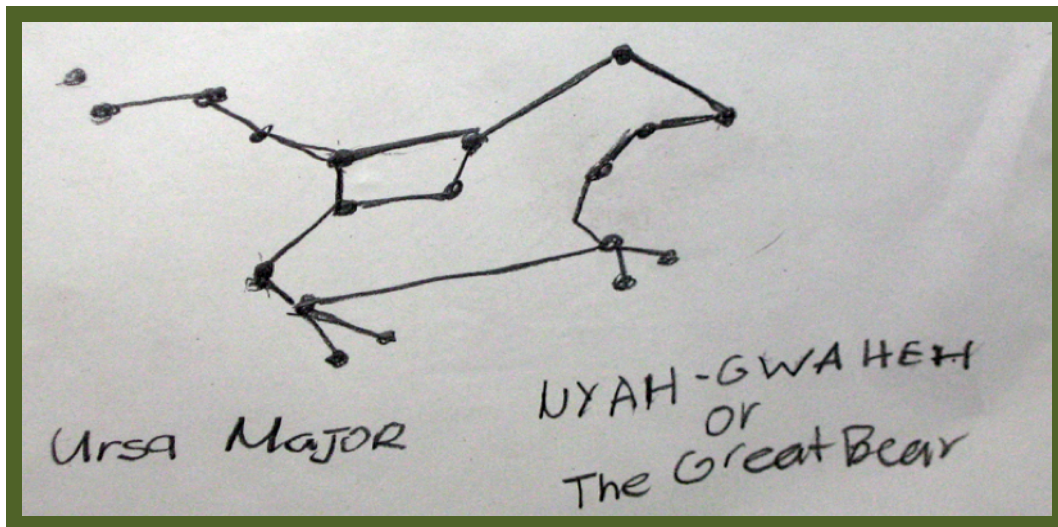


# *Decolonizing Our Schools*

## Aboriginal Education In The Toronto District School Board

A REPORT ON THE  
URBAN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION PILOT PROJECT





# *Decolonizing Our Schools*

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A REPORT ON THE  
URBAN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION PILOT PROJECT

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How to cite this document:

Dion, Susan D.; Johnston, Krista; Rice, Carla, M (2010) *Decolonizing Our Schools Aboriginal Education in the Toronto District School Board*. (Toronto)





## ***Acknowledgements***

The writing of this research report and the doing of the research project that informs it would not have been possible without the contributions of many people. Catherine Pawis, Margaret McIntosh, and the staff at the Aboriginal Education Centre worked with exceptional dedication and commitment to accomplish the goals of the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project. I am sincerely grateful for their collaboration, for the welcome and warmth they extended to me, and for including me in the community they work so hard to create. Thank you for responding to my endless questions and requests “can you tell me more”? This report is stronger because of your thoughtful reflections and detailed sharing of your experiences. The research required extra hours of work and it is yet another reflection of your commitment to Aboriginal students, families and communities.

Miigwetch

I am especially thankful to the students, parents, teachers and community members who participated in this project. Without your support there would be no report. As you were involved in doing the work of education you took the time to talk to members of the research team. You completed surveys, participated in interviews, invited us to attend meetings and events, and did not mind our constant note taking. You shared details of deeply personal and often difficult experiences eloquently and shamelessly with a deep commitment to accomplishing positive learning environments and experiences for Aboriginal children and youth.

Miigwetch

Thank you to the Toronto District School Board for taking on this project. Transforming an education system is difficult work that requires the capacity to look with a critical eye at your own policies and practices and to pay attention to the voices of people who want change. As Thomas King has written “Don’t say in years to come that you would have [done things] differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (p.29).

Miigwetch

This project was a team effort completed in collaboration with a skilled, committed and thoughtful co-researcher and project manager Krista Johnston, Qualitative Research Consultant Dr. Carla Rice and Research/Creative Writing Consultant Michael Dion. Additionally we had the help of a team of skilled research assistants who made an immense contribution to the project collecting, coding, and assisting with data analysis and writing.

Miigwetch

This report is dedicated to the Aboriginal Community in Toronto and to the project of change. Schools in the TDSB are your schools and you have provided directions for making them places where Aboriginal students, families and community members can experience belonging, recognition, and respect.

Chi Miigwetch

Susan D. Dion  
September 30, 2010  
Toronto



# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	iii
<b>Executive Summary and Recommendations</b>	v
<b>Chapter One</b>	
<b>Introduction: Aboriginal Education In the TDSB</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1</b> Context: Aboriginal Students and Schools	1
<b>1.2</b> The Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project	1
<b>1.3</b> The Talking Stick Project	4
<b>1.4</b> The Talking Stick Project Research Report: Decolonizing Our Schools	10
<b>1.5</b> The Research Context: Aboriginal People in the City and Aboriginal Students in the TDSB	13
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
<b>Aboriginal Student Well-Being</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>2.1</b> Student Profiles	17
<b>2.2</b> Understanding Aboriginal Student Success as Student Well-Being	20
<b>2.3</b> Conditions that Contribute to Aboriginal Student Well-Being: Learning From the UAEPP	22
<b>2.4</b> Markers/Indicators of Aboriginal Student Well-Being	28
<b>2.5</b> Barriers to Aboriginal Student Well-Being	29
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
<b>Urban Aboriginal Education: Teacher Roles and Responsibilities</b>	<b>35</b>
<i>Written By: Krista Johnston</i>	
<b>3.1</b> Defining Teacher’s Roles and Responsibilities	35
<b>3.2</b> Decolonizing Teacher Practice: Learning from the UAEPP	35
<b>3.3</b> Challenges	49
<b>3.4</b> Reflecting on What Was Learned and Recommendations	52
<b>Chapter Four</b>	
<b>Urban Aboriginal Education: School Responsibilities</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>4.1</b> Defining School Responsibilities	59
<b>4.2</b> Creating Decolonized and Indigenized School Communities: Learning from the UAEPP	59
<b>4.3</b> Barriers and Challenges Confronted: Audits, Attitudes, and Resistance to Change	66
<b>4.4</b> Key Components of Decolonized and Indigenized School Communities	74
<b>Chapter Five</b>	
<b>Make it a Priority: School Board Roles &amp; Responsibilities</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>5.1</b> Identifying Board Responsibilities	79
<b>5.2</b> Accepting Responsibility: Learning From the UAEPP	79
<b>5.3</b> Board Responsibilities to Aboriginal Teachers, Students, and Communities	85
<b>5.4</b> Board Responsibilities: Serious and Ongoing Work	88
<b>Appendix A</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Reference List</b>	<b>99</b>





# *Decolonizing Our Schools*

## Aboriginal Education in the Toronto District School Board

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### Executive Summary

In this report titled *Decolonizing Our Schools: Aboriginal Education in TDSB* we describe the work of the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project (UAEPP) in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Drawing on data gathered between April 2009 and September 2010, we document, evaluate, and provide our analysis of the UAEPP in service of understanding how to accomplish an education worthy of our children and our ancestors in a large, diverse urban context. The report is based on the research findings of the *Talking Stick Project: Aboriginal Education in the TDSB Gathering Stories of Teaching and Learning*.<sup>1</sup> It is intended to inform both the UAE Steering Committee and the TDSB about the successes and challenges the Pilot Project faced in accomplishing its goals.

Our research confirms what Aboriginal parents, educators, and students already knew: institutions of formal schooling, including the TDSB, are failing to provide Aboriginal students with the educational environment and experiences they require to achieve success.

Students in urban settings confront particular problems since they may not be recognized as Aboriginal or, if recognized at all, may be expected to have access to and be willing to share cultural knowledge. Furthermore, they may not see themselves represented in the curriculum or the teaching population and are encouraged to attend school in spite of a long, negative, and hurtful relationship between Aboriginal people and schooling.

School Board administrators, teachers, and other Board employees in urban settings also confront particular challenges, such as recognizing Aboriginal student populations, delivering programs when students are frequently dispersed across a range of schools, lacking the requisite knowledge for teaching Aboriginal subject material, and engaging families and communities who may be understandably resistant to formal educational institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> This report addresses the Implementation Phase of the UAE Pilot Project in the TDSB. Activity that occurred during the planning phase of the project is not included. The staff chart on page 3 of the report includes the names of TDSB staff that were not pilot project staff. The Pilot Project staff and the TDSB Aboriginal Education staff worked in close collaboration to accomplish the goals of the Pilot Project as such it was difficult for the research team to differentiate. Two names are missing from the chart, Jeffery McDonald and Eddy Robinson worked as Consultants on the Pilot Project. In addition Lloyd Mckell Executive Officer, Student and Community Equity, played an integral role in supporting the project.

## Research Findings

Our research conducted with over 200 students, parents, teachers, community members, administrators, and other UAEPP stakeholders has generated four key findings.

### **1. The Board must recognize the importance of understanding and responding to Aboriginal students, youth, and their learning needs.**

In this research, parents, teachers, students, community members, and UAEPP staff emphasized that quantitative indicators of success (grades, completion rates) are insufficient indicators of students' experiences within the urban school system and are not necessarily commensurate with Indigenous conceptions of learning. This research found that rejecting a narrow definition of learning premised on the acquisition of and capacity to replicate knowledge and the mastery of skill, in favour of a broader conceptualization of *student well-being* that relies on a complex understanding of what it means to learn, facilitated greater and more meaningful learning opportunities for Aboriginal students.

In particular, as a result of involvement in UAEPP activities, activities which attended to well-being, students in this research began to see school as a place for them, a place where they could not only be Aboriginal, but where they could learn about and feel comfortable in their Aboriginality. This involved creating learning environments and learning experiences for students where they had opportunities to contribute to as well as learn from Aboriginal people's experiences and perspectives.

