

# **Enhancing Conditions for Aboriginal Learners in Higher Education: The Experiences of Nishnawbe Aski Teacher Candidates in a Teacher Education Program**

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## ***Abstract***

*This article studies a community-based Indigenous teacher education program in Northwestern Ontario in Canada. This program, the result of a partnership between the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council and Brock University, was designed to prepare Nishnawbe Aski teachers able to teacher through a Two Worlds Orientation: unique Indigenous understandings combined with Western educational principles. The program characteristics and structure are outlined. The strengths of the program, as identified by teacher candidates and teacher educators, are explored. Impediments to success are also considered.*

*Keywords: Aboriginal teacher education, teacher education, Aboriginal education*

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“I am so far from my family. We are a really close family and three weeks is a long time away.”

“Every time I left, I did planning for three weeks... I would be planning until 3 o'clock in the morning and then be up for work early.”

“Our internet is not so good, due to bandwidth... I can't even log on before I run out of time.”

“It's like nobody knows what is going on. Nobody knows when our next course is going to be.”

(Comments by Teacher Candidates)

One of the greatest challenges for First Nation, Inuit, and Métis people is adapting education to suit their needs and interests. As Hampton (1995) writes, Aboriginal education has long been a site for cultural genocide and assimilation into the mainstream of Canadian society. In order for schools to better serve Aboriginal teacher candidates, they need to establish a learning environment that is culturally responsive while preparing them to “confidently deal with all aspects of modern society” (Hampton, 1995, p. 7). Yet, there is much evidence that schools have been unsuccessful on both counts. There has been ongoing decline in the percentage of North American Indian children with an Aboriginal mother tongue from 9% in 1996 to 7% in 2001 (Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001) suggests that schools are doing little to protect language. There has been a steady increase in the number of Aboriginal children in Ontario classrooms, with an estimated 50,312 Aboriginal teacher candidates enrolled in Ontario's elementary and secondary schools (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2007). Low graduation rates, however, are a major concern. Almost half of all Aboriginal people over the age of 15 have less than a high school diploma (OME, 2007). Only 9% of the adult Aboriginal population between ages 25 and 64 have completed a bachelor's degree, while 36% are college or trades graduates (Statistics Canada, 2006). Twelve percent of Aboriginal Canadians between the ages of 15 and 29 drop out before Grade 9, while 37.5% of 15 to 24 year olds are neither in formal schooling nor employed in the workforce (Robertson, 2003).

Rather than continue on the same path, the education system “must decolonize Canada's education and understanding the treaty right to education as a manifestation of Aboriginal choice” (Youngblood Henderson, 1995, p. 257). In response to this need, a five-year elementary Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) was established in 2004 through a partnership between the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education of Brock University and the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC) representing 24 Nishnawbe Aski First Nations in northwestern Ontario. After extensive community consultation, a program was developed to prepare Nishnawbe Aski teacher candidates to promote language and culture while providing teacher candidates with the academic skills needed to succeed in Canadian society (Kitchen, Hodson, & Raynor, in press). The first cohort of 20 teacher candidates began in 2007, with followed by a second cohort of 15 candidates began in 2011. There are six graduates from the first cohort, with others expected to graduate soon.

At the end of the third year of the program, a Talking Circle was conducted with teacher candidates in the first cohort of the program. As the program was guided by principles of self-determination (Hampton, 2000) and culturally responsive schooling (Castagano & Brayboy, 2008), we were not surprised that teachers were largely satisfied with their courses. Teacher candidates were also very pleased with their instructors (see Kitchen & Hodson, 2013). We were

surprised, however, to learn that many teacher candidates expressed high levels of frustration with the program. All experienced considerable stress and a significant number were at risk of failing to graduate within the allotted five years. Tension and pain emerged as they shared stories of challenging circumstances and the ways logistical and communication issues further complicated their education and lives. This was in spite of considerable efforts at the design stage, at which John had been an active contributor, to incorporate many of the innovative steps taken by Canadian universities to address the needs of Aboriginal teacher candidates (Holmes, 2006).

What happened? As we puzzled over their stories as recounted in the Talking Circle, we came to a deeper understanding of the multiple layers of complexity in the Aboriginal teacher education experience. While grounding in culturally responsive schooling is essential, we learned of the importance of attending to a myriad of minor logistical and communication issues. Attending to these issues is critical to establishing conditions for learning so that the focus of teacher candidates' remains on teaching and learning. Thinking more broadly, this is important for all Aboriginal post-secondary teacher candidates, particularly the 46% who do not live in urban centres (Statistics Canada, 2006). To that end, we identify crucial issues and suggest ways of enhancing conditions for learning for Aboriginal learners in higher education.

