



VALUES AND ETHICS IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

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ABORIGINAL "WAYS OF BEING": EDUCATIONAL LEADERS, STUDENTS AND TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL KNOWLEDGE

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*"We once thought you came to live with us.
You still could have that chance.
We're still here, and we live on this land.
We don't live in your libraries in the pages of your books....
We have a long surviving and sacred tradition and an experiential wisdom
that's been passed on for more centuries than you can imagine.
This is your chance to benefit from that.
All you have to do is to be quiet and listen
and quit worrying about proving and believing."*

Mad Bear
Tuscarora Holy Man
of the Tuscarora Nation of the Six-Nation Haudenosaunee Confederacy

The School System and Aboriginal Students

It is well known that students from Indigenous societies around the world overwhelmingly demonstrate a distinct lack of enthusiasm for schooling in its conventional form, most often attributed to an alien institutional culture (Battiste, 2002). The statistics bear this out. In Canada, for example, only 47% of Aboriginal¹ students graduate from high school, compared to 82% of non-Aboriginal students (Mendelson, 2006).

¹ In this paper, we use the terms Aboriginal, Indigenous and First Nations somewhat interchangeably. Typically, Indigenous is a global term referring to original inhabitants on the land, and in Canada, Aboriginal refers to three groups of Indigenous peoples—First Nations, Metis, and Inuit. Our discussion in this paper centers on Indigenous peoples, who are Aboriginal and First Nations.

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The percentages in British Columbia, where we reside, are the same as the national statistics (BC Stats, 2005), although, in Manitoba, another Western province, only 16% of aboriginal students graduate (Mendelson, 2006). The prognosis for Aboriginal children living in the United States is similarly poor, with only 49% of Native American students graduating (Swanson, 2008), and some states like Nebraska showing only a 40% graduation rate (Greene & Winters, 2002).

We know that young people who drop out of school, or who are “pushed out” (Fine, 1991), are over-represented in minimal-wage jobs, are more likely to be on social assistance or become entangled with the justice system, and experience a reduced quality of life (Cassidy & Jackson, 2005; Farrington, 2000). Howe’s (2002) study of earnings reveals that an Aboriginal female in Saskatchewan without a high school diploma earns less than \$90,000 during her lifetime and an Aboriginal male earns \$500,000 less than a non-Aboriginal male with a diploma.

Periodically there is a flurry of policy initiatives designed to better engage the Aboriginal learner. For example, in February of this year, the Ontario Minister of Education announced a new six million dollar Access to Opportunity Strategy to boost the number of Aboriginal graduates in Ontario schools, stating the need to provide better opportunities for Aboriginal youth and thus “creating a stronger, more inclusive education system for all students.” (CNW Group, 2009, p.1). Yet, despite these type of initiatives, Aboriginal youth still represent the group most likely to drop out of school.

Until a few years ago, Aboriginal students themselves were blamed for not succeeding in school; they were not intelligent enough, not focused enough, and not skilled in problem-solving (Battiste, 2002). Fortunately, this discourse is now labeled for what it is--uninformed, racist, and representative of the dominant white hegemonic culture. Well-meaning educators, in an attempt to make curriculum more relevant to Aboriginal students, have also made mistakes. McDonough (1998, p. 486-7) relays the story told by Deyhle and Swisher (1997) about a teacher who tried to engage her Pomo Indian students with an ancestral story about Slug Woman. Some students responded with open hostility, others with silence. McDonough postulates that perhaps the teacher mis-recognized this story as a genuine part of the students’ identity or perhaps the students resented an outsider discussing a story that was theirs. He concludes that educators should not impose what they deem as “culture” without collaboration and great sensitivity (p. 486).

Similarly, programs developed for Aboriginal students to redress what is perceived as their need to succeed in the traditional school environment, are typically doomed to failure unless the deeper issues of an alien institutional school culture are addressed (Aikenhead, 1995; Harris, 2006; Stairs, 1994). For example, students from Indigenous societies will continue to recoil from a school experience that runs contrary to what’s natural to them: the importance of family and relationships; the notion of an interdependent universe; and the importance of place in their society (Kawagley, Norris-Tull & Norris-Tull, 1998). The two worlds of Aboriginal learning and Western thought have not blended well enough to support the learner,

creating a rift between what the Aboriginal learner naturally understands and what is being taught.