### **2. The meaningful and appropriate incorporation of Indigenous issues across the curriculum must be supported by providing in-service professional development for teaching staff.**

Teachers reported that the UAEPP provided them with invaluable access to resources, expertise, training, and that their teaching practice, and their students' learning were directly enhanced as a result. Through UAEPP sponsored projects and professional development, there was a significant shift in teachers' understandings of Aboriginal people, history, and culture, the importance of Aboriginal education, and understandings of their roles and responsibilities as teachers and as inheritors of the colonial legacy. However, while most of the teachers interviewed came to be involved with the UAEPP because of their pre-existing commitment to Aboriginal education, many noted that the anxiety and discomfort experienced through the kind of learning opportunities provided challenged their commitments. Thus, the larger project of shifting understandings of Canada's colonial history ensuring that teachers are using the resources appropriately is part of the larger, much longer process of decolonizing and indigenizing. Teachers must be prepared to take up their unique responsibilities and roles, and they must be supported in their attempts to do so.

### **3. Schools and learning environments must be transformed in order to decolonize and indigenize learning spaces.**

The UAEPP worked in collaboration with TDSB staff at the school level to identify useful strategies for creating decolonized and indigenized school environments where Aboriginal students felt safe and supported in exploring their Aboriginality and where non-Aboriginal students had access to Aboriginal

subject material providing opportunities to know themselves in relationship with Aboriginal students. The experience of belonging and respect that Aboriginal students and families have a right to expect is premised on staff attitudes and understanding, as well as the inclusion of Aboriginal experiences and perspectives in the school curriculum. Understandably, the UAEPP staff were most successful in schools where the principals and vice principals were supportive of their presence and took an active interest in understanding the concepts of decolonizing and indigenizing and reflecting them in their schools. In-service activities and resources that prepare school staff members to act in ways respectful of Aboriginal people must be introduced into schools, along with images and materials that emphasize respect for Aboriginal people.

#### **4. Aboriginal Education must be prioritized across the Board, especially by establishing and maintaining internal and external partnerships.**

Collaborations with both internal and external partners, including departments, institutions, and agencies, allowed the UAEPP staff to create sustainable change by laying the groundwork for integrating Aboriginal Education across the curriculum. However, while the UAEPP staff was often impressed by the commitment of the non-Aboriginal TDSB community, they were also overwhelmed by the lack of knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal issues and the all too frequent demonstrations of disrespect shown to them as teachers. On the other hand, external partnerships between the UAEPP and community organizations increased linkages between schools, Aboriginal students and families, and Aboriginal agencies resulting in opportunities to bring Aboriginal knowledge and content into schools and to put Aboriginal students and their families in contact with community in the city. This research suggests that positive, respectful, and reciprocal partnerships within the Board and across the community can foster student engagement; provide opportunities for meaningful learning related to students' identities, communities, histories, including the history of colonialism; and expand the development of oral and written communication skills and the capacity for self-expression. However, in order to accomplish comprehensive change, Aboriginal Education must be recognized as a priority by the Board and must be actively supported at all levels.

### **Recommendations**

Emerging from our research with key informants is the recommendation that decolonization and indigenization of the learning environment be recognized as an urgent priority by the Toronto District School Board and be actively supported at all levels. In particular, the experiences of interviewees indicates that attention to Aboriginal student well-being and Aboriginal subject material is required. There needs to be active work toward improving course offerings and creating better, balanced, and fairer representations of Aboriginal people, cultures, and histories by encouraging the integration of Indigenous thought and perspectives across the curriculum and physical learning environments. Supporting collaborative working relationships between the Aboriginal Education Centre and TDSB departments is necessary if comprehensive change is to be accomplished. Sustaining partnerships established between the TDSB and external Aboriginal community agencies and organizations will allow for the integration of Aboriginal people's knowledge, experiences and perspectives.

In what follows, we outline general and specific recommendations arising from this research.

### **Overarching Recommendations:**

- Aboriginal Education must be recognized as a priority by the Board and must be actively supported at all levels.
- Sustained funding is necessary to build the work accomplished by the UAEPP.
- Attention to Aboriginal students' well-being and the meaningful and appropriate incorporation of Aboriginal subject material across the curriculum must be made a priority.
- A comprehensive staff development plan, including the recruitment of Aboriginal educators and staff, is needed for decolonizing and indigenizing teaching practice and content delivery.
- Establishing and maintaining respectful and reciprocal relationships between the TDSB and community organizations are essential for creating a safe teaching, learning, and work environment for Aboriginal staff and community members.

### **Specific Recommendations**

#### ***Supporting Aboriginal Student Well-being***

- TDSB must adopt an approach to Aboriginal Education that puts Aboriginal student well-being in the center.
- Classroom teachers and school support staff should actively take responsibility for all students' learning rather than waiting for or expecting students to come forward and identify as Aboriginal before receiving support.
- School and Board staff must provide opportunities for Aboriginal students to become leaders and advisors in the education of non-Aboriginal students and the whole school.
- School and Board staff must create multiple opportunities for Aboriginal students to have lessons that include traditional teachings, language instruction, examination of the history of colonialism, and historical and contemporary Aboriginal culture.

#### ***Benefits***

- Rather than experiencing alienation and marginalization within the school community, Aboriginal students could begin to experience schools as offering a place of belonging for them.
- Students who have access to Aboriginal perspectives and experiences in their out of school lives would then be put in the position of being able to draw from and build on that knowledge.
- Aboriginal students would have opportunities to know themselves as Aboriginal beings and to develop their own ways of expressing their Aboriginality.

#### ***Decolonizing and Indigenizing: Teacher Roles and Responsibilities***

The TDSB in collaboration with the Ministry of Education as well as other educational institutions and professional bodies must provide teachers with ongoing professional development opportunities that include meaningful discussions about colonization.

- The TDSB must focus resources on improving teacher training, especially related to building a respectful classroom environment where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students are comfortable learning about and discussing the history and legacy of colonialism.
- In collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the TDSB, teachers must work to integrate Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum and to develop and offer Native Studies courses in secondary schools.
- Teachers must ensure that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students have access to appropriate resources.
- Teachers must be provided with support to work respectfully and supportively with Aboriginal students.

### ***Decolonizing and Indigenizing: School Responsibilities***

- Schools must educate non-Aboriginal students, teachers, and administrators about Aboriginal peoples and cultures, the history of colonialism, and contemporary issues using opportunities like National Aboriginal Day.
- It is the responsibility of each school to provide information about the nation on whose traditional territory their school is built on, as well as the name and location of reserves located in close proximity to their school community.
- Schools must anticipate resistance from non-Aboriginal students and staff, and be provided with the knowledge, resources, and support school staff and administrators need to positively face and deal with resistance.
- Schools must provide in-service education with teacher librarians to support them in providing appropriate Aboriginal resources to students and teachers, including Aboriginal authored texts
- Include Aboriginal art, poetry, and traditional teachings on the walls of the school.
- Schools should consider incorporating Aboriginal approaches to conflict resolution, including the use of restorative justice circles, in collaborative decision-making procedures

### ***Decolonizing and Indigenizing: School Board Roles & Responsibilities***

- The Board must require all principals to participate in decolonizing and indigenizing professional development.
- The Board must support Aboriginal community liaisons with the capacity to nurture relationships between TDSB schools and external Aboriginal agencies.
- The Board must respect and value the expertise that the Aboriginal community brings to the classroom through sustaining and strengthening community ties and partnerships.
- It is the responsibility of the Board to practice reciprocity by giving back, recognizing that if Board leadership wants community members to participate in and support change in TDSB schools, then TDSB staff, including senior staff, must support and participate in the activities and initiatives of community agencies.
- The Board must offer and support teachers in acquiring decolonizing and indigenizing teacher development courses.

- The Board must require all departments to demonstrate a plan for integrating Aboriginal Education. Priority should be given to the development and implementation of Native Studies courses in secondary schools.
- The board should set realistic goals to increase the number of Aboriginal educators and staff, especially by recognizing alternative qualifications and by altering hiring policies and practices to support the hiring of Aboriginal people.
- Finally the Board must maintain a centre like the Aboriginal Education Centre, to be the hub of activity related to Aboriginal education.

# 1 Introduction: Aboriginal Education In the TDSB

*[T]o think along with other Indians in the hope of making a reflective contribution to the conversation among Indian educators about defining and implementing an education worthy of our children and our ancestors. (Eber Hampton, 1995. p. 5)*

---

## 1.1 Context: Aboriginal Students and Schools

During the past two years Catherine Pawis, Central Coordinating Principal for Aboriginal Education in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has led a staff of Aboriginal Educators and allies in a project aimed at accomplishing “an education worthy of our children and our ancestors” for students in the city of Toronto. The work has been exhilarating, exhausting, difficult, and rewarding. Done in collaboration with the counsel of parents and community members, their work provides a guide for transforming Aboriginal Education in urban contexts.

In this project report titled *Decolonizing Our Schools: Aboriginal Education in TDSB*, we describe the work of the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project (UAEPP) in the TDSB. Drawing on data gathered between April 2009 and finishing in September 2010, we document, evaluate, and provide our analysis of the Pilot Project in service of understanding how to accomplish an education worthy of our children and our ancestors in a large, diverse urban context. The report is based on *The Talking Stick Project: Aboriginal Education in the TDSB Gathering Stories of Teaching and Learning*.