### **Framing the Issue in Theory and the Historic Context**

The experiences of teacher candidates in the Brock/NNEC Aboriginal B.Ed. program need to be situated in the context of the challenges that have faced Aboriginal people in the context of colonization, with a focus on higher education and, particularly, teacher education.

Education is critical to the success of Aboriginal Peoples both as emergent self-determining nations and in terms of the needs of the greater Canadian society. Teacher education is a historic site in the struggle of Aboriginal people to free themselves from assimilative forces and assert their right to educational self-determination (Smith, 1999). This understanding is evident in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007):

States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language. (Article 14.3)

This document reflects an emergent international consensus that education has a critical role to play in the success of "Indigenous peoples in (re)claiming and (re)creating their lives, languages, and futures" (Deyhle, Swisher, Stevens, & Galvan, 2007, p. 330).

Tribal Critical Theory (TribalCrit) is a useful framework for both critiquing existing approaches to university education and reframing issues in ways that are respectful of the lives of Aboriginal peoples. The first two tenets of TribalCrit are that colonization is endemic to North American society and that government policies are rooted in "imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429). It is important that one recognize that from the point of European contact there have been "systematic assaults on [Aboriginal] languages, religions, and communal ways of being" (Deyhle et. al., p. 330) by colonizers in Canada and throughout the world. The cultural assumptions endemic to Canadian society with its engrained in Eurocentric views of education in North America (Ladson-Billings, 1998) also need to be acknowledged. These normative assumptions and judgments fail to account for "the multiple, nuanced, and historically- and geographically-located epistemologies and ontologies

found in Indigenous communities” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 427) and lead to assimilative approaches to education that are not responsive to the cultural traditions of Aboriginal teacher candidates.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP] (1996) highlighted the depth of the educational challenges for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Colonization underlies many of the obstacles to post-secondary education. Historical factors related to “absorbing them into mainstream society” (Holmes, 2006, p. 9) include abuse in residential schools and a university system that has had little participation from Aboriginal teacher candidates until recently. In Canada, Aboriginal leaders acknowledge that there are considerable challenges facing their communities and worry about the impact of poor educational outcomes for their children will effect those challenges. They also worry about the declining health of their communities and the decline in knowledge of language and culture among their young (Statistics Canada, 2003).

These barriers are compounded by the university programs themselves, which “ignore Aboriginal perspectives, values and issues” and offer “little or no affirmation of Aboriginal identity” (RCAP, Chapter 5, Section 6). The report also blames negative environments and a lack of Aboriginal support systems. In addition, the report highlights other impediments to post-secondary attainment, including socio-economic and geographic factors. These challenges are illustrated in Morrisette and Gadbois’ (2006) study of Aboriginal counselling teacher candidates. Counselling teacher candidates faced personal challenges due to financial constraints and family demands, as well as a range of academic issues related to language, culture, learning styles, and competitiveness among teacher candidates. NNEC, which had noticed similar problems among the university teacher candidates it supported and funded, entered into a partnership with Brock in order to provide teacher candidates with culturally responsive higher education within the community.

Aboriginal teacher candidates need to see themselves and their culture reflected in university classroom settings (Holmes, 2006). This requires universities to foster deeper understandings of Indigenous Knowledges (IK) and integrate it into educational processes to create “fresh vantage points from which to analyze Eurocentric education and its pedagogies” (Battiste, 2002, p. 5). Aboriginal leaders also view IK as integral to a curriculum that addresses culture, language, history, and intellectual traditions. For example, the Chiefs of Ontario (2005) identify Aboriginal teachers as critical to preserving Indigenous languages and culture:

A foundational element of a high quality First Nations education system is the presence of teachers and educators who understand First Nations history, culture, intellectual traditions and language. They must also comprehend First Nations relationships with the land and creation. (Anderson, Horton, & Orwick, 2004, p. 2)

This manifesto speaks to the importance of preparing Aboriginal teachers so that they both understand their languages and culture and have the skills to teach through culture and the ability to teach Aboriginal languages through immersion.

Universities have an important role to play in supporting Aboriginal peoples as they extract themselves from the legacy of colonization. Meaningful partnerships with Aboriginal communities can lead to decolonized education (Freire, 1970) that frames, shapes, and supports curriculum that is meaningful to Aboriginal communities. While problems faced by Aboriginal university teacher candidates may arise from the legacy of colonization, not all obstacles to postsecondary education are cultural. As Holmes (2006) observes, geographic, personal/demographic, and economic factors also play important roles. The difficulties and costs of travel and accommodation are compounded by the “potential for social isolation for an Aboriginal student used to the networked support environment of a small community” (Holmes, 2006, p. 11).