Educational leaders are just beginning to come to grips with what Giroux (1988) observed twenty years ago: “the school is the representation of lived experience, material artifacts, and practices forged within the unequal and dialectical relations that different groups establish in a given society at a particular historical point” (p. 116). The school itself is a cultural creation, a site for negotiation among cultures in contact, not a “free-floating universal agency unbound from history and present situation” (Stairs, 1994, p. 155-6), or simply the vehicle for transmitting the tools for success in the dominant culture.

Purpose of This Paper

In this paper, we turn the lens of examination on educational leaders, particularly school principals and teachers, who are in a position to provide spaces for the co-creation of school culture to occur (Sergiovanni, 1994). We suggest that an important first step is for these leaders to begin their own journey of looking inward, reflecting on their own identity and examining their own biases, perceptions and judgments. This is a process that zeroes in on the educator’s “ways of being”--their attitudes, behaviors and interactions with Aboriginal students. It also focuses in on the educator’s fundamental beliefs about “what is education” and how this is manifested in school policies and pedagogical practices. This combination of “being different,” “thinking differently,” and “doing things differently,” is key to providing a school culture that is more receptive to Aboriginal students and their ways of learning.

In the course of this discussion, we will interweave examples from a school that enacts these principles and has a record of providing school success for Aboriginal youth. Whytecliff Agile Learning Centre is an accredited independent school in British Columbia, designed specifically for youth aged 12 to 18 who face multiple challenges in their lives, have experienced failure in traditional public schools, and have a record of school expulsion or dropping out. Many of the students have been involved in criminal behavior, struggle with substance issues, have experienced abuse, come from impoverished environments, and have diagnosed learning disabilities. The school has been in existence for approximately 15 years and operates from two locations in the Greater Vancouver area, with up to 55 students at one site and 36 students at a smaller second site. The school follows the mandated provincial curriculum and provides a high school diploma. Because of the challenges faced by the students, the school provides a lower student-teacher ratio (8:1) and also individualizes the curriculum to cater to the needs of each student.

Approximately 50% of the students are of Aboriginal ancestry, representing over 15 First Nations from across Canada. Uprooted and living in an urban or suburban environment, many students feel disconnected from their roots and traditions. In 2004, the school received special federal government funding² to develop a program that would build on the school’s platform of success for all students (Cassidy and Bates, 2005), while adding

an extra layer of support for Aboriginal learners. They hired an Aboriginal Teacher-Coordinator (hereafter called ATC) to help re-connect the youth with their heritage, add Aboriginal content to the curriculum, and mentor the school staff about First Nations' ways of being and learning.

The illustrations discussed in this paper come from data collected at the school over a two and a half year span, using a participatory action research methodology involving the ATC (Marsden) and the university consultant/researcher (Cassidy), field notes documenting interactions with the school administrators, teachers, students, and Aboriginal Elders, as well as hour-long taped interviews with the principal, teachers, ATC and select students.

The goal of this research was to uncover (and then put back into practice) principles that were effective in engaging the students with their coursework as well as kindling in them a sense of the bigger picture—their links with their heritage and their uniqueness and giftedness. The purpose, then, was not only to help students achieve school success, but also to turn around their life trajectory and to give them the strength to address the many challenges they faced—addictions, criminal involvement, poverty, and marginalization.

In the next section we contrast Aboriginal conceptions of education with Western traditions, and follow this with a discussion of how Whytecliff incorporates Aboriginal knowledge. The final section of the paper discusses implications for public schools.

