

# Fostering a Sense of Belonging for Aboriginal Students

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## Abstract

*The Canadian educational system is at a crossroads when it comes to embracing the future of Aboriginal people. Over the years, researchers have reported on the poor performance of Aboriginal students due to the effects of Eurocentric teaching pedagogies and culturally irrelevant curricula that do not reflect Aboriginal culture, language, values, or worldviews. Literature reviewed throughout this paper highlights the significance of integrating Aboriginal perspectives in school curricula and of fostering a sense of belonging. The literature examines four themes: past Eurocentric teaching models and the encompassing effects that they have had on Aboriginal students, changes needed to prepare teacher candidates for teaching Aboriginal content, inclusion of Aboriginal content in classroom teaching, and positive effects that inclusion of Aboriginal content has had for Aboriginal people. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research that will address what is missing in education for Aboriginal youth today with regard to self-identity and sense of belonging.*

School attainment and success rates for Aboriginal students are much lower than for their non-Aboriginal counterparts across Canada. Although there has been an increase in educational opportunities for Aboriginal people, public education is still failing Aboriginal youth (Agbo, 2004; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Kanu, 2007; Ledoux, 2006). Research indicates that in Canada, the proportion of Aboriginal youth who do not complete high school is 40%, compared to 13% for non-Aboriginal youth (Agbo, 2004, p. 1; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011, p. 94; Ledoux, 2006, p. 266; Richmond & Smith, 2012, p. 1). These statistics are cause for concern, because education seems to be leaving behind one of the fastest growing populations across Canada. With increased public accountability spotlighted on achievement, and pressure on schools to improve student performance, there is continued discussion about how to increase Aboriginal student achievement; however, little seems to have been done to improve the situation (Ledoux, 2006; Marsiglia & Kulis, 2008; Tremblay, Gokiart, Georgis, Edwards, & Skrypnek, 2013). Ledoux (2006) noted that “while educators are busy revamping curriculum and designing evaluation tools, . . . Aboriginal peoples are being left further behind” (pp. 266-267).

Far too often, Aboriginal students and their families are blamed for their low achievement rates. However, with increased research in the area of Aboriginal education, it has been confirmed that the problem lies within the school system, not within Aboriginal students or their culture (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Ledoux, 2006). Several Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators and researchers are at the forefront of efforts to change the school system. They are trying to help people realize that the real reason for poor academic performance of Aboriginal students is the lack of sensitivity to Aboriginal learning styles and the use of teaching strategies that do not reflect Aboriginal culture, language, or worldview (Agbo, 2004, Ledoux, 2006; Richmond & Smith, 2012). Interestingly, literature on curriculum development indicates that curriculum should be in harmony with students’ life experiences; however, curriculum is frequently not culturally relevant for Aboriginal students and often takes a minutest approach to teaching Aboriginal content (Agbo, 2004; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Ledoux, 2006).

As Aboriginal youth continue to be enrolled in urban schools, educators struggle with challenges of providing adequate education that is meaningful and relevant, and that fosters a sense of belonging (Agbo, 2004; Deer, 2010; Ledoux, 2006). Creating meaningful and relevant education for Aboriginal students requires fundamental changes. It requires the creation of curricula that affirms Aboriginal identity, language, values, beliefs, and practices not only in content but also in teaching and learning activities (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011). Only when Aboriginal students find a sense of belonging will achievement levels and general health

improve (Deer, 2010; Kanu, 2007; Napoli, Marsiglia & Kulis, 2008). The focus throughout this paper is to review the literature geared toward schools fostering a sense of belonging for Aboriginal students, and what such schools might look like.