The alienation and marginalization of Aboriginal students, families, and communities from institutions of formal schooling is well documented (Kirkness and Bowman, 1992; Battiste, 1998; Dion, 2000). Students in urban settings confront particular problems: they may not be recognized as Aboriginal students; they may not see themselves represented in the teaching population; and they may not see themselves represented in the curriculum. If recognized at all, they may be expected to have access to and be willing to share cultural knowledge; and they may be asked to speak for all Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people attend school in spite of a long, negative, and hurtful relationship between Aboriginal communities and schooling.

School Board administrators, teachers, and other Board employees in urban settings also confront particular challenges in taking up the responsibility of education, including: identification of Aboriginal student populations; delivery of programs when students are frequently dispersed across a range of schools; a teaching population that lacks knowledge of Aboriginal subject material; and the challenge of engaging families and communities who may be understandably resistant having experienced a legacy of negative associations with educational institutions.

---

## 1.2 The Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project

Recognizing responsibility for the estimated 50,312 Aboriginal students who attend provincially funded elementary and secondary schools, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) identified Aboriginal Education as one of its key priorities. The UAEPP is a significant first step in addressing what many

Aboriginal parents, students, and educators see as a long over due response to the issues of Aboriginal Education in Ontario.

## **1.2A Background**

In January 2007, the Ontario Ministry of Education developed the *First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*. In that framework, the Ministry made a commitment to work “in collaboration with school Boards, First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities and organizations, [to] develop innovative approaches to meet the needs of First Nation, Métis and Inuit students living in large urban centers.” The Aboriginal Education Office (AEO), a shared office of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, began to work with a range of stakeholders to develop Urban Aboriginal Education models for engagement with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students, families, and communities. Along with Lakehead District School Board and Simcoe County District School Board, the TDSB was identified as a pilot site. The TDSB Pilot Project began in September 2008 and was originally slated to run until June 2009. In the spring of 2009, the project was extended for an additional 12 months.

The activities related to these Pilot Projects seek to achieve the following goals, as outlined in the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework:

- High levels of student achievement;
- Reduced gaps in student achievement; and
- High levels of public confidence.

The AEO established a provincial Steering Committee to oversee the entire project. The Steering Committee is chaired by the Director of the AEO (or designate) and co-chaired by one school board and one Aboriginal organization. The Steering Committee consists of representation from urban school boards, post-secondary institutions, Aboriginal organizations, teachers’ federations, principals’ associations, trustee associations, the Council of Directors of Education, Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, Indian, and Northern Affairs Canada, Ontario Region, and the Ministry of Education.

The Steering Committee established a research sub-committee to a) review and provide feedback on research to inform the work of the three pilot sites; b) to provide liaison and advisory support in the development of the evaluation framework and indicators pertaining to individual Pilot Projects; and c) to inform the development of a broader evaluation framework. Within each of the three Boards, a sub-committee was established to oversee the implementation and evaluation of the Pilot Projects.

## **1.2B The UAEPP In The TDSB**

The TDSB began the Pilot Project aware that “meeting the needs of [Aboriginal] students in an urban context requires not only innovative approaches to program delivery and support but outreach to Aboriginal families and communities as well” (TDSB, 2008). Since at least 2003, the Board has undertaken a number of Aboriginal education initiatives, including the establishment of the Aboriginal Community Advisory Council (ACAC); the creation of a centralized Aboriginal Education Centre under the direction of a central coordinating principal; curriculum development; surveys of students, parents, and teachers; and community outreach and partnership building.



## GOALS

The specific goals of the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project at the TDSB site include:

- A. Enhancing Aboriginal student achievement;
- B. Increasing Aboriginal community participation in the TDSB;
- C. Improving partnerships with Aboriginal Community organizations and service providers;
- D. Developing curriculum resources that reflect Aboriginal people's experiences and perspectives; and
- E. Accomplishing professional development.

## STAFF

Beginning in the fall of 2008 when the TDSB was identified as a UAE Pilot Project site, Central Coordinating Principal Catherine Pawis began organizing a team of Aboriginal Educators to work on the project. Keeping in mind the goals of the project, it was important to hire Aboriginal staff members. Catherine Pawis was committed to doing what was necessary to ensure that Aboriginal people would be involved in developing and delivering the programs and services of the Pilot Project.<sup>1</sup>

### Project Administrators

Name	Position	Assigned	Aboriginal
<b>Catherine Pawis</b>	Central Coordinating Principal Aboriginal Education	Sept 2008	Yes
<b>Margaret McIntosh</b>	UAEP Coordinator	April 2009	No
<b>Jeff Hainbuch</b>	Superintendent Aboriginal Education	Sept 2008	No

### Project Staff

Name	Position	Hired	Aboriginal
<b>Jane Brown</b>	Consultant	Oct 2009	No
<b>Heather Kere</b>	Child and Youth Counselor	Jan 2010	No
<b>Hannah Fowlie</b>	Social Worker	Jan 2009	No
<b>Rob Lackie</b>	Community Liaison	Jan 2009	Yes
<b>Jennifer Funell</b>	Cultural Consultant	Sept 2009	Yes
<b>Jarvis Nahdee</b>	Instructional Leader, Native Languages & Perspectives	Sept 2009	Yes
<b>Shay-Lea O'Brien</b>	Student Success Teacher (East)	Sept 2009	Yes
<b>Andrea Olsen</b>	Aboriginal Tutor Mentorship Program, Project Facilitator	Mar 2010	Yes
<b>Erica Riley</b>	Student Success Teacher (West)	Nov 2008	Yes
<b>Kitty Sill</b>	Office Administrator AEC	June 2009	Yes
<b>Tessa Sill</b>	Community Liaison	April 2009	Yes

<sup>1</sup> Significant barriers got in the way of Aboriginal specific hiring. Please see Chapter 5 of this report for further discussion.

## APPROACH

Building on their existing programs for Aboriginal students, the UAEPP developed a comprehensive plan to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal learners and to address Aboriginal Education across the Board. The Pilot Project plan aimed for a balance between supports for individual students across the system and specific localized programs in areas known to have a higher representation of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students. Additionally, a series of events and activities were offered to provide all teachers and students in the board access to learning from Aboriginal peoples.

The UAEPP was able to develop and support a variety of programs to,

- A. Provide engaging culturally relevant and appropriate programming and student supports in all academic areas;
- B. Foster family and community engagement;
- C. Build on existing partnerships with Aboriginal stakeholders;
- D. Increase the knowledge and understanding of school board personnel about First Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultures, issues, perspectives, and learning styles;
- E. Develop exemplary curriculum resource materials to be included in the curriculum so that Aboriginal students see themselves reflected in the curriculum; and
- F. Build positive self-esteem by increasing Aboriginal students' knowledge about their own culture and traditions, fostering pride in their identity, as well as enhancing confidence in their abilities.

### 1.2C Research and the UAEPP

The TDSB UAE Steering Committee established a research sub-committee to,

- review and provide feedback on research to inform the work of the TDSB;
- to provide liaison and advisory support to the provincial researcher; and
- to inform the development of a broader evaluation framework.

In March 2009 Principal Investigator Dr. Susan Dion was contracted to conduct the evaluation of the TDSB Pilot Project. This evaluation and research project was titled the *Talking Stick Project: Aboriginal Education in the TDSB Investigating Stories of Teaching and Learning*.

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## 1.3 The Talking Stick Project

Looking specifically at implementation and outcomes, the goals of the *Talking Stick Project* were to investigate, evaluate, and learn from the work undertaken and accomplished by the UAE Pilot Project. This research was intended to inform both the UAE Steering Committee and the TDSB about the ways in which the Pilot Project was both successful and challenged in accomplishing its goals.

### 1.3A The Research Team

Graduate students from the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University supported the research team led by Principal Investigator Dr. Susan D. Dion, with assistance from Project Manager/Co-Researcher Krista Johnston.

### **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**

Dr. Susan D. Dion is an Aboriginal scholar who has been working in the field of Aboriginal Education for 20 years. She is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University in Toronto. During the past 10 years, Dr. Dion has worked in collaboration with the TDSB in the service of advancing Aboriginal Education for teachers and students. As principal investigator, Dr. Dion was responsible for all aspects of the research project. She participated in all levels of the research including planning, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. She is the lead writer of this report. Dr. Dion worked in close collaboration with the TDSB Pilot Project Administrators and staff, and responded to requests for information from the Provincial Researcher Andrea Johnston Research Inc.

### **CO-RESEARCHER AND PROJECT MANAGER**

Krista Johnston is a PhD Candidate (ABD) in the Graduate Program in Women's Studies at York University. Her thesis engages an anti-colonial feminist perspective to assess the impacts of citizenship policy and discourse on social movements in the city of Toronto. As co-investigator and project manager, Ms. Johnston worked in close collaboration with both the principal investigator and the team of research assistants. She was responsible for overall management of the project and participated in all aspects of the work.

### **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH CONSULTANT**

The project was completed with the assistance from a Qualitative Research Methods Consultant who brought extensive knowledge of research ethics and experience in the preparation of survey questions, interview techniques, and data gathering and analysis. The consultant participated in training with the Research Assistants and worked with the team on coding, data analysis, and editing and reviewing of the final report.

### **CREATIVE WRITER, RESEARCH ASSISTANT**

Aboriginal Writer/Researcher Michael D. Dion participated in data coding and analysis. He was responsible for writing the student profiles that appear at the beginning of Chapter Two of this report.