Aboriginal Conceptions of Education

The Western education system is still very young; perhaps only 150 years old. Aboriginal education, on the other hand, has been in place for thousands of years. Indigenous people, for many generations, have relied on their ways of examining and relating to all of nature—its forces, the world, the universe, and the interconnections between these dimensions. Traditional Aboriginal education processes were carefully constructed: through instruction by the Creator; observing natural processes; adapting to modes of survival; obtaining sustenance from the animal, plant and material worlds; and using natural materials to make tools and implements. This knowledge was passed down through the generations through songs and ceremonies. Although we are cautious about over-generalizing or over-simplifying Aboriginal educational processes and recognize that there are nuances and subtleties implicit in different Indigenous traditions (Battiste, 1995; Beynon, 2008; Cajete, 2000), we rely on Brant-Castellano's (2000, p. 25) overview when we suggest that "Aboriginal knowledge is personal, oral, experiential, holistic, and conveyed in narrative or metaphorical language" (cited in Beynon, 2008, p. 45).

² We wish to acknowledge the funding support for this project and research from the Department of Justice Canada, Youth Justice Policy Division, Youth Justice Renewal Fund. We also wish to acknowledge our community partner, Focus Foundation of British Columbia and the staff and students at Whytecliff Agile Learning Centre.

Traditionally each Aboriginal person was deemed to have natural talents that were associated with their clan. For example, the Deer clan were teachers; therefore it was natural that the ATC at Whytecliff—a member of the Deer clan—would follow this pathway, as it was a reflection of who she was. The Chief typically came from the clan of the Crane and the Loon, as this clan was gifted with leadership qualities (Kawagley, 1995). Each clan was revered for its knowledge, and part of the education process was to recognize this innate knowledge and to use it routinely, even daily (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Children were prepared from birth for their role in their tribe. When children became "of age", they would join the adults and Elders while they performed their respective roles and duties. There was never a time when a person was not being educated. This training was reinforced through demonstration and was accompanied by thoughtful stories in which lessons were embedded (Kawagley, 1995; Cajete, 2000). This is what natural learning "as a way of life" means in the traditional Aboriginal context.

There is also the belief that each person's instincts and abilities are sharpened with the natural flow of life over time. According to Kawagley (1993), these personal cognitive maps are created and unfold through the dynamics of humor, humility, tolerance, observation, experience, social interaction, and the conversations we listen to in the natural and spiritual worlds. These natural abilities, however, may be covered up by abuse or addictions, or from suppression due to the process of colonization, so that another important dimension of education is healing—healing from the scars of oppression, racism, intolerance and marginalization.

Whereas Western approaches to education compartmentalize knowledge—typically de-contextualized and taught in the detached setting of a classroom or laboratory—Indigenous people value knowledge obtained through direct experience in the natural world. The particulars are seen in relationship to the whole, and "laws" are tested in relationship to survival on a daily basis (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2004). Aboriginal knowledge is holistic; stressing one's relationship with all realms found in this world and the spirit world—the physical, plant, animal and human realms and the ways in which these realms interact to create unique knowledge or a higher knowledge. How an individual places himself or herself within and outside of this knowledge is unique and based on traditional teachings passed down through many generations.

Western thought also differs from Indigenous thought in its notion of competency. In the dominant Western tradition, one's knowledge is discreet and may be measured through written tests, removed from "real-world" application. Barnhardt and Kawagley (2004) contrast this with a notion of competency that is linked to survival and practical application. They give the example of the caribou hunter who needs to know how to put his knowledge of hunting into practice; otherwise his whole family will die.

There is also a dependency on the Creator and an openness to prayer, fasting, visions, and dreams that give direction to one's life and educational path. The spiritual, intuitive and affective dimensions are central to Aboriginal epistemology. The ATC describes Aboriginal people as being very "wide in thought,

feeling and insight,” noting that this breadth can be intimidating to those who do not come from this tradition. She clarifies:

Some Aboriginal education is expressed through dreams, visions, songs, storytelling, connection to the land and each other. It is how we *feel* within each encounter of life. Our land contains the history of the people, the language, the cycles of nature and the cycles of life. Aboriginals are rooted with memories that contain content and this is innate from many generations back.

According to Cajete (1994), Indigenous people are profoundly attuned to the patterns and rhythms in nature and to relationships, affecting them deeply and multi-dimensionally, and that nothing in the contemporary modern educational experience comes close to fostering this sensitivity. Schools tend to avoid the affective domain. Teachers ask students what they think, but rarely ask how they feel. They ask them to report what they know, but this is knowledge that has been learned cognitively, not what has been experienced in a holistic, integrated way (mind, body, soul, and spirit). Brown (2004) observes that attention to the affective fosters an upward movement towards healing and learning, which is essential in transformation. The Indigenous pedagogies of apprenticeship, ceremonies and practice in real-world settings help to uncork the affective domain and give it credence.