### **Effects of Past Eurocentric Teaching Models**

Canadian history prides itself on the idea of a mosaic, wherein all cultures are accepted and treated equally. However, one of the darkest chapters in Canadian history relates to the poor treatment of Aboriginal people and their culture during colonization and particularly with reference to residential schooling. Throughout the literature on Aboriginal education and issues, numerous reports have indicated that education both in past and present forms has been used to oppress and marginalize Aboriginal people (Ledoux, 2006; Richmond & Smith, 2012). For over a hundred years, schools were used as an instrument to oppress Aboriginal people, stripping their cultural practices and languages. Residential schools were widely supported because European politicians felt that Aboriginal cultures, beliefs, and languages were inferior and that Aboriginal people needed Western civilization and its standards to become successful members of society (Richmond & Smith, 2012). Aboriginal children were forcibly moved into residential schools and compelled to conform to Western culture and to reject traditional Aboriginal culture, language, and spirituality (Ledoux, 2006).

As Aboriginal children were continually removed from their homes and cultures, the literature repetitively explains that the treatment in residential schools was inexcusable. Teachers forced Aboriginal students to surrender their way of life and to accept European cultures as their own. Aboriginal children were often punished if they spoke their traditional language or practised Aboriginal traditions. Residential schools had one purpose: to impose European cultures, supposedly for a better life; however, they produced generations of Aboriginal people who lost their culture, language, worldviews, spirituality, self-identity, and sense of belonging (Ledoux, 2006). Many Aboriginal people who attended residential schools became caught between two worlds, as “people who belonged neither in Aboriginal culture nor in western culture – and [residential schools] created widespread social and psychological upheaval in Aboriginal communities” (p. 269). For countless Aboriginal people and families, residential schooling inflicted one of the biggest negative effects on Aboriginal communities within Canada.

The historic trauma experienced by Aboriginal people attending residential schools extends into present times. Even though residential schools no longer exist, the intergenerational impact continues, strongly shaping the sense of belonging and well-being for children and grandchildren of residential school survivors (Agbo, 2004; Richmond & Smith, 2012; Tremblay et al., 2013). With the past history of residential schools, “negative attitudes and mistrust towards education continue within Aboriginal communities on and off reserves due to the generations of lost parenting and the loss of cultural knowledge” (Ledoux, 2006, p. 269). Furthermore, the literature supports that the intergenerational impact of residential schools has hindered the likelihood of many Aboriginal families and youth seeking contemporary educational supports. Fear of revisiting past schooling experiences makes it difficult to increase school attainment, and to create a sense of self-esteem, positive identity, and belonging (Richmond & Smith, 2012).

The literature acknowledges that improvements have been made with regard to Aboriginal education and that healing has begun with respect to residential schooling; however, the school system still operates on a Eurocentric model (Ledoux, 2006). Aboriginal students continue to be caught between Western ways of thinking, while still grasping at traditional Aboriginal concepts. Manitoba has begun to take steps to rectify the situation by mandating the teaching of Aboriginal perspectives across the curricula; however, many teachers feel uncomfortable or inadequately trained, further perpetuating the internal struggle between two cultures. To support their initiatives, there needs to be sensitivity toward the repercussions of residential schools so as to

generate an environment that is welcoming of all cultures and builds a sense of belonging for every student.

### **Changes to Teacher Education**

Throughout the literature, it is stressed that education needs to revamp training strategies for preparing teacher candidates to accommodate the learning needs of Aboriginal students. In the research conducted by Nardozi and Mashford-Pringle (2014), it is clear that many teachers feel a lack of confidence in teaching Aboriginal perspectives. Nardozi and Mashford-Pringle (2014) reported that 27.6% of their participating pre-service teachers felt ill equipped to teach Aboriginal students because they lacked general knowledge of “who Aboriginal people are, the histories and trauma experienced by Aboriginal people during residential schooling, and potential ways to include Aboriginal perspectives into curricula” (p. 57). After short presentations to pre-service teachers, 34.3% felt somewhat confident in teaching the subject material to Aboriginal youth. Although there was a slight increase in the number of teachers who felt equipped to teach Aboriginal perspectives, many teachers do not receive the needed initial training or ongoing professional development to feel fully confident in teaching the history of Aboriginal people to Canadian students.

