly and talk with wisdom because an eagle is known as the messenger for the Creator. Utilizing a feather assisted an individual to convey his/her message to the group and the Creator. The students were taught to listen with an open mind and acknowledge that each individual is entitled to his/her own beliefs and opinions. Not only did this help with daily discussions, but also with identifying point of views when reading texts in various subject areas. The students respected each other and as time progressed the students understood the importance of listening when others were speaking.

I not only wanted the students to learn about the teachings/history through classroom management activities, but also that as Anishinawbek people, we had a rich heritage of which to be proud. An example of this was when I asked the students what it meant to be First Nations and what identities they associated with other than First Nations. This was an excellent activity that the students participated fully in with answers that ranged from doing everyday activities such as hockey (which is popular in the community) and travelling, to more direct things that only First Nations people do such as ceremonies or gatherings that include sweat lodge, fasting, powwowing, etc. The students also were able to give concrete answers to other names that we as First Nations carry such as Native, Anishinawbek, First people (because we were Original people), and Indian. We discussed the last one and agreed that we no longer call ourselves that, but also discussed why we were termed Indian, because Christopher Columbus thought he had landed in India in 1492 and called us Indians because of it. From this information I created a 'What I Know, What I want to Know, and What I Learned' (KWL) chart with the assistance of the students and we listed what terms we knew but also what we wanted to learn about being Anishinawbek which included our history, treaties, daily activities we still do today, the reasons for ceremonies so that we could respect them, and even how to cook foods that are associated with Anishinawbek (scone, Indian tacos, etc.). This helped guide our future lessons/teachings on Anishinawbek livelihood and kick started our First Nations unit for social studies. This was one example of incorporating Anishinawbek teachings, or livelihood into units of study although many were introduced on a

daily basis whether it was done quickly or as a major focal point of the activity in which students were participating.

There were also programs implemented in the classroom by individuals other than the teacher. This was done to ensure that students were receiving a cultural program that was appropriate for their community's culture, but also to show them useful resources to assist them in their personal, cultural growth if they wanted more than what was offered in the classroom. This also allowed students to see positive role models found within the community. It is always a great thing to ensure that the youth see what their community has to offer and learn about knowledgeable members.

The first program was the Aboriginal Shield program and two members of the Youth Centre delivered this. The program was delivered in the class and at the end the students had a culminating feast to celebrate their graduation from the program. The program delivered was culturally infused and focused on a substance free lifestyle. As the program's description explains,

In many cases the lessons are designed with an awareness of Aboriginal culture and, wherever possible, traditional Aboriginal customs have been integrated into the classroom presentation. Because this is a national program, local cultural differences are not specified or explored. These differences must be uncovered and taken into account by the Officer as the program is implemented in each area. (Hodgson, n.d., p. 5)



This program was excellent because the Anishinawbek way of life is substance free and alcohol and/or drugs are not tolerated. Tobacco that is used in a traditional manner is allowed and is one of the four main medicines found on the medicine wheel, but alcohol and other drugs are to be abstained from. It is important that "cultural values can be applied to the contemporary context, that Native culture is not outdated, and that any Native program must be based on local culture if it is to be successful" (Witt, 1998, p. 268). This was also identified as a culturally relevant program because the facilitators identified cultural practices of the community in their lessons. The handbook for the program also insists that the community's cultural practices must be incorporated and this was a part of the implementation of the Aboriginal Shield program. The program lasted for six weeks and the students met once a week with the facilitators for approximately an hour. The titles of the modules included: Laws and Society; Choices and Decisions; Be Your Own Best Friend; Aboriginal Traditions, Culture, and Values; and Developing Alternatives (Hodgson, n.d., pp. 7-8). When the programs were taught we utilized role-playing for understanding how to make decisions when faced with various situations, especially situations the students might find themselves in which included day-to-day activities in school, with sports teams, or family events. The students were guided through activities by the facilitators and I assisted with classroom management where required.