The Aboriginal concept of education, then, flows out of what is natural and innate, is rooted in historical traditions, and has a practical application. The learner is situated within a broad interconnected web of relationships with the land, with ancestors, with others, and with the Creator. Aboriginal education is hands-on, experiential and geared towards meaningful purposes. There is a balance between the cognitive, affective, physical and spiritual dimensions of one's life. It might be said that Aboriginal education reflects a certain “way of being and doing” that runs contrary to what we see practiced in schools today: individual accomplishments and competitiveness versus collective activities; learning through books and direct instruction in the contrived environment of the classroom rather than through experiential learning in real-life settings; a focus on cognitive understanding as opposed to a balance between the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual. Schools today also concentrate on the demonstration of learning within limited time frames, and it is expected that all students of a certain age and grade should perform particular tasks that the dominant culture has deemed appropriate for that level. There is little opportunity for individual expression or for learning to occur as a natural evolution over time.

Aikenhead (1995, p. 220) portrays the contrast this way: aboriginal knowledge for the sake of survival versus gaining knowledge for its own sake; celebrating mystery vs. eradicating mystery; human action that is intimately and subjectively interrelated versus formally and objectively decontextualized; holistic perspectives reflecting a gentle,

accommodating, intuitive and spiritual wisdom versus a reductionistic Western science with its aggressive, mechanistic and analytical explanations.

It is not much wonder that Aboriginal youth feel silenced. Just as the residential school experiences in North America silenced their parents and grandparents, Aboriginal students today are being silenced through educational policies and practices that run contrary to their ways of being and learning. It is not surprising that they are failing to succeed in the traditional school system, or leaving school in large numbers.

Turning the Lens on the Educational Leader

It is incumbent upon conscientious educational leaders to ask the questions: How might they better engage the First Nations learner? How might knowledge of Aboriginal education be incorporated for the benefit of all students? Rather than asking the learner to adapt to a hostile environment, the lens needs to be shifted to creating the right environment for the learner to thrive. This involves an examination of the educational leader's philosophy and “ways of being” in addition to reconfiguring school policies and pedagogical practices.

Ornstein (2003) points out that the educator's philosophy greatly determines educational decisions. Central to this is one's vision about what a human being is, and the processes through which well-being comes about (Brown, 2006). Rocoer (1992, p. 172) talks about the educator's ethical intentions as “aiming at the good life with and for others in just institutions” (in Robbie, 2005, p. 206). Giving Aboriginal students the opportunity for the good life in the setting of a just institution means that Indigenous approaches to learning should be evident in school policies and practices (Robbie, 2005).

Stairs (1994) points out that it is critical that there be more than mere accommodation of First Nations students, but rather that the school be co-constructed together with Aboriginal communities, otherwise educators will be guilty of “othering” those that are different. Respect needs to be shown for the validity of First Nations epistemology (Harris, 2006). It is in the process of listening attentively to the voices of each other, and allowing for those quiet spaces between conversations to occur, that “the Spirit” will show itself and something dynamic and wonderful will happen (Harris, 2006). Stairs (1994, p. 1) describes the dynamic energy that comes from true collaboration where both the “insiders” and the “outsiders” are changed and something new and fresh is created.

The program for students at Whytecliff unfolded through authentic collaboration with local Aboriginal communities and leaders. The ATC was hired based on recommendation by an Indigenous educator from the university who could attest to her talents and abilities. The ACT worked closely with key Aboriginal agencies, Elders, and bands, to design activities for the youth that were authentic and powerful, connecting them to their culture, traditions and ceremonies. She also consulted daily with the school principal and worked alongside the teachers to mentor and guide them into First Nations' approaches to teaching

and learning. This mentoring process is worlds apart from a “telling modality.”