As education continues to move toward becoming more culturally relevant, the training of beginning teachers needs to build an understanding of the past histories of oppression and marginalization that Aboriginal people have faced. Hare and Pidgeon (2011) analysed the stories that Anishinaabe youth shared and “coded the transcripts for patterned responses that emerged, and for themes that became apparent across all their stories” (p. 99). In their analysis of the transcripts, the researchers identified the major theme of racism. Upon further review, all participants (n=39) reported that they experienced racism while attending public high school and that non-Aboriginal peers and teachers created an unwelcoming school environment that directed negative attitudes and stereotypes toward the Aboriginal students. Given this response, it is important that educators are aware of the effects of historical and present day racism because these effects contribute to a lack of success and belonging that many Aboriginal students currently face. In order for all students to feel a sense of belonging, teachers must familiarize themselves with the cultures of their students (Agbo, 2004; Kanu, 2007; Nardozi and Mashford-Pringle, 2014) so as to make the learning enjoyable, authentic, and relevant for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike (Deer, 2010).

Kanu (2007) supported preparing teacher candidates to integrate Aboriginal perspectives. In Kanu’s qualitative research involved 31 Aboriginal students: 15 were from an enriched classroom that integrated Aboriginal perspectives throughout the course work, and 16 were from a regular classroom wherein occasional integration of Aboriginal perspectives took place. Students participating in the enriched class performed noticeably better than those students in the regular class. In both the written and verbal responses, students in the enriched class demonstrated better understanding, higher level thinking, and overall improvement in self-confidence, which is linked to strong sense of belonging. The teacher in the enriched class demonstrated the ability to understand and, more importantly, the confidence in teaching to and for Aboriginal students, which was supported by Nardozi and Mashford-Pringle’s (2014) later research, which added that teachers need support to understand Aboriginal issues in order to teach them effectively.

As Aboriginal populations increase throughout Canadian schools, it is necessary for educators to learn, understand, and incorporate knowledge about Aboriginal worldviews into classrooms and curricular outcomes. The studies by Nardozi and Mashford-Pringle (2014), Hare and Pidgeon (2011), and Kanu (2007) all support that teachers require additional training and professional development to feel increased confidence in teaching and speaking about Aboriginal issues. The conclusions from the research indicate that increasing training for teachers will hopefully reduce racism, stereotyping and discrimination, and will create more

inclusive relationships among teachers, non-Aboriginal students, and Aboriginal students. It is important that educators take a proactive stance in creating and delivering instruction so that First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and all other Canadian children are equally affirmed in order to foster a sense of belonging to the school community.

### **Aboriginal Perspectives in Education**

Across the literature, it is evident that education needs to include Aboriginal perspectives and develop culturally relevant learning opportunities for all Aboriginal youth within the classroom. Kanu (2007) discussed effective integration of Aboriginal perspectives in curricula and the effects on academic achievement, class attendance, school retention, and sense of belonging. As mentioned earlier, Kanu studied the growth of two grade 9 social studies classrooms within the same school: one was enriched with Aboriginal perspectives, and the other had only occasional integration of Aboriginal perspectives. The students who participated in the enriched class demonstrated overall improvement. Additionally, pass rates on tests were significantly higher for the enriched class: 80% in contrast to the regular class's at 44% (Kanu, p. 32). The discrepancy between pass rates for the two classes is cause for cautious optimism about increasing academic achievement solely based on the integration of Aboriginal perspectives. Kanu's results cannot lead us to conclude that culturally responsive pedagogy alone can provide an effective means for reversing the trends of low achievement. However, the increased inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives in this instance motivated all students to do well, especially the Aboriginal students, because they respected that their culture was being incorporated throughout all areas of the grade 9 social studies curriculum.