The second community member to enter the classroom was the cultural facilitator from the local youth centre. She came in and delivered a program that occurred every second week and each session lasted an hour and a half. The

program did not have a developed curriculum or guideline to follow like the Aboriginal Shield had, and it was based on our observations of the students' knowledge of the culture. We would gear each successive session to developing student knowledge based on what we had seen of their prior learning. With this second visitor into the classroom we acknowledged that the Anishinawbek way of teaching is to "teach the whole child, teach mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual beings" (Waabginojii, 2002, p. 297) and that our program would be based on this. For our first lesson we introduced these four aspects of the medicine wheel to the students and had them demonstrate to us through creating their own collages how they view themselves in these aspects. We decided that the culminating activity of this program would be for the students (and me) to create a hand drum and/or shaker.

The overall cultural program was created in conjunction with the long range plans but many lessons were created from scratch and if they were not successful were modified and reintroduced to the students. Reintroducing certain parts of the cultural program to the students allowed me to see how certain portions of the program could be delivered more adequately.

### *Identifying Main Issues*

When implementing the program I had to acknowledge that within the Anishinawbek culture there are many versions of teachings which explain why things occurred or are still occurring to this day. Teachings vary depending on one's teacher and because of this I tried my best to find resource people who were within

the community or that I knew were contributors to a culture that was compatible with the community's beliefs. It was important to ensure that my program was relevant to the community because although I am Ojibway myself and am knowledgeable in the Anishinawbek culture, I had to identify discrepancies between my own beliefs and the beliefs of the community. The Anishinawbek beliefs are not considered a religion but more so a way of life for one to follow and because of this, it is a life of continual learning. I personally realize that it is about a continual learning process about all aspects and the different reasons for components of this way of life and not only took this as a learning opportunity for the students, but for myself.

The main issue for the program was ensuring accountability to the cultural community and ensuring that the program reflected its teachings. The other issue included identifying individuals in the community who were knowledgeable in the culture and ensuring they were an excellent match for delivering the program. It was noted that the program could be hindered by the inability of the educator or cultural facilitators to deliver the program effectively no matter how knowledgeable they were in the culture. What could have a negative effect is the demeanor of the facilitators or educators unable to grab the students' attention.

### *The New Program and the Educator*

Identifying the effects of a new program in a classroom on an educator is important to ensure that the program in question is delivered effectively and that if any modifications need to be made, they are done. When we look at the program

and its effects, we must also look at the educator who is involved. The educator must consider not only the program but the effects it has on students and on the teacher herself. In this research I focused on the strategies used to implement a culturally relevant program, which included looking at how I delivered the program and when I needed the assistance of outsiders. In regards to observing how this type of programming affects a teacher, one must look at how a teacher was educated herself and if she had access to knowledge about identifying First Nations students' needs. It is sometimes feared that "as the standards and demands of teacher education become increasingly oriented towards technocratic goals, and as teacher training becomes more marketized as an educational commodity, it will be increasingly difficult for tribal perspectives to be integrated into the process of credentialing teachers" (Marker, 2000, p. 41). With this in mind, I recall that the opportunity to teach in a remote First Nation community for my practicum or even taking a course on First Nations education was available to me, but I declined these options because I felt as a First Nations member who grew up on a reserve, I knew of the trials and tribulations of First Nations students. I also felt it wasn't necessary for me because I knew from personal experiences as an educator how I would address these issues to ensure I gave the best educational experiences to my students that I could deliver.

With this in mind, I wanted to ensure the students would be left with a "clear understanding of what their culture is all about and how to be proud and feel more comfortable" (Robinson, 2009, p. 2). This was one of my main focal points for delivering a culturally relevant program and allowing myself to reflect upon the

delivery of the topics introduced by this new programming. I was afforded the opportunity to manipulate the program based on my findings through personal observations and reflections. The reflections completed as a part of the action research focuses on the story of the educator and not only how effective the program was but also how I have grown as a teacher. The reflections were based on my observations of how the day went, what had occurred and how it made me feel and grow as a teacher in a First Nations classroom delivering a culturally relevant program. The effects will be further elaborated in the identification of solutions to the needs of instructing in a culturally relevant program.