Through the ATC’s mentorship, the educators at Whytecliff became more attuned to some of the critical dynamics necessary for First Nations students’ success. Although the principal and teachers were already sensitive to the importance of relationship building with their students (Cassidy & Bates, 2005), they became more aware of the need for quiet watchfulness, other-directedness, gentleness, and a collaborative spirit. This required self-reflection and careful attentiveness to their own actions, words and responses. As one teacher said:

It’s all the little things that...translate value and worth....It’s also modeling warmth and caring..., never raising your voice, showing genuine concern when they’re having a bad day....Also ask the youth what they want to do in a particular lesson. I think that shows...you’re making an effort to find them something that they would find relevant.

The ATC talks about how Aboriginal youth are highly attuned to the way the principal or teacher interrelates:

Relationships are the first thing that needs to be developed. If there is no trust there is no relationship or honor. Sincerity is a strong key. When one is insincere towards an Aboriginal youth, they feel it and act from this old knowledge system....The best way to understand Aboriginal knowledge is to be ‘open’ to accepting different realities. Humor is [also important]...Always keeping it light and having a sense of humor will go a long way in building good relationships with Aboriginal youth.

One of the ways that relationships are fostered at the school is through the talking circle. This pedagogical approach spotlights aboriginal culture, plus it creates an environment where each person has equal status and equally important things to say. In this setting, the power imbalance between teacher and student and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student shifts.

It takes enormous relationship building to build trust. We [at Whytecliff] hold aboriginal talking circles...to support Aboriginal culture. The youth are taught the significance of an eagle feather and being able to hold it allows the youth the time and space to speak with their hearts. The youth may pass if they wish or may speak about what’s been bothering them. It could be something they are holding from their past or something that is happening in their lives now. Part of the protocols around the talking circle includes: no judgment or criticism and nothing spoken leaves the safety of the circle, it is strictly confidential. The youth begin to express emotions in a trusting environment where everyone is deemed equal. There is no age category, race category or gender category (ATC).

For many students, the talking circles allowed them to tell their story for the first time in a non-threatening way, rather than be labeled as “non-communicative” or “day-dreamers” as they had in prior schools. They also connected with others who were facing similar challenges or who had arrived at ways of moving forwards with their lives. Robbie (2005), a School District Superintendent in a rural community with a large Indigenous population, describes how he embraced the talking circle as a way to solve problems in his district, especially when the issues involved an Aboriginal student or parent.

I quickly discovered that in spite of my initial belief that the Circle was cumbersome and time-consuming, I need to patiently allow the Circle process to generate a just resolution. I also needed to know that my position as Superintendent of Schools did not privilege me to speak out of turn or control the process. (p. 184)

Of course, building relationships with students is not a novel concept. But perhaps greater attention can be given to structuring quiet spaces that allow relationships to flourish, to choosing pedagogy that gives voice to students, and to acknowledging students’ spiritual and emotional needs. In contrast to a school setting where every minute of the day is structured, efficiency is the priority, and frenetic busyness is the norm, the ATC talks about being in tune with the Spirit, absorbing the needs of each student, and following the path of helping that unfolds as a result of this attentiveness.

...it just depends on what the kids need. I’ll have a feeling...the most important thing is to touch...or talk to each child and see if there is anything they need and then I take that direction. So, for example, Sondey [not her real name] might need a poem....I canget her a Cree poem which is her natural background, and then we work with this.

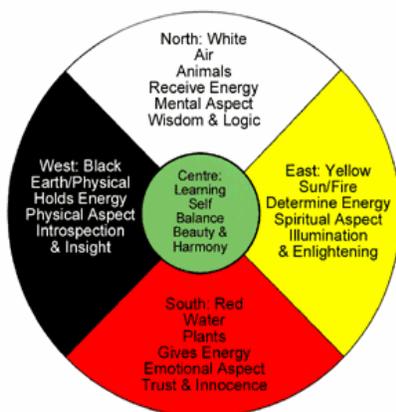
The ATC also takes this same quiet, intuitive approach when mentoring teachers:

In working with teachers...I wait for the person to be ready and to be open...So if I feel they have openness to understanding that...will benefit their teaching I’ll slide it in. I just come around. I’ll even walk around a person until their feeling changes then I’ll sit down and talk with them. Sometimes they are not aware...If you work with people and use your feeling you can work with them in a different way.