Citizenship development within classrooms plays a crucial role in creating a sense of belonging for all students within school communities. Deer's (2010) research supports that of Kanu's (2007) in its finding that Aboriginal people do support Canadian citizenship values of equality, respect for cultural differences, freedom, peace, law and order, and environmental stewardship associated with citizenship development. The inclusion of sensitive, culturally relevant teaching is needed to bridge the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and their values. Much like Kanu's findings, Deer stated that by establishing effective citizenship programs within the classroom for Aboriginal students, an increase in attainment, belonging, and identity will be achieved. Furthermore, through citizenship development, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students will begin to understand past histories, the effects that colonization has had, and the struggles that continue today for identity and autonomy. Deer further stressed that "Aboriginal perspectives are crucial to the identity of Aboriginal peoples across Canada and important aspects of those identities are not only traditional cultural practices but language" (p. 5). Within his research, Deer further emphasized issues of a lack of first language use and instruction for Aboriginal students in Canada, and how that aspect creates an environment wherein Aboriginal students often feel like "strangers in the classroom" (p. 5). Deer discussed educational shortcomings resulting from a lack of trust in the educational system by Aboriginal people, the concern for lack of suitable educational environments that meet the needs of Aboriginal students, and the lack of community involvement in Aboriginal schooling.

Enhancement of Aboriginal students' achievement through culturally responsive teaching practices is a challenge that faces education today. Agbo's (2004) research paralleled Deer's (2010) and Kanu's (2007) research by examining community perspectives and attitudes concerning Aboriginal language and culture teaching practices within the contemporary classroom. Agbo identified issues of disintegration of traditional beliefs that affect the development of initiatives to renew and to integrate culture and language within classrooms. The participants interviewed in Agbo's study believed that children should learn from Elders inside and outside the school setting, and that those traditional values may be relevant to their social well-being and sense of belonging. Furthermore, participants indicated that it is not only

the responsibility of the school to provide Aboriginal perspectives education to all students, but that community members need to take an active role in creating a cohesive “two-way system of education” (p. 18). Agbo’s study supports a reciprocal learning relationship between the school and community members (e.g., Elders) for all students across Canada to learn and share the history, customs, and cultures of Aboriginal people. Therefore, in order for Aboriginal students to take ownership over their culture, all students need to be exposed to the rich, authentic, traditional practices that Elders can provide.

The research reviewed by Kanu (2007), Deer (2010), and Agbo (2004) illustrates that education needs to include Aboriginal perspectives in all areas of curriculum. The results indicate that by including Aboriginal perspectives, students respond positively and attainment increases, along with a sense of belonging. However, educators must exercise caution and not become discouraged if student performance does not immediately increase with the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives. School attainment and a sense of belonging for Aboriginal students cannot be improved solely based on Aboriginal perspectives being taught within classrooms. Teaching Aboriginal perspectives is one piece of the puzzle, and educators need to continue building trusting relationships and forming bonds with and among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

### **Positive Effects of Inclusion of Aboriginal Students**

With increased teacher training and professional development with reference to the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives, a number of positive initiatives for Aboriginal students have surfaced within the Canadian educational system. Provincial and federal education is changing to accommodate the Aboriginal learner both academically and socially. Recently, social-emotional competence of young Aboriginal children has gained attention with regard to preventing social, emotional, educational, and health problems later in life (Tremblay et al., 2013). Tremblay et al. (2013) identified crucial elements for the healthy development of Aboriginal children, while paying particular attention to social-emotional development. Their research has demonstrated that early interventions for Aboriginal students with respect to social-emotional needs have positively influenced the developmental growth of Aboriginal students. Programs noted by Tremblay et al., such as Head Start, have a foundation in Aboriginal ways of knowing and being that contribute to youth learning who they are, and being confident, proud, and accepting of their cultural backgrounds. The study conducted by Tremblay et al. addresses the importance of children knowing and understanding their cultural history. The Head Start and the Friendship Centre programs create opportunities for young Aboriginal youth to become immersed in their culture and to learn from Elders. Tremblay et al.’s research strengthens attention to the need for more Aboriginal intervention programs to use the lived experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal people. The enhanced programming supports Aboriginal children to do better in school and to develop pride in their culture and a strong sense of belonging, instead of turning to negative self-perception and activities, including substance abuse.