### **Reflections: Identifying Needs and Developing Solutions**

Throughout the implementation of the new culturally relevant program reflections were done on a daily basis to identify what was occurring in the classroom. The journals were completed after school hours each day, which allowed proper reflection because the day's activities were still fresh in my mind. Keeping the journal allowed me to identify solutions and new needs based on the reality of implementing the program. Some of the more apparent needs of a culturally relevant program came to light and I reflected on them in my journal. Some of the needs identified included the necessity of guided activities that nonetheless allowed students to feel unconstricted, the importance of acknowledging different points of view in the many teachings found within the culture, the importance of relationships with outside resource people, and my usage of the reflections to better myself as a teacher in a First Nations school with a culturally relevant curriculum.

The program's daily activities began as guided activities and as the students became more comfortable I allowed more independence in their decisions about how to approach the topic at hand. For example, when learning about the Seven Grandfathers I gave them an activity with three questions to answer in a group about their chosen Grandfather but many struggled with this. Because of this observation I decided to try the lesson again and this time guide the students as a class in answering the questions together. This allowed the students to learn from each other's knowledge and assist where they were most knowledgeable. I found it much easier to gain the students' attention when I guided them in the activities and I believe this happened for a few simple reasons. Some students are unfamiliar with the culture, students are shy (especially at the beginning of the year), and/or struggle with applying their cultural knowledge to a new environment they associate with being less cultural in nature. For these reasons, I've decided to keep the majority of the cultural components as guided activities. Guiding the lessons also ensures students are aware of what is being asked of them but while the lessons are guided, students also have the freedom to express themselves in the discussions that arise in the classroom. With this in mind the students must not feel as if they are being guided to believe in something that may differ from or question their own beliefs, but they can learn about the various concepts and beliefs of Anishinawbek culture and demonstrate how they can be applied in their daily lives.

Throughout the majority of lessons I guided the students, but allowed for discussion to acknowledge the importance of their input because in the Anishinawbek culture there are many ways to look at the culture and individuals are

all encouraged to have their own interpretations of their teachings. As a teacher of the culture it was important for me to acknowledge the points of view of others, a lesson which assisted students in other subject areas and situations. This openness assisted with behavioural issues, too, as it was easier to refer to the importance of acknowledging other points of view when students had issues with their peers because of what we had learned about during our lessons. During such occurrences the students were given the time to talk and although some struggled with hearing others' points of view, eventually after coaxing they would see the importance of listening to both or even several sides of the story.

As a teacher it was important for me to realize the importance of patience when dealing with situations where students struggled to acknowledge other points of view. It was much easier to do this in a classroom setting, but when dealing with issues that affect the classroom functioning such as internal conflicts between students, etc. it was a lot more difficult. I found it to be more difficult because students may not have felt that the rules applied that were set forth in the classroom and when I acknowledged this, I realized I had to do more work with the students to help them realize the teachings not only applied to our classroom but to the entire school and even to their daily interactions outside the school. Throughout the year our list of rules and the Seven Grandfathers stayed on display to allow for a visual reminder along with auditory reminders wherever necessary throughout the school years. Repercussions for behaviours also included writing a letter or report about the incident at hand to explain how they would better handle the situation if given the chance again. In some cases we would have a meeting with those involved to

ensure all were heard and were aware of what happened, how to handle the situation, and how to overcome the initial outcomes of a negative situation. Upon reflection I noticed that guiding not only culturally relevant lessons was in order, but that it was also important to guide situations that called for the cultural knowledge to be applied to the students' everyday lives. Doing so ensured understanding by all involved in the classroom and any situations that arose that could potentially affect classroom functioning were dealt with through these processes.

When reflecting upon my journal entries I also noticed the importance of carefully choosing individuals who entered into the classroom to ensure that they were not only knowledgeable in their areas, but also able to address and pique the students' interest. The students did not respond well to individuals who lacked energy when delivering the teachings or lessons. In this example, the presenters were scheduled to come into the classroom on a weekly basis and engage the students in a nationally accepted curriculum on abstaining from use of substances and how to acknowledge the culture in their daily lives. I believe energy consists of being assertive in voice, confident in oneself and the matter being presented, and having the ability to engage the students in meaningful activities or discussions. Lack of energy was evident because classroom management was lost and there was a lot of intervening done on my part to deal with the students' distracting behaviours. In this example the students lost focus in the discussion and did not want to participate in the activities, which mainly consisted of worksheets. Many were having their own off topic discussions with their peers and were not