There are many ways in which universities are now attempting to eliminate barriers and support Aboriginal teacher candidates in order to enhance their prospects of graduation from university. Manitoba, for example, has promoted Aboriginal access programs since the 1970's (Levin & Alcorn, 2000). The government of Ontario launched the Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy (AETS) in 1991 with the goal of increasing participation/completion rates, sensitivity/awareness of post-secondary institutions, and Aboriginal participation in decisions (Education Policy Institute, 2007, p. 3). Approaches include increasing the number of Aboriginal faculty and staff, pro-active recruitment, pro-active admissions policies, transitional support programs, academic outreach (such as distance education), Aboriginal studies programs, and programs focused on Aboriginal needs (Holmes, 2006). Recognizing that faculty and staff may lack cross-cultural awareness, many universities have also instituted training in Aboriginal culture and issues. Other forms of support come in the form of student support services – counselling, tutoring, and financial support (Holmes, 2006). Finally, a sign of heightened sensitivity is the involvement of Aboriginal Peoples in university governance, particularly through Aboriginal advisory committees (Holmes, 2006). While these efforts have to some progress in terms of educational access and attainment, in Ontario the government acknowledges that “Aboriginal learners continue to experience social, cultural, financial, and geographic barriers to success” (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2011, p. 9).

Teacher education, as was highlighted by RCAP, has often led the way with flexible partnerships between universities and Aboriginal people. University of British Columbia has offered a Native Teacher Education Program since 1974, which is now delivered both on the main campus and at four field centres (UBC, 2012). University of Saskatchewan, in collaboration with First Nations in northern Saskatchewan and Inuit in the Northwest Territories, has developed a number of community-based teacher education programs since 1977. Courses in these programs take place in a larger community, with field experiences in local communities (RCAP, 2006). Some Ontario universities also offer community-based opportunities, sometimes combined with distance learning, in their Aboriginal teacher education programs (Queens University, 2012; University of Ottawa, 2012). The Brock/NNEC model incorporated many of these elements, including courses held near the hub community of Sioux Lookout and distance learning. While these programs have generally reported good results, teacher candidates continue to face many challenges. Freeman (2001) and Duquette (2007) both emphasize the challenges of balancing learning with the pressures of family and community. Fleet, Kitson, Cassidy, and Hughes (2007) highlight challenges such as the complexity of learning across cultures, the maze of academic requirements, transitioning between school and home communities, and negotiating time away from work to attend university classes.

Overall, the literature highlights the myriad of challenges confronting Aboriginal learners in post-secondary education. While many teacher education programs have addressed the deeper issues of cultural-responsiveness through partnerships and community-based programming, many significant challenges and logistical problems remain. In this paper, we situate the challenges faced by the Brock/NNEC program in the larger context of higher education and teacher education in Canada.

### **Context and Methodology**

Our research gives explicit attention to the voices of six Nishnawbe-ski teacher candidates in a B.Ed. in the province of Ontario. These six teacher candidates were part of the first cohort in a

community-based program run by Brock University in partnership with the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council. These six were part of a group of eight attending a summer institute.

A limitation of the study is the number of participants involved, which was a result of a number of teacher candidates that were unable to attend the summer program due to the challenges faced by Aboriginal teacher candidates. They are, however, representative of Aboriginal teacher candidates in such programs: female, over 30, and with considerable life experience; half were practicing teachers (without degrees). The experiences expressed during the two hour Talking Circle represent a rich resource for a preliminary study of the learning challenges experienced by teacher candidates from remote communities in an innovative program with an Aboriginal focus. While this paper focuses on the issues raised in one Talking Circle session, it is informed by data from other Talking Circles, questionnaires of staff at the university, the NNEC, and interviews with course instructors.

Participants attended this Talking Circle towards the end of a three-week summer program on the main campus of Brock University in July of 2010. The Wildfire Research Method (Kompf & Hodson, 2000), a semi-structured format that invites participants to share their experiences and observations in a Talking Circle, provided a communal and sacred research environment respectful of the traditions and cultural beliefs of Aboriginal people and the importance of a relationship with the land. An experienced Aboriginal facilitator, who understood the crucial role of the importance of interconnectedness, respect, and the wisdom of the Indigenous intellectual tradition, ran the session (Goulet & McLeod, 2002). This is consistent with Cajete's (2008) observation that "Indigenous educational research is best performed when an Indigenous view and purpose are represented in the conceptualization, development, and implementation of research" (p. 204). This bi-epistemic research team (Hodson, 2009) acknowledged and respected both Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian knowledge traditions in order to garner more profound understandings of Aboriginal student experiences (Smith, 1999).

For the qualitative data analysis, the research team applied grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a methodology that allowed them to gather data "and then systematically develop theory directly derived from the data" (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 548). After the team compiled the data, the two researchers reviewed the results independently, to identify emerging patterns in the data, while considering individual responses. Anecdotal responses provided in the comment boxes were then analyzed through coding and categorizing of key idea units, as described by Creswell (2009). The idea units were then collapsed into categorical clusters and themes representing participants' perceptions. The two researchers independently reviewed the qualitative data before combining their categories, in order to identify key overall findings and broad themes. In presenting the findings, the overall pattern of response, together with supportive quotes that illustrate the themes identified through analysis of participants' anecdotal responses, are included.