Drug and alcohol abuse is quite common among adolescent youth in the Canadian school system. According to Napoli et al.’s (2008) study, 87% of Aboriginal students have reported using drugs or alcohol while attending school (p. 33). These results are daunting, because all students (n=243) surveyed responded that school isolation and disconnectedness contributed to turning to drugs as a coping mechanism for their feelings of lack of belonging and self-identity. However, when educators focused on Aboriginal perspectives and building positive relationships with Aboriginal students, the reports of drug abuse diminished. The research findings cannot be generalized to all Aboriginal adolescents across Canada; however, a strong sense of belonging does play a proactive role against the use of drugs and alcohol, and ultimately improves school completion rates.

School dropout rates for Aboriginal youth are alarming. Maclvor (2012) found that higher than average dropout rates for Aboriginal people contribute to a disproportionately higher poverty level for Canadian Aboriginal people. Maclver examined the lived experiences perceived by Aboriginal middle school youth and factors that contributed to their school engagement. Results of the study revealed that cultural learning environments, workloads that accommodate learning capabilities, and teachers and principals who build relationships with students positively affect Aboriginal student success and completion rates in high school. This research supports the need to build positive relationships with all students, in order to reduce high dropout rates.

Maclver's (2012) results confirm that culturally affirming environments motivate school engagement for Aboriginal learners, because participants identified that inclusion was important to their school life and social well-being. Participants further stressed that joining in school activities (e.g., sport teams and clubs) created a sense of belonging and was an important aspect in maintaining school engagement. While all participants communicated that peers, family, and their communities positively influenced school engagement, they identified their teachers as the most influential and important contributing factor to their educational success. Participants noted that building positive relationships with teachers significantly influenced their engagement to return or stay in school. These results demonstrate the importance that teachers have in fostering belonging for Aboriginal students through culturally inclusive learning environments in which Aboriginal students perceive that they are valued learners.

Much like Maclver's (2012) research, Richmond and Smith (2012) examined the importance that quality social supports have in improving the learning and educational achievement of Aboriginal youth within Canada. By interviewing urban Aboriginal youth about their opinions of school environments and the social supports that shape a sense of belonging, Richmond and Smith gained a better understanding of the programs and resources that 14 Aboriginal youth needed in order to remain in school. The most compelling results indicated that all of the research participants were affected by violence and other negative experiences at some point throughout their schooling. Lack of trust and feelings of segregation across social, cultural, and curricular lines contributed to marginalization and a feeling of not belonging within the school environment. Richmond and Smith further reinforced that establishing culturally safe supports, whereby Aboriginal students can seek help from Elders and teachers to navigate between two cultures, has increased school attainment rates and promoted a sense of trust and belonging among Aboriginal learners and their peers.

The literature reviewed by Tremblay et al. (2013), Napoli et al. (2008), Maclver (2012), and Richmond and Smith (2012) reveals that Aboriginal youth are caught between two distinctive cultures and that they require support and guidance to feel accepted and valued. Each study researched the numerous social-emotional needs of Aboriginal learners and what some educators are doing to support their Aboriginal students' well-being and sense of belonging within society. The results indicate that policy-makers and educators need to listen to the voices and concerns of Aboriginal youth. Once that dialogue has been initiated, nourished, and sustained, together all parties can do what is truly needed to support success in both the traditional and non-traditional sense for Aboriginal youth. The foundational concern remains the building of meaningful teacher-student and student-student relationships so that all citizens of the school feel welcomed and valued for who they are.