The Medicine Wheel in First Nations cultures provides a visual depiction of the importance of the emotional, spiritual, mental and physical dimensions, and the need to provide a balance; that is, developing each equally, not one over the other. The eastern part of the medicine wheel is the sun or fire depicted by the color yellow, where energy is sought and the focus is on the spiritual--illumination and enlightenment. In the south, there is growth, the color red gives energy, and the emotional dimension is paramount. In the west, the color black holds the energy, and attention is on the physical, introspection and insight. In the

north, the color white receives the energy, there is purity, wisdom and logic and the secrets of life are revealed.

Figure 1 : Medicine Wheel³



At the centre of the medicine wheel, the process of healing and learning takes place, as the four dimensions are integrated. According to Brown (2006, p. 107), healing emerges as a by-product of learning if learning occurs in a healthy and balanced way. He stresses cultivating spiritual learning through ceremonies, emotional learning through talking circles, physical learning through bodily awareness, and mental learning through validation of aboriginal knowledge. Volition is also important as the learner seeks to integrate the four dimensions of the Medicine Wheel.

The ATC describes the Medicine Wheel as a mirror, where “everything that is seen in the mirror is reflected back, encompassing the great circle of life and all its inhabitants....It requires great bravery to look into the mirror and embark upon the path of discovery.” She encourages educators to look into the mirror, examine themselves and their school environment and see the children’s pain as well as their hopes and dreams.

Would greater attention to balancing the four dimensions of the medicine wheel result in greater success for students and a more harmonious school? At Whytecliff, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students benefit from a combined focus on emotional, spiritual, physical and mental development (Cassidy & Chinnery, in press; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Cassidy & Subroto, 2005). This focus on the whole person is supported by the ethic of care literature (Beck, 1992; Fine, 1991; Noddings, 2005, 2003, 2002; Rauner, 2000). Noddings (2002) argues, “our main educational aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving and lovable people” (p. 94).

³ This Medicine Wheel is taken from the website: The Healing Trail (2006). <http://www.diabeteshealingtrail.ca/traditionalhealing.html>. Note that some First Nations allocate the colors to a different dimension, or rotate the location of the dimensions on the Wheel, although Yellow always represents the sun, and is in the East.

She rails against a school system that relentlessly and haplessly strives for academic adequacy at the expense of learning to care for other human beings, including care for self, for intimate others, for distant others, for animals, plants and the physical environment, and for ideas.

Incorporating Aboriginal culture, history, traditions and language into the formal and informal curriculum is another important dimension to engaging First Nations learners and to teaching non-Aboriginal students the value of these contributions. At Whytecliff, each of the core subject areas has been adapted to incorporate topics and an approach to learning that is natural and familiar to Aboriginal students. The ATC explains why this is important:

Aboriginal traditions are a sacred element to the survival of our culture. Many Aboriginal youth thrive when they are able to attend ceremonies...such as sweats, naming ceremonies, pipe ceremonies, coming of age ceremonies, honoring ceremonies, pow-wows....When an Aboriginal person has been disconnected from their roots they are confused about who they are and where they are from. Re-connection to their personal heritage and traditions begins to re-create an opening and eventually an understanding of the self. This self-identity begins to grow and is nurtured through continuous support, love and acceptance.

At Whytecliff, lessons involve the community and nature. Students participate in art, drum making, sweats and ceremonial dances. This past year students worked with a prominent Aboriginal artist to create an 8’ x 10’ mural for their school that incorporated an aspect of each student’s identity and creativity. The drum making activity took students through the entire process from curing the bison skin, to stretching and making the drum, to performing a song using the drum. Students participated in nature walks to learn about traditional medicines and edible plants. They learned songs, dances and phrases from Indigenous languages that “broke down the emotional, physical and intellectual barriers that have been tainted during colonization” (ATC). The youth heard Elders speaking their own language or dialect, sometimes for the first time. In all of the activities care was given to “preparation, process, patience and purpose” (ATC) rather than the final product.

In some instances, non-Aboriginal students were given the option to join their Aboriginal classmates; inclusiveness was modeled.