### **Tensions Experienced by Aboriginal Teacher Candidates**

Teacher candidate highlighted the personal and professional challenges they experienced. There were many tears as participants spoke of pain and sacrifice. There was also much laughter: sometimes to mask pain or awkwardness, sometimes out of an awareness of life's absurdities. These accounts were then coded and analyzed around major themes related to the administration of the program. In this section, we look at five themes that emerged from the data: (a) Travel and Distance from Community, (b) Family, (c) Community, (d) Communication with University and Community Partners, and (d) On-line Learning.

### **Travel and Distance from Community**

It is widely recognized that access to educational opportunities is significantly more difficult for individuals living far away from major urban centres. Aboriginal peoples are doubly challenged as they experience geographical distance, differences between small and large communities, and the cultural distance between their Aboriginal world and the dominant Euro-Canadian culture (Battiste & Barman, 1995). Teacher candidates from the North, especially from fly-in communities, must be deeply committed in order to make the necessary sacrifices. The B.Ed. program was designed as a community-based and culturally responsive program. As the communities were far apart, and well away from the university, courses were offered in one of three formats: in retreat setting near Sioux Lookout, on campus Brock University, and on-line. Two of these entailed withdrawing teacher candidates from their home communities to reside together for three-weeks at a time. Many teacher candidates identified travel as a major challenge. One described it as “heart wrenching for us and our families.” She recalled that many years ago she declined the opportunity to study nursing because “I couldn’t leave my kids or couldn’t take my kids out... It was just me there for the kids.” With her children no longer living at home, she enrolled for the B.Ed. program but remained worried about her grandchildren and others in the community.

The program at the retreat near Sioux Lookout was viewed positively. Participants valued the opportunity to live together on the land. This setting enabled them to bond as a group and focus on their studies, but it also limited contact with their families and communities. Fortunately, telephone and the internet were used regularly to maintain contact with loved ones. At the same time, as one complained, “It is just so far from town.” She was concerned that this made it harder to maintain contact with members of their community passing through Sioux Lookout.

Issues were more pronounced when they attended classes at Brock University for three-weeks to attend courses. Some appreciated the opportunity: “I really enjoyed coming down here to Brock...I have never been anywhere further than Thunder Bay.” Others joked about their adventures, including getting lost, discovering new foods, adapting to a large campus in an urban community. While some looked forward to returning to campus the next summer, most would prefer to study closer to family and community.

### **Family**

Participants who were teachers in community schools were deeply committed to teacher candidates’ learning and enhancing the communities in which they live. They loved teaching and were proud to be furthering their education. This commitment, however, came at a high personal price for them and their families. Many told moving stories that conveyed how difficult it is to be away from their families for several weeks at a time, whether near Sioux Lookout or at Brock University. These absences diminish family life, including declines in school attendance by their children, reduced parental support at home, and resulted in greater safety risks within their home communities.

Their stories highlighted the heavy burden of health and mortality issues in their communities. Attending classes often meant not being able to help care for ailing relatives or to mourn the deaths of people in the community properly. Isolation issues meant that access to health care for participants and their families was difficult. One participant recalled leaving a

three-week course early in order to visit her father in hospital after a heart attack. The next year, she lost her grandmother, her father who passed away due to heart failure, her uncle who died due to diabetes. “It was really hard to leave my Mom at the gravesite,” she recalled. While she tried to “keep [her] head up and stand strong” and viewed what she learned as “valuable to [her] and the kids [she] loved,” she also wondered if it was worth the sacrifice. These family realities were genuine challenges for these teacher candidates in a rigorous program of study stretched over five years. There were many moving moments in the Talking Circle as participants spoke of the personal strain resulting from efforts to meet all the demands of the program. They also worried that these demands had caused other members of the cohort to miss courses or withdraw from the program all together.

While there may be little the program administrators can do to alleviate these problems, it would seem important to reduce other stresses that might add to difficulties in completing the program.

### **Community**

The challenges in Aboriginal communities are particularly great. As teacher candidates participating in the study were often pillars of their families and communities, this placed burdens on them that were much greater than those of other university students. One participant recalled, “When I came out here, I had to think about how people were going to be...” She then burst into tears before she could explain her worries for the safety and well-being of family members. Also, while efforts were made to align the teacher education calendar with local activities, it sometimes conflicted with communal activities such as the annual goose hunt. As all participants came from communities facing numerous difficulties, that are direct outcomes of colonization, it was difficult for them to simply remove themselves from the burden of worry and responsibility. As many participants were also educators, they carried responsibilities for their school communities. One participant confided “Every time I left [my school], I did my planning for three weeks and that required a lot of work and sometimes I would still be planning until 3 o’clock in the morning and still be up and be back to work.” Since many in schools were unaware of program demands, they often placed additional demands on participants when they had major teacher education commitments.