volunteering to participate when called upon. To immediately fix this situation I would help the presenters in their lessons and use close proximity to the students to guide their behaviours by constantly circulating in the classroom. I did not take over the entire lessons as the presenters did this for a living and were scheduled to appear in other classrooms and as with all professions, experience is essential for professional growth. I was able to give advice to the presenters through their evaluation and expressed the importance of showing enthusiasm and engaging students in meaningful discussions and activities rather than relying on worksheets as I, myself as an educator, had learned of this throughout my years of teaching. I realized that engaging the students and being passionate about what is being discussed or taught is important and must be applied to a culturally relevant program. Without this being evident, the students will most likely not engage in the cultural lesson and because of this, not retain anything that is being taught. Berger, Epp & Moller (2006) have found through their own research that “the more relevant the program, the more individualized and varied the programming, the less reason students have to misbehave” (p. 191). The students needed a program that was geared towards their needs, but the misbehaviours also illustrated that my initial attempt at incorporating the traditions in a classroom management program might have to be revisited since students forgot the Grandfather teachings when confronted by facilitators who did not engage their interest.

What these findings also brought to light was the necessity for students to not only show respect towards me, but also any individuals who enter into the classroom. This was a cause for concern because showing respect is a major

component of our Seven Grandfathers teachings that outlined our essential classroom management strategies and the students' behaviours clearly illustrated the inability to apply this important aspect of the teachings. Although the students demonstrated more enthusiasm for individuals who presented with more energy during their presentations, this brought to light the question of how they would act if the invited individuals in the classroom were Elders, who sometimes tend to be more soft spoken, and speak slowly. This question was somewhat answered when we were given the opportunity to attend the teaching lodges where the students were listening to teachings being given by local Elders. During these teachings I could not attend inside the lodge because I was on my time and as a woman cannot enter into a lodge during this special time but I was sitting outside and gave my students to another teacher who would supervise them. Although these circumstances did not make for the best situation to observe, my students were heard and seen from outside the lodge to be respectful. This was confirmed by the supervising teacher and demonstrated to me that the students could be respectful to Elders who tend to be softer spoken and speak slowly. Although I noted that students respond much better to individuals who display more energy, yet demonstrated respect for Elders, it remains important to ensure students understand that they should show respect for all who enter into the classroom. With this in mind, it is still very important to ensure facilitators can provide a program that is engaging and draws the students in to the teachings.

Prior to allowing individuals into the classroom I realized the importance of ensuring that the students had activities that would engage them. In this one

example I have cited, the students were given worksheets to complete that were part of a nationally approved curriculum. The students found them to be boring and repetitive and as stated above did not enjoy this activity. For me, this confirms that a culturally relevant program needs to be hands on and must acknowledge the students in important discussions especially if they are used to being acknowledged as important individuals in their classroom (community) and that the development of their ideas is seen as important to their development and the school's growth.

To find a more effective solution, with my next resource person, I ensured that we met prior to the students being introduced to the individual. When meeting with the resource person, I discussed my concerns about showing energy in the delivery of the program and noted that the students need to be engaged in healthy discussions and interesting activities. Prior to this, I had trusted the presenters based on their professional standings in the community, and the fact that they had recognized and adapted curricular outlines to guide them in their teachings. I chose my second resource based on her experience, knowledge and outstanding and energetic demeanor. She came into our class on a biweekly basis for four months and would meet with the students for approximately an hour and a half. Doige believes that "discussing values, beliefs, and the many stories about being human infuses spirituality into learning and permits students to relate individually to the information and on reflection to make it practical in their lives" (p. 154) and this proved to be the case with the second resource person. The students really took to our time with her and showed respect by listening to and participating in the discussions. The students were engaged and retained the teachings from week to

week and I assume this was because of the delivery methods used with the program. It was done informally with the students encouraged to share their knowledge of the biweekly topics. This allowed me to fully understand a solution to my problem of engaging the students fully when individuals other than me instruct the cultural components. Generally, the students respond better to individuals who show enthusiasm or a genuine belief in their teachings than those who rely more on an outlined curriculum, including worksheets, and do not engage in discussions with the students.