### **RESEARCH ASSISTANTS**

Graduate students from the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Environmental Studies served as Research Assistants (RAs) on the project. At different times and in different capacities, seven RAs participated in the work including Samantha Cutrara, Carmen Carrero DeSalazar, Michelle DeMerchant, Katherine Lapointe, Christine Cho, Tanya McFadyen, and Laura Mae Lindo. Each research assistant was invited to participate in the project based on their interest in Aboriginal issues, critical pedagogy, and processes of decolonizing and indigenizing research methods.

## **1.3B Purpose, Objectives and Key Questions**

### **PURPOSE**

Looking specifically at Pilot Project implementation and outcomes, the purpose of the *Talking Stick* Project was to investigate, evaluate, and learn from the work undertaken and accomplished by the UAE Pilot Project in the TDSB.

## OBJECTIVES

The *Talking Stick Project* addressed the following objectives:

1. Investigate and evaluate the efficacy of the UAE Pilot Project in increasing Aboriginal student performance.
2. Analyze and assess the effectiveness of the project in enhancing Aboriginal community engagement including parents, families, community organizations, and support services.
3. Identify and analyze the challenges and barriers encountered in implementation of the project and achievement of its' aims.
4. Identify and understand project strategies, resources, and other factors contributing to positive outcomes of the Pilot Project.
5. Investigate the project's effectiveness in building educator confidence and competency as well as system capacity to respond to the needs of Aboriginal students, families, and communities.
6. Working in collaboration with both the steering committee and the Provincial Evaluator, Andrea Johnston Research Inc., respond to the requirements of the provincial research project and contribute to the provincial work of documenting urban models of Aboriginal Education with case studies and effective practices that can be adapted and implemented in other urban settings.

## KEY QUESTIONS

The following research questions informed the work of the project:

1. In what ways did participation in Pilot Project activities and events impact Aboriginal student achievement? Is there evidence of this change in Aboriginal students' performance on province-wide assessments in reading, writing, and mathematics? Do classroom teachers recognize a change in students' performance and or changes in attitudes?
2. How do students who participated in Pilot Project activities understand their Aboriginality? Did participating students register a significant change in their attitudes toward education and/or toward their understanding of themselves as Aboriginal people?
3. Were partnerships between the TDSB and Aboriginal community organizations and service providers established and/or improved? In what ways did those partnerships serve to enhance Aboriginal student achievement and/or reduce Aboriginal students' experience of alienation and or marginalization within the TDSB?
4. Was the Pilot Project successful in developing curriculum and having that curriculum integrated into classrooms? In addition to curriculum development, what other professional development projects were undertaken and did those projects contribute to teachers' confidence and capacity for teaching Aboriginal subject material, and for responding to the needs of Aboriginal students, families, and communities?
5. The Pilot Project set out to enhance parent and family engagement in TDSB. Did parents and family members experience increased engagement and did this engagement have a positive impact on students?
6. What did members of the Pilot Project steering committee learn from participation in the project? In what ways has this learning been, and might continue to be, useful in their ongoing work in serving Aboriginal students, families, and communities in both the TDSB and the Aboriginal community in Toronto?

7. Considering the variety of activities undertaken by the Pilot Project, which activities were most successful, and what contributed to their success? What activities were most challenging and what contributed to the challenges?

### 1.3C Decolonizing Research Methodology

Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains that decolonization,

*is about centering our concerns and world view and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes. (1999, p. 39)*

#### RESEARCH DESIGN

In keeping with Indigenous approaches to research, the *Talking Stick Project* is guided by the following principles: respect for existing knowledge and relationships within community; respect for Indigenous worldviews and traditions; action in support of the development of capacity and skill building; collaboration throughout the process; community ownership and control over gathering of information and process; and ongoing response to community requests for involvement (Absolon and Willett, 2004).

These commitments have guided the design and implementation of the research, and our adoption of a multi-method approach including Talking Circles, interviews, participant observation, surveys, and on-the-spot interviews. The selected methods all emphasize the importance of narrative and collective knowledge production, and embrace an Indigenous-informed qualitative approach. The focus is on the rich complexity of participants' own storied experiences about the successes and challenges of the Pilot Project.

Through regular contact with the staff of the UAE Pilot Project and the TDSB research sub-committee, we have ensured that the research was conducted in an appropriate way, respectful of participants' concerns with confidentiality, inclusive of Indigenous approaches to research, and congruent with and attentive to the goals of the UAE Pilot Project site. The in-depth interviews, regularly scheduled Talking Circles, and ongoing participant observation provided a sense of the project as it unfolded and shifted, enabling researchers and staff members to track success, challenge, and change over the course of the Pilot Project. This has also provided the opportunity for researchers and staff members to develop a respectful and trusting rapport.

Community trust has also been built through rigorous adherence to the principles of informed consent and confidentiality, which included painstaking review of transcripts for confidentiality and accuracy, as well as returning interview transcripts to participants for their review. Although this was a time-consuming process, it reassured participants that their contributions and their words were valuable and respected. This valuing of the contributions of participants also was indicated through the provision of small honoraria, where appropriate. The importance of gifting is central to Indigenous approaches to knowledge and respectful relationships.

In Talking Circles, comprised of 3-12 participants each, researchers ensured that refreshments were available, and that attention was paid to appropriate ways to begin and close the gatherings. This created an important tone, signalling that a comfortable time and space was set aside to reflect individually and collectively on the important work at hand. Staff members have also noted the importance of the Talking Circles in providing space and time for reflection and connection with other members of the Pilot Project team. In this way, the research project has provided a reciprocal support to

the Aboriginal Education Centre. This commitment to reciprocity is central to Indigenous conceptions of good working relationships, and has created an important sense of trust and openness between researchers and the staff of the Pilot Project.

These explicit elements of research design were further enhanced by ongoing reflection of the researchers, through team meetings and the data analysis phase. Analysis of the data has focused on emergent themes, tracking continuity and change over the course of the Pilot Project. The central themes and findings are the focus of this research report.

### **APPROACH TO EVALUATION**

Over the course of the data collection phase, parents, teachers, students, community members, and Pilot Project staff have repeatedly emphasized that quantitative indicators of success (grades, completion rates) are insufficient indicators of students' school experiences, and that they are not necessarily commensurate with Indigenous conceptions of learning. In this project report, we have concentrated on qualitative indicators of students' school experiences. Our attention is focussed on the impact the Pilot Project has had within the Board; we pay attention to what the staff have told us about what they have accomplished with teachers and school communities; and we have listened closely to the voices of the youth.

In carrying out this evaluation, we have concentrated our efforts and attention on the work of the UAEPP in accomplishing four objectives:

- Understanding and responding to students and youth and their learning needs;
- Teacher development;
- Transformations in schools and the school board environment; and
- Meaningful and appropriate incorporation of Aboriginal subject material.

For this report, the following questions have framed our approach to evaluation:

- How has learning been accomplished? What kinds of learning have been accomplished? What do Aboriginal students require in order to learn?
- To what degree are relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (students, teachers, and community members) being transformed?
- Do teachers feel prepared and/or supported in their attempts to fulfill this curricular requirement?
- Are representations of Aboriginal people, history, and culture in TDSB schools respectful and appropriate?
- What have the UAE Pilot Project Staff and participants identified as positive change, what supports positive change, and what are the obstacles to change? How can these be addressed?

### **DATA CHART**

Below is a summative chart of the data collected over the course of the *Talking Stick* research project. In the first year of data collection, research activity focused on large-scale Pilot Project events and initiatives. In the second year, we focused more closely on the issue of student success and school level changes. As is evident from the chart below, a significant amount of data that maps the breadth of the Pilot Project was gathered across the years of the project.

	YEAR ONE	YEAR TWO	TOTAL
<b>STUDENTS</b>			
Elementary/Middle School OTS Interviews	8	16	24
Secondary School Student Interviews	5	14	19
Student Surveys	0	16	16
Student Talking Circles	2 Circles 9 Students	3 Circles 32 Students	5 Circles 41 Students
<b>Total Student Contacts</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>TEACHERS</b>			
Teacher Interviews	25	8	33
Teacher Librarian Interviews	0	2	2
Teacher Surveys	0	30	30
Teacher Evaluation Forms	0	33	33
<b>Total Teacher Contacts</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>BOARD, STAFF, AND COMMUNITY</b>			
School Principal Interviews	2	3	5
Board & Project Administrator Interviews <sup>2</sup>	3	2	5
UAEPP Staff Interviews	5	11	16
UAEPP Staff Talking Circles	2 Circles 14 Staff	2 Circles 19 Staff	4 Circles 33 Staff
Community Interviews <sup>3</sup>	3	4	7
Parent Interviews	1	5	6
<b>Total Board, Staff, &amp; Community Contacts</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>OTHER RESEARCH ACTIVITY</b>			
Event Observation Notes	16	8	24
School Audits <sup>4</sup>	9	10	19
School Visits	1	5	6
Events/Activity Participation	1	6	7
<b>TOTAL DATA SOURCES</b>			
<b>Total # of Interviews</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>Total # of Talking Circles</b>	<b>4 Circles</b> <b>23 Participants</b>	<b>5 Circles</b> <b>51 Participants</b>	<b>9 Circles</b> <b>74 Participants</b>
<b>Total # of Surveys &amp; Evaluation Forms</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Total # of Other Data Sources</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Total # of Contacts &amp; Data Sources</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>326</b>

<sup>2</sup> A second Board level administrator was contacted on three occasions for an interview, but phone calls were not returned until it was too late in the data collection phase for the interview to be included.

<sup>3</sup> Effort was made to interview additional artists, community members, and parents. Busy schedules, high levels of service expected of community members, and the short time frame of the project made it difficult to conduct interviews with other members of these groups.