### **Communication with University and Community Partners**

Many of the practical concerns of B.Ed. teacher candidates could be characterized as communication issues. While teacher candidates recognized that sacrifices were necessary and inevitable, they were irritated by poor communication with and among the university, the NNEC, and local education authorities.

This new program was innovative in conception, but the fine details were still being worked out as teacher candidates were recruited. Sometimes, partners in the project conveyed different understandings as they responded to the particular circumstances of individual teacher candidates, which they in turn shared with their fellow learners. Participants had varying understandings of when courses would run and how many advanced standing credits they would receive for previous higher education experiences. One participant said, “Nobody talked to me about how long it is going to be: the whole day, one subject, one hour.” The exact dates for sessions were sometimes not worked out until a few weeks before, which added to uncertainty



and stress. Among the challenges was finding qualified instructors prepared to teaching in the community, and adapting the schedule to accommodate their availability. One participant recalled, with frustration in her voice, "I didn't know what was the next course we were taking." While there were good reasons for many of these complications, B.Ed. teacher candidates paid a toll.

This stress was compounded by a sense of powerlessness as they dealt with distant bureaucracies. This was particularly evident in their concerns about credit transfers, which were handled by the university registrar's office. One participant, disappointed to receive credit for only one of two university courses she had previously taken, failed to understand why both credits were not recognized and felt powerless to appeal: "It's just a hassle when you have to explain yourself over and over again." Feeling insulted, she failed to provide the information necessary to receive credit recognition. In response to our recommendations, clearer lines of communication were established with a NNEC staff member working with the registrar to resolve issues.

A similar lack of awareness of process contributed to several teacher candidates failing courses. Although they had the program guidelines, these B.Ed. teacher candidates were unaware that they had the right to request more time to complete work, particularly if they were dealing with personal issues. One participant who failed a course when she left early due to a family medical crisis, thought she had passed the course, only to learn months later that her mark was below the cut-off. In such cases, contract instructors were often not familiar with university procedures and did not take the initiative to ensure that teacher candidates were given every chance to succeed. Given the difference between their cultural experiences and the norms of mainstream society, these B.Ed. teacher candidates needed added supports to succeed in an alien environment. Interestingly, more experienced teacher educators were more likely to accommodate candidate needs and push them to complete assignments after the official due dates. In response to these concerns, the university program coordinator now received ongoing reports on teacher candidates' progress and works to ensure that they avail themselves of every opportunity to succeed.

Concerns were also expressed about sense of support they felt they received from Chiefs, and Band Councils, education directors, and principals. Most were pleased with the level of financial support and encouragement they received. At the same time, the level of support they received varied. One person spoke of a significant increase in support after the election of a new local education authority, and believed that a new education director was making her continued enrolment in the program difficult. Others expressed disappointment that the program was not better understood by local leaders: "I don't even know if our education director even knows how far we are...They don't say anything to me when I tell them I'll be leaving for three weeks." There were also concerns about ongoing funding, particularly as the program is five years in duration; some indicated that funding on a year-by-year basis added to their stress. While B.Ed. teacher candidates understood that local leadership often change over the course of five years, they remained concerned about gaps in information, different levels of support, and varying degrees of understanding. Understanding at the local level is particularly important in ensuring that principals and schools put teacher candidates at ease when they indicate that they must take time off to take courses in the program. In response the NNEC developed a more rigorous communication strategy at the local level designed to inform, update, and garner support for those teacher candidates.

## **On-line Learning**

On-line learning was seen as a positive dimension of the program. B.Ed. teacher candidates liked the idea of taking courses while remaining in their schools and communities. One person commented that she enrolled in the program because she assumed “that we would be doing it on-line.” Many wished to have more on-line courses in the program, as this was the option that provided the most continuity in their personal and professional lives. These comments are consistent with those heard during community-based consultations prior to the development of the program, which identified program delivery via internet as a way of lowering high transportation costs while minimizing absences from their families and, for some, the schools in which they taught (Gordon, Hodson, & Kitchen, 2012).

While an audit of local connectivity identified the level of internet connectivity as good and the familiarity with distance education in the communities as sufficient to in distance learning initiatives (Gordon, Hodson & Kitchen, 2012), teacher candidates encountered considerable problems with on-line course delivery. Much of this was attributed to local connectivity issues and older hardware. One participant noted, “our internet is not good due to band width issues.” Another noted the limitations of the laptop computers provided by the NNEC. These diminished the effectiveness of on-line courses by frustrating efforts by both teacher candidates and instructors. Over time, some of these issues began to resolve themselves. Teacher candidates also have specific suggestions for improving connectivity. One participant noted that nursing stations had the best connectivity in her community, as it is vital to ensuring health.