The culminating activity brought the entire class together as we were given the option to make hand drums and/or shakers. This took a total of three working periods and the students were very much engaged with students who were ahead of the game in the process helping others at completing their creations. I had only three individuals not complete their projects and that was due to poor attendance. The students who did complete their projects, especially the hand drums, participated in a birthing ceremony for their drums. What this ceremony does is bring the drum to life and the students were very attentive during this portion of the activity, including those who did not make a drum. The instructor spoke of the importance of participating in ceremonies, and for those not participating to show respect by acknowledging the ceremony's importance and wait until all involved have finished what is asked of them based on their roles in the ceremony. They were completely enthralled with this ceremony, especially when the drums appeared to come to life during the ceremony. The students and myself included demonstrated a sense of pride in our creations and were taught the importance of

taking care of our newly sacred possessions. After we had completed this portion it was up to the students now to take the teachings they were taught and show respect for their drums/shakers when they took them home.

The second guest who entered our classroom illustrated to me the importance of not only finding applicable resources for a culturally relevant classroom, but also the importance of ensuring the students and the resource person could collaborate to complete a successful project/session(s). In my journal reflections I acknowledged that the students participated much more willingly in this second round of teachings with a community teacher and found major differences in how the projects were delivered. The main differences included the enthusiasm with which the program was delivered, and the activities the students engaged in. Students responded very well to this individual who showed a sense of pride in her beliefs and enthusiasm in sharing that knowledge with others. The students also enjoyed a more informal lesson structure where the lessons were more of a discussion and sharing of everyone's knowledge. As a culturally relevant program is delivered it is important to acknowledge that "children come to school living their life stories, and we need to be attentive to the stories they bring, the stories they tell, the stories they live" (Orr, Murphy & Pearce, 2007, p. 286). This program allowed the students to voice their beliefs making it more meaningful to them as they were acknowledged as developers of the Anishinawbek culture. Finally, the students enjoyed hands on activities rather than when they were expected to complete a worksheet to illustrate their knowledge. In a culturally relevant program it is important for students to not only listen to the teachings, but

also internalize them and show respect for them. I believe in this second round of sessions the individuals were able to demonstrate their understandings of the teachings more so, and especially through the culminating activity at the end. Throughout the creation of the drums/shakers students were not only making their own independently but also willingly helping others to complete the work asked of them. The students demonstrated this through their completion of making a drum/shaker, participating in the ceremonies that followed, or even just showing respect by being attentive during the making of the drums/shakers and especially during the ceremonies. After this time with the presenter I felt my students were learning the importance of showing respect for all that came into the classroom and how to apply one of the important Seven Grandfathers that created our classroom management program.

In the end, it was important for myself as an educator to ensure my culturally relevant program was guided, that the culture shared was relevant to the students' community, and that the outside resources (individuals) brought into the classroom were a good fit for such programming. What my reflections illustrated was that this was an opportunity not only to provide a culturally relevant program and environment for my students to allow them to flourish, but for myself to acknowledge the steps to develop such a program, how to implement a new program, and develop myself as a professional through personal reflections. As educators it is important to acknowledge not only what is being done in the classroom, but also what works, and how to modify aspects of programs that may not be beneficial to the majority of students involved. Action research allows

educators the opportunity to complete this process through steps that ask the educator to look at the program currently being delivered, examine how to implement a new program, and take the time to reflect on the changes and then finally seize the opportunity to modify the program and once again repeat the steps to ensure development of a stronger program.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Summary of Reflections