<sup>4</sup> Although RAs made multiple attempts to visit 4 additional schools, principals failed to return phone calls or expressed concern with the timing of the audits, and thus more audits could not be completed.

PARTICIPANTS	YEAR ONE	YEAR TWO	TOTAL
Students (Middle and Secondary)	22	76	98
Teachers	27	70	97
Principals	2	4	6
Parents	1	5	6
Community	3	3	6
Project Staff	13	14	27
Board Administration	3	1	4
<b>Total Participants</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>244</b>

### DATA CHART INTERPRETATION NOTE

Participants in the project had the opportunity to take part in multiple forms of data collection consequently the total number of contacts and data sources in each year is different from the total number of participants. Participant totals reflect the number of individuals who contributed to the data collected and contact totals reflect the total number of contributions to the data.

In keeping with Indigenous and Tri-Council research protocols, names and other information identifying research participants have been changed or removed. To shift the locus of responsibility for Canada’s colonial legacy from individuals to systems, we identify research participants by role (for example ABP Teacher.1, or RD Student.2) rather than by pseudonym. Where students, parents, and community members name individual teachers, staff members, or administrators of the UAEPP, the AEC, or TDSB schools, we have assigned these employees a pseudonym to preserve the flow and readability of informants’ accounts.

## 1.4 The Talking Stick Project Research Report: Decolonizing Our Schools

This report reflects the depth and detailed stories shared by research participants. Our emphasis on decolonizing and indigenizing is an intentional move reflecting a consistent and recurring message expressed in the data collected.

### 1.4A Structure of the Project Report

This report has five chapters and an Executive Summary that includes Key Findings and Recommendations. Keeping in mind the structure of the Board and the delivery of education, we begin the discussion with a focus on Aboriginal students and move on to address teachers, schools, and Board roles and responsibilities for Aboriginal Education. Each chapter begins with a description of roles and responsibilities, we follow-up with detailed attention to the activities of the Pilot Project, and offer an analysis of what was accomplished and what was learned. Each chapter concludes with challenges confronted, recommendations, and what needs to be done to sustain the work accomplished.

#### Chapter Two

Focuses on what we learned from, with, and about students, we propose a shift from the focus on “student success” to a focus Aboriginal Student Well-Being.



### **Chapter Three**

Tells the story of teachers with a primary focus on the Arts-Based Project.

### **Chapter Four**

Describes the Pilot Project's work in collaboration with schools. Drawing on work done in particular schools, we identify successes and on-going challenges to fostering transformations in school environments.

### **Chapter Five**

Looking at collaborative work with both internal and external partners, we identify Board roles and responsibilities in supporting and advancing Aboriginal Education in TDSB schools.

## **1.4B Key Concepts**

In this report we argue in support of decolonizing and indigenizing school communities and decolonizing education for school board employees. For clarity, we provide definitions of these key concepts, explaining what we understand these concepts to mean, how we apply them, and how we see them contributing to the goals of the UAEPP in the TDSB.

Additionally, we argue that the legacy of residential schools continues to have a profound impact on Aboriginal students and their families. We have included a short description of what we understand the legacy of residential schools to include. For an in depth discussion see *The Legacy of School for Aboriginal People* by Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003).

### **THE LEGACY OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS**

Established early in the 1840s and operating well into the last century, Indian residential schools were a cornerstone of the colonial project in Canada. With the goal of forcing Aboriginal people to assimilate into white society, Aboriginal children were removed from their families, required to speak English, adopt Christianity, and engage in physical labour. As Marie Battiste (1995) notes, residential schools were only one of various approaches to schooling that imposed "Eurocentric educational practices ignored or rejected the world-views, languages and values of Aboriginal parents in the education of their children" (p.vii). The abuses inflicted on children in residential schools are well documented (Miller, 1996; Haig-Brown, 1988) and as Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) argue continue to impact the well-being of Aboriginal people, families, and communities and to inform Aboriginal people's relationship to institutions of formal schooling. Considering this history, Aboriginal people have little reason to trust schools or the people who work in them. This is not meant to suggest that all Aboriginal people have negative relationships to schools, but rather to suggest that this historical legacy continues to shape the relations and contexts of Aboriginal Education.

### **INDIGENIZING**

Indigenous scholar Taiiike Alfred (2004) suggests that in order to indigenize education, we must work to change schools so that they become places where the

*values, principles, and modes of organization and behavior of our people are respected in, and hopefully even integrated into, the larger system of structures and processes that make up the [school] itself. (p. 88)*

Indigenizing involves the integration of Indigenous thought and perspectives across the curriculum and throughout all grade levels. Rather than limiting Aboriginal content to the Ontario grade three curriculum unit on *Aboriginal People and Pioneers* and the Ontario grade six curriculum unit on *Aboriginal People and Explorers*, Aboriginal subject material is integrated across the curriculum at all grades. Aboriginal people have been telling stories since time immemorial and there is a rich body of literature available to teachers and students for teaching and learning from Aboriginal scholarship, worldviews, and perspectives. Indigenizing the curriculum means providing students with access to that rich body of texts, as well as introducing students to the study of other creative work by Aboriginal artists including visual art, music, film, dance, and drama. Indigenizing the school community would see the inclusion of Aboriginal art, poetry, and traditional teachings on the walls of the school, and included during announcements and assemblies. Aboriginal community members including Elders and artists would be invited into the school on a regular basis so that positive relationships could be established. Students would be introduced to, and able to easily access, Aboriginal-authored texts when they visited their school libraries. Aboriginal approaches to conflict resolution including the use of restorative justice circles would be learned and practiced, and collaborative decision-making would become a part of classroom and school procedures.

All students would come to recognize the names of Aboriginal authors, and learn from the rich body of Aboriginal literature that derives from the land they live on. They would come to know traditional teachings, and develop knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal ways of knowing the self and knowing the self in relationship with the people and the world in which they live. They would have opportunities to learn from Aboriginal writers, visual artists, musicians, and teachers.

Aboriginal students could begin to experience schools as offering a place of belonging. Students who have access to Aboriginal perspectives and experiences in their out-of-school lives would be in the position of being able to draw from and build on that knowledge. Aboriginal students would have opportunities to know themselves and to develop their own ways of expressing their Aboriginality.

## **DECOLONIZING**

The relationship between colonialism and institutions of formal schooling in Canada cannot be denied. Missionaries first established schools for Aboriginal children to further the civilizing mission in Canada (Miller, 1996). Later, the system of residential schools was instituted with the intention of enforcing policies aimed at erasing students' understanding of themselves as Aboriginal people, policies which ultimately were responsible for decimating Aboriginal families, cultures, and nations. Given this legacy, the decolonizing of institutions of formal schooling is a complex, daunting, and crucially important task.

In this research project report, the concept of "decolonizing" we employ refers to the project of critiquing western worldviews and challenging oppressive power structures that they uphold. According to Maori scholar Linda Smith (1999), decolonizing, "once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long term process involving bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power" (p. 98) including in schools.

The task of decolonizing education (and schools as sites of education) requires that teachers and students have opportunities to:

- Investigate and learn from the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people including the legacies of oppression and their ongoing impacts;
- Identify ways in which the oppression of Aboriginal people continues;

- Understand Aboriginal people’s activism as assertions of human and Indigenous rights;
- Prioritize Aboriginal people’s concerns and worldviews;
- Come to know, understand, and experience Aboriginal informed teaching and learning practices; and
- Participate in collective action aimed at transforming the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people from one premised on oppression to one of equity and justice.

In schools undertaking decolonization, students would know the name of the nation on whose traditional territory their school is built, and they would know the name and location of reserves located in close proximity to their school community. Students would develop an understanding of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, learning that Aboriginal people did not simply or in reality disappear after Canada was explored and settled by waves of immigrants. All students would benefit from access to knowledge and understanding of a complex and difficult history that informs the present. And importantly, Aboriginal students would have the possibility of understanding the context of their lives.

## 1.5 The Research Context: Aboriginal People in the City and Aboriginal Students in the TDSB

The TDSB is the largest school board in Canada located in a large and diverse city that serves the needs of a vast and equally diverse student population. Recognizing the size of the Board, and understanding the place Aboriginal people occupy in the city and Aboriginal students occupy in schools are crucial to understanding the complex task undertaken by the UAEPP.

### 1.5A Aboriginal People in Toronto

Aboriginal people have histories on this land prior to its existence as a city and certainly from the time Toronto came into being, Aboriginal people have made their homes here. Much of the Aboriginal population in Toronto comes from multiple generations of intermarriages and multiple forced removals from peoples’ lands and homes (Lawrence, 2004, p. 19). There is a long history of community-building and support networks among Aboriginal people throughout Toronto, starting in the 1950s with the establishment of the North American Indian Club (p. 131). Over the past decades, this social network has accomplished changes in discriminatory laws and has established many institutions for the benefit of Aboriginal residents (p. 132). While many members of Toronto’s urban Aboriginal community struggle with the social and economic marginalization that results from centuries of colonial oppression, there also exists a significant section of middle class Aboriginal people who work to address social problems (p. 169). Despite the ongoing attempts of colonial processes to erase and destroy

27% of the Aboriginal population **lived under the LICO** compared to 18% of the non-Aboriginal population

75% of Aboriginal householders were **renters** living in **houses needing major repairs**

Aboriginal people in Toronto had only **2/3 of the household income** of non-Aboriginal people

44% of the Aboriginal population versus 37% of the non-Aboriginal population **spent more than 30% of their income on shelter**

32% of Aboriginal **children under the age of 14 live below the LICO** vs. 23% of non-Aboriginal children

38% of the Aboriginal population in Toronto is under 25, with 22% under the age of 15

Aboriginal culture, Indigenous identity in Toronto continues to survive and to strengthen. There are now over 35 Aboriginal organizations in Toronto, all of which are invested in promoting cultural knowledge and practices (Toronto, 2010). This emergent “urban traditionalism” functions as a tool to maintain a cohesive Aboriginal identity (p. 165) within an often hostile and marginalizing urban environment.