Bringing together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners, with their differing perspectives and ways of learning, created a balance in the school where each group learned to better appreciate the other. Bringing all “relations”...together gave each other a feeling of respect. This produced excitement, courage, confidence, honor and a strong sense of self worth, and more involvement that led to added “self identity” in the Aboriginal students. (ATC)

The program also had an impact on the teachers, as illustrated by this teacher's comment.

What I saw today at the Native Education Centre, was a great learning experience. The day was full of prayers and song, which is all spiritually based--a connection to something bigger than yourself, a sense of being a part of a greater whole....It's families, it's people you don't even know all hanging out in the same place. Young kids connect with older kids, older kids connect with elders. There's much greater connectivity....Davita [ATC] has open my eyes to a lot of ritual ways of being, ways of thinking that had been completely foreign to us.

Implications for the Public School System

Current and past research conducted at Whytecliff (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Cassidy & Jackson, 2005; Cassidy & Subroto, 2005; Shariff, Osborne, Cassidy, Ho, Gander & Taylor, 2000) demonstrates that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, despite their life challenges, find success at this school. School attendance is consistently high at 85%, students are passing their courses, and graduating from high school (Focus Foundation of British Columbia, 2008). Students also report improved self-esteem and greater hope for the future (ibid.). The First Nations students say they have more pride in their heritage and have a stronger sense of identity and self-worth.

But is this approach to educating Aboriginal learners appropriate in the public school setting? Certainly Whytecliff has some advantages, with a lower student-teacher ratio and a smaller student population, which allows for greater flexibility in catering to students' individual needs and planning community-based activities. Yet, Whytecliff faces the challenge of engaging students who have been rejected by other schools and have a history of school failure and family and personal difficulties.

We posit that the principles we have outlined in this paper have merit and offer an alternate to approaches currently embraced by the public school system. Rather than expecting First Nations' students to adapt to the dominant educational culture, we argue that schools should provide the means for Aboriginal students to learn through hands-on engagement in their communities, through activities that are meaningful, through cultivating their natural talents and predispositions over time, through a holistic system that responds in balance to students' emotional, spiritual, physical and mental needs. This requires educators to listen attentively to the needs of the learners in a non-threatening and affirming manner. It also involves collaboration with Aboriginal stakeholders to develop a program of study that differs from the typical classroom. An important dimension is involving First Nations' educators in the planning and implementation of any program, including hiring Aboriginal teachers who can model the values, practices and pedagogical approaches of Aboriginal education, and connect students authentically and respectfully with their traditions.

Certainly the idea of interrelating with the wider community is not a novel concept (see Dewey 1900, 1916; Gelsthorpe & West-

Burnham, 2003). Emotional learning also has received attention in recent years (Bar-On, Maree & Elias, 2007; Goldman, 2006; Zins, 2004), and there is an increased sensitivity to spiritual issues (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson & Zine, 2000; hooks, 2003), as well as a focus on students' physical well being (Evans, Davies & Wright, 2004). First Nations' epistemology and pedagogy combines these themes in a holistic way that benefits both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners.

The Aboriginal focus on building relationships in the human, physical and spiritual realms seems crucial in this era of political turmoil, terrorism, environment degradation and global warming. Schools have much to learn from Aboriginal people who traditionally tread lightly on the earth, practice sustainability, respect the wisdom of Elders, and look after community members. Cajete (2000, p. 166) suggests that schools need to find an organic balance between cultivating individuality and teaching students that they are social beings living in relationship with one another. For Cajete, our physical and biological survival is intimately interwoven with the communities that we create and that create us. Johnston (2006) describes education as a "profoundly moral endeavor...fundamental in the relationships we develop with our students and...in those we help them develop with one another" (p. 5).

First Nations' conceptions of education challenge the educational leader to re-evaluate what is important. Aboriginal wisdom says that each human being is a micro-Creator. For the educational leader, this means the power to create the kind of learning environment that allows each student, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, to thrive. As the ATC at Whytecliff says: "Students need to be accepted, supported and loved by those around them. Each generation will re-learn knowledge passed down from past generations. The process of decolonization will clean and clear the past mistakes caused by our forefathers and enable our youth to learn according to their capacity and courage."

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