With this research it became apparent that incorporating a culturally relevant program could not only be done, but could be done in a manner that was beneficial to the students while providing reflective professional growth for the educator. With this research I was able to incorporate a new program and using critical reflection practices, assess how the program worked and how I had grown as an educator. It was important for me to find a balance because “if Indigenous children are to become healthy adults who meaningfully contribute both to their communities and to broader society, it is imperative that they be enculturated into the fundamental values of their own specific histories and cultures” (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2007, p. 52). To find such a balance I had to resolve some major issues that surfaced from the research including providing a program that was guided while allowing students to actively participate and not feel constricted; providing a program that was compatible with the culture of the community; and engaging the students in programs that encouraged participation and growth through incorporation of resourceful community members. After trying to use less guided lessons during cultural programming, it was noted that students benefited more from guided lessons. These lessons also needed to allow for students to feel free to participate or not, and to have their own teachings and beliefs validated while providing an environment that allowed them to share in discussions and provide insight into the cultural components. This was important to address to ensure the



history of First Nations education was not repeated and that evolution had occurred to allow for growth in students and teachers as well.

Another finding was that a culturally relevant program must be compatible with the culture of the community. To ensure this, resources should be local and acknowledge that there are many aspects to the teachings and different interpretations of the teachings. Implementing a culturally relevant program must be done with sensitivity and acknowledgement that there is no one viewpoint for the Anishinawbek culture. This is not to discourage implementing a culturally relevant program but it must be understood that such a program has to be adaptable to the very diverse parameters (classroom, student body, and teacher) that can all affect a culturally relevant program. A curriculum model needs to be created " that Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators would use for short-term personal improvement and long-term social change" (Saunders & Hill, 2007, p. 1029). The program must be implementable by all teachers, no matter what their background is, and this brings with it issues such as ensuring a program is delivered with social awareness, respect, sensitivity, and accuracy. For these reasons, it is important an "awareness of social inequalities must be brought to the mainstream education policy writers, curriculum designers, and school improvement activists for outward coalitions, partnerships, and advocates to be formed" (Saunders & Hill, 2007, p. 1033). Curriculum developers have to take into consideration all these extenuating factors when creating a culturally relevant program, as well as understanding the educators who will deliver the program.

A culturally relevant program must also take into account how the students will interact with outside resource people and respond to their way of teaching. With this being said, classroom management also must be established where students understand that respect should not only be shown towards those they interact with on a daily basis (teachers), but also guests invited into the classroom. Students were found to be more attentive to those who spoke about the teachings with passion and belief. They also responded well to a program that was hands on and an environment where their thoughts and insights into the culture were appreciated. Completing monotonous or repetitive tasks such as worksheets were not beneficial to the program; nor were presenters who appeared to lack motivation and energy to deliver a program that was cultural.

### **Roles of First Nations Schools: Walking in Two Worlds**

First Nations schools have a unique role because they must provide a curriculum that is equal to or surpasses the expectations of provincial curriculum and also provide an environment that allows students to flourish where there has been a history of suppression for First Nations students. Incorporating a cultural component is not a newfound idea but one that has been in the works for many years, especially with the introduction of on-reserve schooling. Incorporating a culturally relevant program calls for “academic enablers who include social and emotional factors that allow a child to benefit from classroom instruction. A number of academic enablers have subsequently been shown to predict and correlate with academic success” (Baydala et. al., 2009, p. 21). One of the first

groups that thought of incorporating a culturally relevant class environment and program was the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) who, with their document entitled the "Indian Control of Indian Education", brought forth the following purposes of First Nations schooling: "(a) to incorporate First Nations culture into the school system, (b) to foster greater involvement of parents, (c) to harmonize education with local development, (d) to make community people accountable for the education of their own children, and (e) to assert the right of First Nations parents to circumscribe the type of education necessary for their children" (quoted in Agbo, 2005, p. 305). With this in mind, research needs to continue to ensure First Nations schools can provide a program that meets the needs of their students as they set foot in two worlds.