The urban Aboriginal population is dispersed across the Greater Toronto Area. According to the 2006 Census conducted by Statistics Canada, Toronto’s population is the third largest urban concentration of Aboriginal people in Canada. As of 2006, the Census recorded 26,575 Aboriginal people living in Toronto; and 31,910 people in the larger GTA (City of Toronto, 2008). This represented a growth of 31% from 2001, particularly amongst those self-identifying as Métis. In other words, Toronto’s urban Aboriginal population is growing quickly. It should also be noted that many have suggested these numbers are a low estimate of the urban Aboriginal population in Toronto, as census data does not include those living in collective residences, institutions, or who have no fixed address. It also fails to include those who are listed as “non-status.” It is possible that Toronto’s urban Aboriginal population is in excess of 70,000.<sup>5</sup>

As is the case in other urban contexts across Canada, Aboriginal people in Toronto are likely to live in households with precarious income, and to experience violence, illness, and poverty. According to Germain et.al. (2009), the Aboriginal population in Toronto is best described as “young, growing, and female.” The following statistics drawn from Germain et. al., and the city of Toronto Web Site<sup>6</sup> provide a picture of the socio-economic realities that Aboriginal people experience.

A detailed discussion of the legacy of colonialism and its link to the poverty and violence that permeates the lives of Aboriginal people is beyond the scope of this report. At the same time, if schools aim to advance Aboriginal student well-being and success, it is incumbent on educators to understand the complex relationships between colonialism, oppression, poverty, and failure on the part of institutions of formal schooling to respond to the needs of Aboriginal students, families, and communities.<sup>7</sup>

These experiences of marginalization and precariousness have a direct correlation with experiences of formal education, as statistics compiled by Germain et al<sup>8</sup> show.

Aboriginal youth have a **lower rate of school attendance**: 64% versus 73% of non-Aboriginal youth

**More Aboriginal people** than non-Aboriginal people have **completed less than high school** 20% vs. 12%

In Ontario, off-reserve **Aboriginal men 15 to 34** said that **wanting to work was the main reason for not completing school**, while **for women it was pregnancy/taking care of children**

There is a slightly greater tendency for Aboriginal adults to **return to school**; with women over 35 leading the trend 10% vs. 7% non-Aboriginal women over 35

Young Aboriginal women are more likely to **obtain a university degree** than males (26% vs. 15%)

<sup>5</sup> This is the number used by Aboriginal agencies in 2006 as reported on the City of Toronto Web Site, (Downloaded March 10 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Specifically, the statistics come from “Toronto’s Racial Diversity” (Downloaded March 10 2009) and “Toronto Aboriginal Persons Demographic Snapshot, (PDF presentation 2008).

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the link between the history of colonialism and current social-economic realities confronting Aboriginal people see Wotherspoon and Satzewich (2000), Lawrence (2004), and Simpson, (2008).

<sup>8</sup> The statistics in this chart come from Germain et al., (2009).

## 1.5B Aboriginal Students in the TDSB

As of 2009-2010, the TDSB had 595 schools in 562 sites, servicing approximately 257,000 students. The Board employs about 10,100 elementary teachers and 5,900 secondary teachers as part of a complement of 33,000 full-time and 8,000 part-time staff. Overall, the student body speaks 75 different languages (not including regional dialects), with roughly 24% of students born outside of Canada, in one of more than 175 countries (*TDSB website, August 26, 2010*).

Despite the size of Toronto's Aboriginal population, there is no concentrated Aboriginal neighbourhood or community. Aboriginal people are often rendered invisible in Toronto's diverse cityscape. The impact for Aboriginal students is often one of alienation. "Lacking a definable urban Aboriginal community with whom they can identify, students are often either isolated in their schools and communities or are 'hidden in plain view,' reluctant to self-identify" (TDSB, 2008).

Identifying the number of Aboriginal students attending TDSB schools has proven to be challenging. Initially TDSB 2006 Student Census data showed less than 100 Aboriginal students in TDSB schools, but upon revising the methodology for identifying students this number increased to 414 secondary school students.<sup>9</sup> Students who participated in the census were classified as "Aboriginal" if they

1. Self-described as "Aboriginal" in the "Race" question of the Census or
2. Described themselves as "Aboriginal" or related (e.g. Mohawk, Ojibwa, Cree) in the "Ethnicity" question of the Census.

If according to the 2006 Census data there are 26,575 Aboriginal people living in the City of Toronto and given that 22% of the Aboriginal population in the city is under the age of 15, then a significant number of Aboriginal children are attending TDSB schools. The disparity between Student Census and City of Toronto statistics demands the question: Where are these students and why are they not self-identifying?

In a personal narrative cited in *Seeing Ourselves* (James, 2010) Vanier describes her experience of "coming out" as Aboriginal. In her story, Vanier addresses some of the challenges involved in self-identifying, explaining that when you expose your Aboriginality you open your self up to questions including "Are you Aboriginal?" and "How Aboriginal are you?"

Vanier explains that these questions demand something from her. To answer, she is required to educate her interrogators. When asked, she tells people about government policies that impact Aboriginal people and the complexities involved in acquiring and losing status. She sometimes talks back to "the plethora of misrepresentations" of Aboriginal people: she does not "look" Aboriginal but what do people expect an Aboriginal person to look like? Vanier explains that these are the simple answers. The more complex, difficult-to-explain responses that she keeps to herself have to do with how she feels about her identity and her loss of access to her traditional language and traditional knowledge. Vanier's essay is helpful in explaining some of the reasons why Aboriginal students are choosing not to identify. Clearly, Vanier has done some thinking about her identity; she has had the opportunity to learn how to speak back to the questions posed.

The issues and challenges surrounding self-identification are woven through this report. In some ways Vanier's story encapsulates the essence of what we learned. Aboriginal students are choosing not to self-identify because it is not always safe to do so, and because they do not necessarily know how to

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<sup>9</sup> It has become evident through the work of the UAEPP that there are many more students than this number reflects.

respond to the questions that they will be asked. Importantly, not talking about their identity does not mean they are not thinking about it or feeling alienated by a school curriculum and environment that offers them little in the way of working through the complex questions of self-understanding.

### **1.5C The TDSB and Aboriginal Student Achievement**

According to a TDSB preliminary report based on limited data collected in 2006-2007 Student Census, Grade 9 Aboriginal student achievement was noticeably lower than achievement for the full cohort:

- Using credit accumulation indicators (that is, accumulation of fewer than 7 credits by the end of their first year in secondary school) 32% of Aboriginal students were “highly at-risk” of not completing secondary school, compared to 14% of the full cohort of students.
- Only 17% had achieved the provincial standard in mathematics compared to 47% of the full cohort.
- 45% of Aboriginal students were taking a majority of their Grade 9 course in the academic program of study, compared to 72% of the full cohort. This is significant because taking a majority of Grade 9 courses in the academic program of study has been identified through previous research as a powerful prediction of on-time graduation, and post-secondary attainment.

In addition, the post-secondary attainment of 17 and 18 year old Aboriginal students in the TDSB in the 2007 application cycle was much lower than the full TDSB population.

Amongst the 17 and 18-year-old Aboriginal students,

- 20% confirmed an offer of admission from an Ontario post-secondary institution,
- 11% applied but did not confirm an offer, while
- 71% did not apply at all in the 2007 application cycle.

In contrast, of the full 17 and 18-year-old population,

- 40% confirmed an offer of admission from an Ontario post-secondary institution,
- 10% applied but did not confirm an offer, while
- 49% did not apply at all in the 2007 application cycle.

This limited statistical data confirms what Aboriginal parents, educators, and students know from lived experience: institutions of formal schooling including the TDSB are failing to provide Aboriginal students with the educational environment and experiences they require to be in a position to pursue post-secondary education.

In the following chapters we report on and evaluate the work of the UAEPP in the TDSB with a focus on students, schools, and the Board.

## 2 Aboriginal Student Well-Being

The primary focus of the UAEPP in the TDSB was on Aboriginal students. With students' permission, we begin with three profiles describing their past and present relationships with schooling. In each case the student was actively involved with the Pilot Project for two years.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 Student Profiles

#### LUCAS' STORY

I came from a reserve in the north, it has no name.  
Would it make a difference to you, as we play the Indian Act game?  
Me and my buddies we have our own way.  
We tell our stories in comic books and hip hop.  
So that you can hear what we have to say.  
I wrote a song, I need to forgive to cleanse our souls,  
It seems to me they ain't sorry for playing their role.

I am from a northern Ontario reserve and I went to school up there. In 2008 I came to Toronto and started grade 11. My first year was difficult, I had no friends, I had no connection to any community here. Fitting in to a new high school is never easy, being singled out as the only Native student did not help. There was a big communication problem between me and the teachers, and just because I couldn't understand most of what they were saying they were like, "Oh you're a bad kid."

Then in November, a transformation happened. A teacher heard about an event that was happening at the AEC and I was the only identified Native kid in the school, so he took me out of class and brought me to the assembly. There was drumming and kids dancing. I no longer felt alone in the city, I was like whoa, I want to be a part of this.