Teacher candidate who had taken other distance education courses suggested using radio. While radio is a lower level technology, participants praised its reliability in their communities. Generally, these on-line problems contributed to lower completion rates in the first on-line courses.

On-line learning presented challenges in terms of balancing study with their personal and professional lives. Completing teacher education readings and assignments presented challenges for participants who had to manage busy lives in both school and community. At first they were given release time for the on-line classes, but this proved too little time. Later they were also granted time to complete the work, which made a difference for many.

## **Lessons to Be Learned**

The degree of teacher candidate tension was surprising given the culturally responsive nature of the program and the efforts of instructors and Tecumseh Centre staff to avoid the assimilationist practices that have often impeded university attainment for Aboriginal teacher candidates (Hampton, 2000). As there seemed to be little to suggest significant issues with faculty and staff (carers) or teacher candidates (cared-for), the “failure of caring” (Noddings, 2001) seems primarily situational. Many of the practical issues of concern delineated by teacher candidates can be broadly characterized as involving logistics and/or communications. While teacher candidates recognized that sacrifices on their part were necessary and inevitable, they also believed that life would be easier if many of these irritants were removed. As these teacher candidates belong to a population that has traditionally been poorly served by the education system it is particularly important that they be addressed sensitively and effectively. As caring involves a commitment to improving the experience of teacher candidates, it is up to the program

and institution to adapt in order to enhance their learning and prepare them to work in underserved Nishnawbe-Aski communities.

In schools and universities, there is an increasingly recognition that education is more than a systematic course instruction. As Dewey (1938) wrote, it is important that educational systems recognize the “organic connection between education and personal experience” (p. 25) and proceed from the individual in his/her social context. While subject knowledge remains important, good instructors “are centrally concerned with the creation of authentic relationships and a classroom environment in which teacher candidates can make connections between the curriculum of the classroom and the central concerns of their own lives” (Beattie, 2001, p. 3). A body of scholarship emphasizes the importance of caring and relationship in student learning (Noddings, 1992). Since caring is by nature relational, one must be responsive to the cared-for and attempt to trace failures of caring to the carer, cared-for, or the situation” (Noddings, 2001, p. 100).

Certainly what dominates the narratives of the teacher candidates are many examples of “relations” (Bishop, O’Sullivan, & Berryman, 2010) that can be understood to be fundamental to an ongoing process of decolonizing the relationships that exist within the sphere of the program. To that extent what we observe as researchers through the teacher candidate experiences of this particular learning community – teacher candidates, instructors, funders, First Nation, and university support personal – is a community in the process of decolonizing the totality of their relationships that are a natural outcome of being immersed in this teacher education program. That process of decolonization is therefore simultaneously relational, reciprocal, and discursive with all involved decolonizing by virtue of being part of that shared experience. As each new challenge to the status quo is confronted a tension results that drives those in relation to that challenge to engage in a reciprocal discourse of deconstruction that reveals the underlying assumptions that support the *status quo*. Each decolonizing discourse results in that status quo being recognized to be untenable and there is a corresponding realignment of the relationships involved. Each experience becomes a milestone of personal and yes even institutional decolonization that once experienced can never be fully ignored and the status quo shifts.

Bishop, O’Sullivan, and Berryman (2010) describe this interaction between reciprocal discourses and decolonization as a “culturally responsive pedagogy of relations,”

...in which power is shared between self-determining individuals within a nondominating relations of interdependence; where culture counts; where learning is interactive, dialogic and spiral; an where participants are connected and committed to one another through the establishment of a common vision of what constitutes excellence in educational outcomes. (p. 20)

Successfully enacting this pedagogy within a dominant educational culture depends on recognizing the needs of Aboriginal learners and being prepared to respond to those needs. This study creates a backdrop that illuminates the possibilities intrinsic of this definable process of decolonization as an act of doing, of the engagement of two distinct and often conflicting epistemic traditions working to the common purpose of social justice.

University programs are particularly effective when they care for the needs of the diverse individuals and groups they serve. Universities provide programs to help teacher candidates who experience difficult transitions from high school. Accommodations such as orientation programs, academic counsellors, and writing clinics have helped reduce the failure rate among these teacher candidates. Universities have also made accommodations for groups of teacher candidates identified as underserved or underperforming so that they are better able to succeed in the university context: reduced discrimination, curriculum more inclusive of cultural diversity, and

the development of new programs that serve teacher candidates of particular backgrounds or aspirations. The range of accommodations for Aboriginal teacher candidates identified by Holmes (2006) reflected such a commitment to adapting education to serve the needs of teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds.