Providing a culturally relevant program may be more attainable in a First Nations school because the number of knowledgeable local resources is at times abundant and conducive to teaching the culture of the community. With the work from this research I was hoping to engage my students in an "energetic and creative renewal of their cultural identities and practices as well as a quest for economic self-sufficiency" (Caracciolo, 2009, p. 183). It is my hopes that First Nations students find balance with their identities as Anishinawbek people and become self-sustaining in today's modern world. First Nations students who know where they come from may find it easier to blaze a path for them to where they want to go. Witt (1998) argues that the "educational process must provide the student to remain a functional member of his/her own group, yet satisfactorily fit into the dominant society if he/she so wishes" (p. 266). As a First Nations member I realize the

importance of not only identifying myself as a traditional Anishinawbek Kwe (woman) but also a professional in today's western world. Without knowledge of my history would I be able to identify as an Anishinawbek, even if I did not practice the traditional Anishinawbek way of life? Not all First Nations students will identify with a traditional lifestyle but acknowledgement of one's history is demonstrated to be of importance in taking pride in oneself. Students can benefit from finding their culture and in a First Nations school the First Nation staff can easily incorporate their 'dominant' culture because the Anishinawbek culture is no longer the culture of the minority but the culture of the majority of students. First Nations students themselves may find it difficult to walk in two worlds, as some might say, but with the assistance of First Nations schools that provide a provincially recognized curriculum and a culturally relevant program, young people will be able to excel.

### **Needed Research**

Research into implementation of a culturally relevant program is necessary to continue the evolution of First Nations education. There is much needed research to be completed in order for culturally relevant programming to emerge. Questions to be explored include the needs of the numerous First Nations and their varying cultures; how to find resources to create a program; and how to implement culturally relevant programming in an urban setting. I believe that one of the major concerns for creating culturally relevant programming is the fact that there is not just one culture for the Anishinawbek found throughout North America. At the same time the programs must "never forget that our teachings must promote self-

worth, dignity, and empowerment to our children, in all of our communities wherever our territories are” (Antone, 2000, p. 100). This means that the programming must be adaptable to all the different beliefs and languages, which would make it very general in nature. A very general program would leave it up to the educators to deliver a program that meets the needs of their students and some teachers may not have the knowledge base or resources to fulfill this even though research shows that culturally relevant programming has positive outcomes for First Nations students. This might deter teachers from implementing such a program. Thus it is necessary to complete research on how to create culturally relevant programming for the many cultures and communities found within First Nations groups.

With this in mind, future research should also acknowledge the importance of delivering a culturally relevant program alongside a curriculum that meets or exceeds the provincial expectations. Castagno and Brayboy (2008) believe that “educational standards should specify Indigenous and mainstream knowledge, norms, cultures, languages, and pedagogies as complementary goals” (p. 977). Any research that is beneficial to the growth of this area must acknowledge this important fact.

Another reason to complete more research into culturally relevant programming is the necessity for educators to be sensitive to the cultures of First Nations students. “A sensitive teacher must acknowledge that not all Aboriginal students know their cultural heritage and that they hold differing ideas about

spirituality” (Doige, 2003, p. 151). Teachers need to be aware of possible issues that may arise such as students (or parents) who may question the program due to the use of resources that may contradict beliefs that students bring to the classroom. Culturally relevant programs need to be developed in such a way that they are not constricting or binding and allow students to be active participants. Students can learn just as much from being observers because this still allows them a chance to see a part of who they are as Anishinawbek. Research needs to be done to create a program that is general to allow for the diversity of cultures, but also a program that allows students’ voices to be heard about their beliefs and the choice of being active participants or observers.

With all of this in mind, another reason more research is needed can be because educators will have to actively search for resources in their varying areas. Greenwood and de Leeuw (2007) believe that “ongoing community involvement from the participation of Elders and community representatives through to curriculum that rests both on local Indigenous knowledges and broader, global, sense of Indigeneity” (p. 53) is necessary. Educators will need to know how to actively search out resources while respecting the culture of the communities as many communities of First Nations schools may view the teachers as outsiders, especially if they are not from the area. Researching how to approach such a feat is necessary to ensure cultural boundaries are respected and that appropriate resources are found. Finally, research will be beneficial to the idea that a culturally relevant program can be implemented in varying educational settings. The research for this thesis was completed in a First Nations community with an on-reserve

population of approximately 6000 people, which is a rather high population for a First Nations community. Culturally relevant programming research needs to be completed in various settings such as urban environments that have a high First Nation student population. Friedel (1999) found that in urban areas "Native parents also chose this alternative program because they believe that an Aboriginal-based curriculum will be more beneficial to the well-being of their children in the long run by increasing students' chances at academic success" (p. 144). Research has begun in this field and needs to continue even if "the development of a culturally respectful dialogue and collaboration between Natives and non-Natives might simply be the beginning of this process" (Friedel, 1999, p. 153).