So with the help of Mr. Russell I organized a powwow at my school with dancers, singers and an activist who gave an interesting talk. This event at the school turned things around. Now they have Aboriginal art on the walls, the principals and teachers are giving me handshakes and saying, "Wow, you're a pretty bright kid."

This was the jumping off point for me. I met some staff at the AEC. I began to get involved with the community. I got involved with the youth mentorship, doing the Debwewin, helping with the camp on the Island. The Pilot Project got me involved and pushed me, it transformed a rez kid into an active leader.

Then came my second year and I was introduced to the Native Learning Centre, the Riverdale Course, and the Drama Co-op. In these programs I spent a lot of time on social interaction and learning the teachings. I was told, "I came out of my shell" whatever that means, I became a people person. "I'm just myself right now" and it is the Pilot Project that enabled me to believe I am capable of big things.

I've got to take back all these things I got here now, and take that to the reserve so that the students there can have the option. They deserve much more than what they are working with now. The government needs to help us out, we are not getting that much attention. In my Riverdale course I learned that I could speak out in class, I learned that Aboriginality was something special that everybody needs and everybody needs to find that out for them selves.

<sup>1</sup> An Aboriginal Creative Writing Consultant Michael Dion wrote these profiles. The stories are based on transcripts of the students' interviews as well as students' own written and creative work. Students approved the profiles prior to their inclusion in the report.

### **BRIANNA'S POINT OF VIEW**

I wanted school, but school did not want me.  
Drop out, drop in, being out was easier.  
Higher education, I did not think was an option for me  
I did not come from a wealthy family.  
The story is oh so familiar.  
I felt, they let me fall through the cracks.  
But now they have extended their hand  
A gateway is here, for me to pass through.  
My thoughts are always welcome,  
Finally, the world can get "my point of view."

Growing up I imagined myself having a good job and being able to take care of myself and having a future that I wanted to live. As I got older, it kind of faded, and I stopped dreaming, my dreams were unreasonable because of what was going on in my life. The road I was going down was not good, school didn't fit me, and then I didn't fit school. No matter what, I always tried going back, even tried the alternative schools. I always wanted to finish, I'd go for a month or maybe two, and then I would leave again. I didn't really have any hope that school would ever have a program that would fit me.

When I first heard about the AEC, I was enrolled in an Alternative School and still it was not working. Freya the counselor from the AEC was the one who found me. She suggested I check out the AEC and I came, and here I found the hope of finishing school. Freya believed in me and took the time to show me all the programs and resources, she took the time and that inspired me. Over the past two years I've noticed that I'm happier and more hopeful.

Growing up I knew that I was native, but I didn't know that there were resources out there for me. When I first came to help in the office I knew almost nothing about my culture and it really opened doors for me, it has taught me so many things about my background, and allowed me to explore that side of myself. The projects going on at the Centre interest me, get me involved in the community and now I want to give back to Aboriginal Education, and the Aboriginal community in the city.

The Center keeps me doing positive things and keeps me motivated to stay in school. Working with people here has kind of given me insight into what can go on within the TDSB. I'm working on a project locating and mapping all the Aboriginal agencies and organizations in Toronto. It will be a resource for teachers, there will be an historical aspect to it because archaeological sites will be included.

The Centre has given me the opportunity to work different sorts of jobs, with different people in various organizations. I can see what I might want to do with my life. It taught me a lot of interpersonal skills, communication skills, self-motivation, and a good work ethic too. For a long time I felt like I was stuck in a rut. Now I feel like I'm doing something worthwhile, something productive. It makes me feel as if I'm moving forward and I am.



**AND ERIN SAID: "LET ME SHOW YOU A PICTURE AND TELL YOU A STORY"**

I am part Mohawk. I decided to come forth because I lost my culture, because my grandpa was adopted. So I didn't really inherit the Aboriginal culture from my family. I just really wanted to get to know my culture better and get submerged. One day teachers from the AEC came to my school and there was a presentation about Native history and they were talking about the medicine wheel. I walked up afterwards and said, "listen, I'm part Mohawk and I know nothing about that." And they said to me "you know what, we're going to help you." And thus began 'the painting of a new self portrait.' My new vision on life includes the complexity of duality, walking between the Native and non-Native ways of life. I was introduced to Debwewin, and then Ms. Evans got me a summer job with some people called POR AMOR and it is there that I started painting murals. Next came Native Child where I met Kevin a youth mentor who teaches me so many things.

Erin's interest and curiosity about her often-stymied need to connect to her fractured Aboriginal roots peaked following a controversy at her school over the school's logo. The logo, a "Red Indian Head adorned with a feathered headband," was considered by some to be racist. Initially Erin liked the logo but the more she learned the more she became convinced the logo was indeed racist and had to change. The UAEPP guided Erin and provided courses, workshops, and a myriad of experiences that enabled her freedom of choice in terms of discovering her heritage, something that she had not been encouraged to do before. In one of her Riverdale Course assignments Erin was able to share some pictures, "Because I always find that everyone loves old pictures." In her story telling with the pictures as a backdrop, Erin was able to describe to her class the discoveries she was making about her biological family and her adopted family and she was finally able to create a family tree that was connected at it's roots by familiarity and necessity.

Erin's poetry helps explain her growth, and who she is, "so far."

I am Erin Elizabeth Hayward Hill,  
I am Peaceful Watching Sacred Water Woman  
I am passionate and loving, independent and stubborn (in a good way)  
I am a Haudenosaunee woman born and raised in Scarborough,  
Traditionally from Six Nations Ontario  
I am turtle clan.  
I stand for preserving the earth for six future generations  
Just in the same way my ancestors did before me.  
I stand for researching ancestral roots  
in order to discover who you are as a person.

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## 2.2 Understanding Aboriginal Student Success as Student Well-Being

*Yeah. It's way more critical thinking. Like I was using my brain a lot more for this class. Because it's something that we all want to know. Because like the projects were, like about us. Most of them were, okay, how does this make you feel, or what does this have to do with you? And most people if they're just told, "Oh, why does Romeo and Juliet kiss in the end?" or something like stupid, that has nothing to do with the rest of our lives, no one really cares, and they'll just answer the question and move on with their life. But actually thinking about how it affects you, it actually just makes you interested and the fact that you're thinking so much doesn't even feel like you're thinking because it's just common sense that you're trying to figure out who you are. (RD Student.2, CD, pp 5-6)*

In this report, we emphasize Aboriginal Student Well-Being as the preferred goal of education for Aboriginal students, their families, communities, and nations. The concept of Aboriginal Student Well-Being as the aim of education that emerges from our data differs in significant ways from "student success" defined by the Ministry of Education in Ontario. For key informants in this research, narrow markers of student success such as improving literacy and numeracy skills and credit accumulation are not the exclusive goal of education.<sup>2</sup> Complicating a narrow definition of learning premised on the acquisition of and capacity to replicate knowledge and the mastery of skills, the notion of student well-being advanced here relies instead on a complex understanding of what it means to learn. Additionally and significantly, this concept recognizes that "school learning" is only one component of the whole of the person. For Aboriginal students, an emphasis on academics in the absence of attention to the whole of the person is alienating and contributes in substantive ways to disengagement and dissatisfaction with schooling. Grounded in the perspectives and experiences of project informants, we argue for a focus on Aboriginal Student Well-Being for four significant reasons:

- Well-being upholds Aboriginal cultural values and culturally relevant educational philosophies and teaching practices;
- Well-being recognizes how histories of colonization are in large part responsible for the achievement gap between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal students living the colonial legacy;
- Well-being acknowledges the adverse effects of colonialism on Aboriginal student identities, engagement, learning, and belonging, and responds to these impacts in appropriate, respectful, and non-pathologizing ways; and
- Well-being reconceptualizes what it means to learn by recognizing that student success should not be limited to knowledge acquisition or skills mastery but must incorporate Aboriginal principles of education that value self understanding and self knowledge in relationship with others and the larger world.

Because it advances Aboriginal teaching philosophies and practices and addresses colonial histories and legacies, well-being thus decolonizes and indigenizes education. Listening to the stories Aboriginal students told about their school experiences and to their experiences with Pilot Project activities, it is clear that coming to know their Aboriginality made success possible by creating well-being for those participating in this project. They describe coming to know their Aboriginality in the following ways: knowing themselves as Aboriginal beings in relationship with community, family, and nation; having access to knowledge of Aboriginal languages, stories, and traditional teachings; learning about the history of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships; and acquiring the knowledge and skills that will allow them to contribute to the wellness of their families, communities, and nations.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Ontario Ministry of Education website page titled "Student Success/Learning to 18" student success is measured primarily by student graduation rate (,2010).