The people, who designed, taught, and supported the teacher education program demonstrated considerable care in their work with Nishnawbe-Aski teacher candidates. The program was carefully designed to be culturally responsive by progressive Aboriginal educators in consultation with First Nations educators in the region. Teacher candidates were generally very positive about both the curriculum and the instructors hired to teach the courses. While many of the instructors were not of Aboriginal descent, and only one was Nishnawbe-Aski, this was not identified as a problem by teacher candidates. Staff at both the Tecumseh Centre responsible for the program and the NNEC were deeply committed to the program and actively involved in the program administration.

Reviewing these tensions, we identified four areas for improvement: (a) advanced planning and logistical support, (b) reduced points of contact, (c) instructor continuity, and improved on-line learning.

### **Advanced Planning and Logistical Support**

Universities and their complex procedures can be daunting for teacher candidates regardless of circumstances. For teacher candidates thousands of kilometres away and unfamiliar with large bureaucracies, these are even greater. Add the cultural differences between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian cultures and the challenges are daunting.

Teacher candidates wanted to have the program planned and scheduled at least one or two terms in advance. This was not always possible, however, for a variety of reasons known to program organizers. As this was the first year of the program, there were challenges in finding instructors who were available to teach courses, particularly intensive three-week courses in the Sioux Lookout area. There were also challenges finding dates that were suitable for all teacher candidates, as they lived in different communities with varying cultural calendars. When explained by us, teacher candidates understood the challenges, but nonetheless often felt lost at sea. Partly as a result of our report to the steering committee for the program, the schedule for the second cohort has been mapped out in advance with dates, courses, and locations specified.

Similarly, teacher candidates sought better ongoing local support during the five years of the program. Some felt tremendously supported by principals and local education authorities, which made it easier for them to enter the program and meet the challenges, while others felt isolated. Some reported reluctance to attend because their principals did not support the replacement of them in the classroom with qualified and effective teachers. Given this it should come as no surprise that many B.Ed. teacher candidates in the first cohort were so dedicated to the needs of their teacher candidates that they knowingly disadvantaged themselves by missing courses in the program. As Chiefs, local board officials, and principals change during the course of the five-year program, there are bound to be gaps in information, different levels of support and varying degrees of understanding. One person, after recalling very encouraging words from her Chief, said, "But still they don't seem to be aware of how the program has proceeded. There doesn't seem to be any communication from our education authority. I don't even know if our education director even knows who we are." Understanding at the local level is particularly important in ensuring that principals and schools put teacher candidates at ease when they indicate that they must take time off to take courses in the program.

## **Points of Contact**

B.Ed. teacher candidates wanted fewer points of contact with Brock University and the NNEC. Some issues were handled by the Registrar's Office, the program coordinator, or various staff members at the Tecumseh Centre, while others were the responsibility of the NNEC. This caused confusion and frustration. While the division of duties made sense institutionally, it led to further frustration for many B.Ed. teacher candidates. We recommend that teacher candidates work directly with designated staff who can then work behind the scenes with the complex university bureaucracy.

Part of the problem was a lack of staff in the university designated to work closely with this cohort. The program coordinator was a contract employee who lived far away from both the university and Sioux Lookout, and was unfamiliar with the university culture. Program support was spread across several staff members rather than being the focus of a single staff member. These circumstances tend to compromise accurate communication. Reducing the number of contact people at Brock and NNEC would result in greater clarity and less confusion for teacher candidates. Close communication across the two institutions would enhance the logistics of this complex operation, resulting in a more positive student experience.

While it is important to think pragmatically about logistical issues and points of contact, it is also important to establish the broader structures that support and sustain teacher candidates and their communities. Archibald (2008), in describing a program run by University of British Columbia, highlighted the importance of "community-based relationships and regional field centres that provide localized opportunity of Indigenous learning" (p. 89). While Brock's program took place in Sioux Lookout and NNEC helped with the logistics, there was not the ongoing presence of field-based teacher education personnel offering an ongoing presence. This meant that the program bureaucracy always seemed distant. Also, the lack of such a presence reduced awareness among community leaders, such as band council representatives. A stronger local presence, by increasing the sense of self-governance in the program (Hampton, 2000), might help address these issues. As local capacity expands with more program graduates teaching in schools, it may be possible for the program coordinator and support staff to be located in the area. It may also be possible for more instructors to emerge from those First Nation communities.

## **Instructor Continuity**

One way of reducing stress is to provide a level of continuity in the team of instructors. While teacher candidates appreciated most of their instructors, they particularly enjoyed working with a core group of instructors over time because they were able to build deeper relationships. This should be an important consideration in staffing and curricular decisions. The first instructor is particularly critical as s/he establishes the overall tone of the program and has the opportunity to set forth an approach to teacher education that is respectful of the knowledge and culture of teacher candidates and the contexts in which they live and work.