### **Future Endeavors**

With all that I have learned from this research I hope to engage in further developing curriculum for culturally infused programs for First Nations classrooms. I am currently assisting a local foundation in creating a cultural component for their youth leadership camps and am utilizing my findings to try to create a program that is cultural but also acknowledges that there are many diverse Anishinawbek cultures that must be considered. I believe in such a program because it has been demonstrated that "culturally appropriate interventions that focus on the development of leadership and study skills may provide children with the tools they need to achieve academically" (Baydala et al., 2009, p. 30). Baydala et al. go on to argue that "If such programs are implemented, care must be taken to ensure that their content supports the ways in which leadership and study skills are defined

within the Aboriginal community” (p. 30). With this in mind, I take pride in the fact that the foundation is a First Nations based foundation and that First Nations teachers are teaching the cultural aspects.

As for my educational aspirations I see myself completing AQ courses that I began prior to the beginning of my journey to completing a thesis. I will be looking at attaining specialties in Reading Development, and Special Education as I find these necessary for the area I teach in. Students not only struggle with their identities as Anishinawbek but also academically, especially in the field of literacy, which unfortunately impacts the other core subjects taught. With previous grade assignments (a comprehensive class) I acknowledged the importance of identifying special needs of our students and accommodating or modifying my classroom program accordingly.

I have also become intrigued with completing additional research in the field of culturally relevant programming, possibly looking at whether students in culturally relevant programs carry these beliefs through to future educational levels. If the students do carry their beliefs through and apply them accordingly, will it not only affect personal growth, but also educational growth? Witt (1998) claims, “one of the instruments for healing is, however, the building of self-esteem in the client, and self-esteem can only be built on the basis of what or who that person is” (p. 269). Healing is necessary in the education of First Nations and truly observing the long term effects of culturally relevant programming would not only be beneficial to those developing the curriculum, but the students as well. With an understanding of



their past and a sense of pride in their culture, it is hoped that students will carry this confidence forward and achieve their goals whether it is in a formal academic setting of a university or trade school, or informal as a traditional educator. The options are endless in seeing how far such a program can affect a student, especially if culturally relevant programming follows them throughout their educational travels. My educational goals of attaining a doctorate in education is not only for personal growth and knowledge, but to create knowledge to assist First Nations education as it is important for First Nations students to walk in both worlds, traditional and Western.

I am passionate about culturally relevant programming because of my own experiences in a classroom as a student, and because of the findings from my research in this field. First Nations students have needs, just as any student has, but because of the history of the education of First Nations students their needs are a bit more complex because they were introduced to the educational setting through coercion and a loss of identity. It is noted by Ignas (2004) that “meaningful curriculum must necessarily be rooted in local knowledge and history and that this is especially so in the case of Indigenous students whose typical experience of mainstream education is one that has distanced and denied First Nations knowledge” (p. 49). To right the wrongs of education history changes must be made and in order to do so, one must be knowledgeable about the history and the implications of previously implemented programs.

Implementing a culturally relevant program in an educational setting can be the beginning of realizing that the Anishinawbek culture is accepted in other venues of life. "Restoring balance by restoring the place of spiritually based traditions in our public institutions is logical and necessary" (Marsden, 2006, p. 143). I am fortunate that my employer acknowledges this and allows for leave for cultural activities that we as professionals partake in, as well as the students. This allows for personal growth and has assisted me in my own spiritual growth that I can bring to already acquired traditional knowledge necessary for delivering a traditionally infused cultural program. It is important to acknowledge the many cultures that create our multicultural society and this initial step being taken in many classrooms is a continued progress to acceptance of our many students' diverse needs and how to address sensitive issues such as culture and religion. In regards to education and First Nations student achievement, Doige (2003) states "students can only do this well if his or her spirituality is respected and accepted" (p. 150). As educators it is our obligation to assist our students to the best of our abilities and support their development as best we can.

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