## **Discussion**

The literature reviewed throughout this paper has identified key elements of Aboriginal education that need attention. The same issues and problems are identified, and the same recommendations are made across the literature, time and again. It is apparent that some changes have resulted from recent initiatives in Aboriginal education; however, more significant change is needed if the situation will ever be rectified and learning environments created wherein Aboriginal people feel a sense of belonging and ownership over their future. It is evident

from the research examined that fundamental changes must be made and that educators need training and professional development so that outdated pedagogical theories and teaching practices of the dominant white society are no longer relied upon and perpetuated.

Perhaps the most compelling and troublesome results are that, despite the fact that most educators know the importance of teaching culturally relevant pedagogy, little seems to have been done and education is still seen as a form of oppression for many people. Aboriginal education cannot be exclusively approached by Aboriginal or European cultural perspectives alone, but rather through a blend of these two and other worldviews. Through a combining of several approaches, all students will gain a richer sense of culturally appropriate ways of life, while developing sensitivity, a stronger sense of belonging, and higher school retention rates. The literature available reveals that further research is needed in several areas of Aboriginal education and that we are now only beginning to see empirically based research that answers important questions related to social-emotional and educational success for Aboriginal children (Ledoux, 2006). Currently, most of the research is based on descriptive or narrative results rather than on quantitative research, which is understandable as changes begin to take place in some classrooms. It is important to discuss the significance and need for fostering a sense of belonging with Aboriginal students; however, the research lacks extensive in-depth studies of Aboriginal learning styles. That situation may influence views on achievement and sense of belonging due to the expository nature of many of the contemporary studies. Further research is needed in the area of Aboriginal language programs and the effects of their integration on students' academic and social-emotional success in school and in the broader society.

Although the literature communicates an urgency to expand the qualitative data, researchers must be careful of racial biases and appropriately target their research for change. A participatory action research approach is conducive to being respectful of Aboriginal cultures and philosophies. This approach provides Aboriginal communities with the autonomy to establish which concerns are important. Researchers and educators continue to face several challenges related to Aboriginal education. However, with persistence by collaborative advocates, genuine integration of Aboriginal perspectives will increasingly help to meet the needs of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

The need for change within our classrooms has inspired me to add a whole new set of authentic stories related to Aboriginal cultures. Before I began my research, I thought that I understood the importance of teaching Aboriginal perspectives, but I admit that I did not do a great job of integrating Aboriginal content in all areas of curriculum. Now, I look for ways to support the Aboriginal students and their culture within my classroom. This past year, I taught the Seven Teachings of wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth to my kindergarten class by using Aboriginal author Chad Solomon's book series (e.g., *Rabbit and Bear Paws Sacred Seven: Truth*, 2011) and The Treaty Education Initiatives (Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba, 2015) as support. From these teachings, I found that both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children learned to make authentic connections with one another and developed a greater sense of self-worth. Students became confident in expressing feelings and forming a caring environment wherein everyone was supported and welcomed. Conflicts within the classroom were easily resolved by using the language given within each teaching. I felt delighted and enthusiastic to witness a diverse classroom coming together, sharing, and being proud of who they were and willing to learn in-depth about another culture. Over the course of a few weeks, students were willing to share their culture in a judgment-free environment and to create their own stories about the Seven Teachings. Learning about the Seven Teachings benefitted both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in my classroom.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review strengthens the notion that for Aboriginal students to feel successful, they must first feel valued. For this reason, it is important that educators nurture culturally

inclusive learning environments and recognize their responsibility to influence Aboriginal students' sense of belonging through their interactions, curricula taught, and instructional strategies used. It is clear from the research that innovative ways to include culturally relevant learning must take precedence if we as educators are serious about improving Aboriginal students' achievement and sense of belonging. Continued efforts need to be made to improve the quality of education that Aboriginal people receive so that they see themselves represented equitably within the curriculum. Hopefully, such an approach will develop an environment of trust and create generations of lifelong learners who feel valued, respected, and included.

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## About the Author

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