Student evaluation exemplifies the tensions caused by poor communication and instructor continuity. Teacher candidates were unaware of their rights, particularly their right to appeal grades or request extensions. Similarly, instructors from outside the university tended to adhere strictly to the due dates in their course outlines and did not take an active role in ensuring that teacher candidates had every chance to meet course requirements. Even though these instructors

were Aboriginal or had worked in First Nations schools, they were not always responsive to teacher candidate needs. On the other hand, instructors who were long-time university instructors tended to be more accommodating. Teacher candidates were very appreciative of instructors who provided alternatives and critical of those who simply submitted marks to the university (Kitchen & Hodson, 2013). The program coordinator could also review final marks with instructors and discuss ways in which teacher candidates can make up for missing work. This form of ongoing communication about policies would have made a considerable difference to teacher candidates.

Implicit in a number of comments from participants was a sense that there was a clash between the cultural norms of the university and of Nishnawbe-Aski culture. The short duration courses in the program reinforced a technical rational view of the world that is not consistent with the holistic nature of Aboriginal knowledge. Therefore, it is important that the administrators be sensitive to potential culture clashes and advocate for solutions that are respectful of Aboriginal worldviews. While university policies often cannot be changed, there is often latitude to adapt administrative and instructional practices to meet local circumstances.

Comparing this program to larger and more established programs, the issue of instructor continuity can be linked to the importance of local capacity. One of the defining characteristics of the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program is a dedicated group of faculty and staff who are regularly available in the community to respond quickly to needs (McCreath, 2008). While Nishnawbe-Aski teacher candidates valued the coordinator and instructors they had, there seems little doubt that locally based faculty would add both to continuity and to community relevance.

### **Online Issues**

Teacher candidates like many other Aboriginal people in remote communities, desired on-line learning as a means of obtaining “postsecondary educational credentials without leaving their home communities” (Voyageur, 2001, p. 1). While educational programming delivered via the internet has long been held to be the answer to increasing access to higher education by Aboriginal peoples in remote communities in Canada (Fiddler, 1992; Voyageur, 2001), there is little research (Hodson, 2002; Sharpe, 1992) that presents a holistic view of what occurs across those involved in administrating, creating, supporting, teaching, and learning within such a technologically mediated environment. While the field of distance education continues to evolve, Voyageurs (2001) wisely notes that “having an appropriate experienced student support network in place is essential” (p. 6). Distance education can provide excellent learning opportunities but, the Brock based computer support team’s efforts to remedy problems were thwarted by infrastructure issues in communities and a lack of technical support. They discovered that skilled technicians could achieve little without support at the user’s end (Gordon, Hodson, & Kitchen, 2012).

Partly as a result of our recommendations, later on-line courses were delivered using a broadcast technology that was more robust though less innovative and nimble. As importantly, the replacement system was community-based. It relied on existing community technology and was managed by a community provider. Yet again, local knowledge and local capacity has a critical role to play in supporting partnerships between universities and Aboriginal communities.

### **Conclusion**

Even the most cursory study of the historic and contemporary indices definitively demonstrate that Aboriginal peoples in Canada have been harmed by acts of colonization and that public institutions have an important role to play in the process of decolonization and local capacity building. Many institutions of higher education have committed to better serving Aboriginal teacher candidates and communities by improving access, enhancing support services programs, and offering programming targeted at Aboriginal populations (Holmes, 2006) but there is much more that needs to be done.

Studying the experiences of Aboriginal teacher candidates in specialized programs is essential to enhancing conditions for all Aboriginal learners in higher education. This study highlights many of the logistical challenges that face post-secondary institutions as they attempt to move from sound principles to the practical challenges of enhancing conditions for learning by Aboriginal teacher candidates from remote communities. While some challenges may be outside the university's direct control—such as geography, family, and community—university officials, and instructors can make culturally responsive adaptations to meet these unique needs.

One lesson to be learned is that caring and relationship with Aboriginal teacher candidates and communities needs to be culturally responsive. Given the critical shortage of bi-epistemically educated Aboriginal people employed by universities, long-term retention requires that the initial transition to university be as smooth as possible. As Aboriginal teacher candidates from these communities are less familiar with bureaucracy, careful consideration needs to be given to ensuring that the steps in the process are clear and smooth and that logistical support is easily accessible. Communication should be with qualified and culturally responsive staff who maintain ongoing relationships with teacher candidates. Continuity in instruction and effective on-line learning are also crucial.

Another lesson to be learned is that university-based expertise works best when it is combined with local community-based practitioners. As the programs such as the Brock/NNEC partnership develop, they need to develop and sustain local capacity in order to better serve the Aboriginal teacher candidates they serve and develop in the community the ability to adapt teacher education to suit their needs.

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