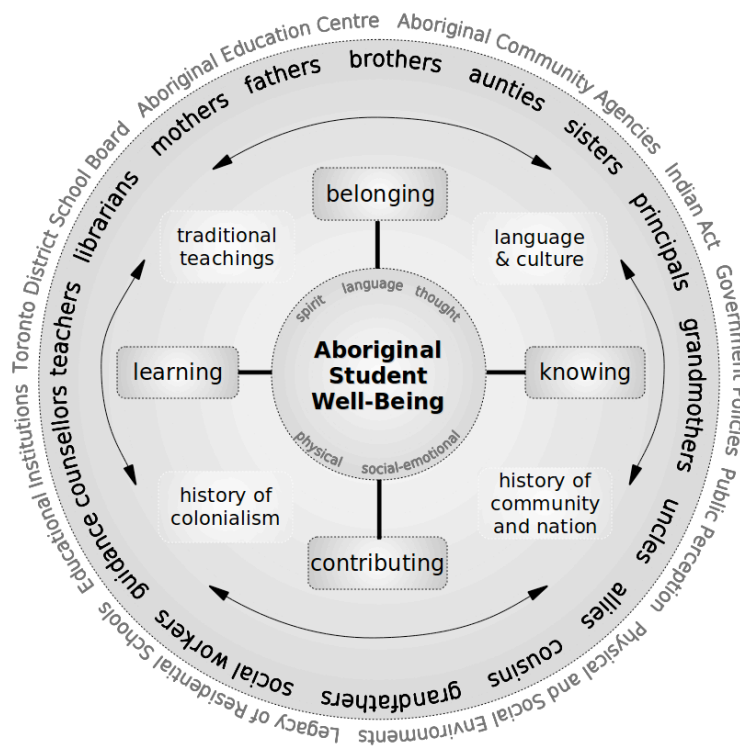
A member of the Aboriginal community expressed her understanding of education informed by her indigenous philosophy,

*“Learning as a way of life.” And as we walk our life’s journey inherent in that is that you pick up other teachings and responsibilities. So by the time that you come to the adult part of your life, the translation then is ‘In the pursuit of knowledge there in you will find life’.(CM.1, p. 2)*

She went on to explain that while education has and can be used as a tool to cause harm it is also an important tool for individual and community self-determination. She sees an indigenous approach to education as a way of transforming the institutions that control Aboriginal people. Premised on indigenous philosophies education is a responsibility we hold together as a community. (CM.1, p. 4)

Drawing these words and the words of other participants we conceptualize Aboriginal Education with a focus on Aboriginal Student Well-Being.

### ABORIGINAL STUDENT WELL-BEING



Premised on Aboriginal ways of knowing and developed from the data collected on the Pilot Project in the TDSB, we conceptualize an approach to Aboriginal Education that puts Aboriginal Student Well-Being in the centre. Listening to parents, teachers, Pilot Project staff, and the students themselves we have come to understand that students learn within a community that includes extended family and friends, as well as classroom teachers, classmates, librarians, principals, guidance counselors, and other interested and involved adults. That community exists within a broader social-political and economic context. The relationship between the circles is dynamic. Individual students impact and are impacted

by their circle of teachers and learners, and both the students and their circle of teachers and learners impact and are impacted by what happens in the world around them.

When creating learning environments and constructing learning experiences for students, Pilot Project staff members recognize that as much as students want and need to belong they also learn from having opportunities to contribute. And, as much as students desire to learn, they also want to participate in activities that allow them to share and build on what they know. Students come to school with knowledge premised on their lived experiences, the meanings they make from the lessons that schools provide depend on how this knowledge is acknowledged and respected. Aboriginal students and Aboriginal educators have told us repeatedly that Aboriginal students want access to lessons that include traditional teachings, language instruction, examination of the history of colonialism, and historical and contemporary Aboriginal culture. Students want opportunities to learn from Aboriginal people’s experiences and perspectives. They want more Aboriginal content in their curriculum and they want to learn with and from teachers who have knowledge of Aboriginal approaches to pedagogy. They can and do develop their language and literacy skills and an understanding of mathematics and numeracy skills when those lessons are grounded in Aboriginal content.

### 2.3 Conditions That Contribute to Aboriginal Student Well-Being: Learning from the UAEPP

Teachers, parents, school administrators, and the students themselves reported on the ways in which support from Pilot Project staff made a difference in students’ well-being and experience of success at school. UAEPP staff members delivered support in various ways including individualized teaching and peer tutoring sessions; small group sessions (for example in the form of Girl’s Groups); meetings with parents; and organized events including assemblies, drama presentations, workshops, and symposiums (Table 2.1).

#### PILOT PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS IN SERVICE OF STUDENT SUPPORT

EVENTS	2008-2009	2009-2010
<b>Individual Student Instruction</b>	Began during the first year	At least tripled during the second year.
<b>Tutor / Mentoring</b>	Introduced during the first year	Further developed with hiring of a designated staff person.
<b>Parent Advocacy</b>	Began during the first year	At least tripled during the second year.
<b>Counseling</b>	Began during the first year with individual and small group sessions	Further developed and came to include Tree of Life, Guiding Circles, and transition to Secondary and post-secondary school
<b>Girls Groups</b>	Groups at 2 Schools	Groups at five Schools
<b>Student Employment and Volunteer Opportunities</b>	Supported students in locating work and volunteer experiences	Continued support during the second year of the pilot project
<b>Assemblies</b>	Aboriginal Education Month (November)	Aboriginal Education Month (November)
<b>Workshops/Symposium</b>	Louis Riel Day Symposium	Louis Riel Workshop (November) Humber College Symposium (June) A regional symposium organized and presented in collaboration with area School Boards.
<b>Native Earth Performance</b>	4 Performances of <i>Takin Pride</i> <i>Crystal Lake SS + 1 Community</i>	Aboriginal Education Month Encore Performance of <i>Takin Pride</i>

<b>Camp Experiences</b>	Toronto Island 60 Students	Humber College 21 Students Tim Horton's Camp 35 Students
<b>Youth Group</b>	Introduced in the first year	Continued with increased participation during the second year
<b>Drama Co-op</b>		January – June, 26 Students (10 Aboriginal)
<b>Riverdale Course</b>		September – December, 8 Students

Due to the pervasiveness of negative imagery and associated attitudes and beliefs about Aboriginal people within the broader society (including in TDSB schools) and the challenge of limited access to the Indigenous community in the urban context, many students are reluctant to identify as Aboriginal. Encountering many misconceptions and few positive messages outside their family networks, numerous participants have told us that some Aboriginal students would rather remain within the “Aboriginal closet.” In the current socio-cultural environment, student secrecy is entirely understandable. At the same time, concealment creates a significant barrier to student well-being. In recognition of and in response to this challenge, Pilot Project staff organized a variety of activities to establish contact and strengthen ties with Aboriginal students and families. The Pilot Project staff was highly successful in working within schools, planning and holding events, and offering programs that allowed students to comfortably self-identify in positive and supportive environments. During the second year of the Pilot Project, staff developed an Aboriginal Student Data Base that includes the names of 207 students who in some capacity participated in Pilot Project activities. This database contributes to the important task identifying Aboriginal students and attending to their well-being in TDSB schools.

In this section we describe student, parent, teacher, principal, and Pilot Project staff reflections on the successes of the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project over the past two years. These represent the range of perspectives voiced by those surveyed and interviewed.

### **STORIES FROM STUDENTS**

When asked about their school experiences and the impact of the Pilot Project, students shared important stories of learning and belonging. We interviewed and surveyed learners who participated in a variety of ways including those who

- Worked with the Aboriginal Student Success Teachers;
- Participated in group work with the Community Liaison Workers;
- Attended assemblies, workshops, symposiums; and
- Participated in the Riverdale Course and or the Drama Co-op.

Students consistently reported on the significance of opportunities to learn from:

- Elders and other Aboriginal instructors;
- Aboriginal content, including traditional teachings; and
- In community with other Aboriginal students.

As the following students tell it, these experiences transformed their understanding of themselves as learners, changed their attitudes toward school, and positively impacted on their feelings, opinions, and beliefs about their Aboriginal identity.

*Before taking any Aboriginal classes or being involved with [Pilot Project Staff] I didn't even find out from my family I was native, but when I found out the classes really opened my eyes to the culture. (Student Surveys)*

*Working with [Pilot Project Staff] made me appreciate my background and I shouldn't hide it from anyone. (Student Surveys)*

*I feel proud, I want to learn more, whether it be languages, ceremonies, or teachings. I feel connected to it more than ever before. (Student Surveys)*

In our first Talking Circle with them, students began by describing their previous school experiences and the ways in which the AEC staff contributed to transforming their experiences.

*I'll talk about my school experiences. I had a rough time in school. I had a hard time attending, and, meeting up with [Pilot Project Staff] and working with her has really got me into the mindset of going back to school and moving on in my life. So I had a rough past, but things are getting better, for sure. (Student & Youth, TC.1, p. 2)*

Another young woman stated,

*So I was in and out of school all the time. I either dropped out, got expelled or got suspended or just never wanted to go. And [Pilot Project Staff] helped me stay in school. (Student & Youth TC.1, p. 3)*

In keeping with the overarching goal of Aboriginal student well-being, this support exceeded the provision of tutoring or academic resources, and focused on emotional support as well as basic survival: finding housing, groceries, and employment, providing direction with how to negotiate aspects of social assistance.

*Um, I probably would have dropped out of school, from Gray Stone, and I probably wouldn't have, like, looked at GED or anything if it wasn't for [PP Staff support]. And working once a week. Like, that really helps a lot because being on welfare sucks. And I don't know, she helps. Summer jobs and all that stuff. (Student & Youth TC.1, p. 10)*

During the TDSB's Aboriginal Awareness Month, the Pilot Project staff organized an assembly for Aboriginal students. For one student in particular, this event was highly significant and pivotal in changing his relationship to school. Lucas had recently arrived in the city from a reserve community in northern Ontario. One of the teachers at his school took him to the assembly and from that point onwards Lucas became involved in Pilot Project activities and events. He explained that when he first arrived,

*It was kinda like a new city, like I didn't ... like it was a new city, I felt isolated, I didn't know anybody." And he went on to say, "Yeah I was skipping earlier, like I was doing good at first then slowing down, skipping, and then like the assembly went on, and then I felt comfortable in school again. (Student & Youth Interview .1, p. 8)*

When asked about what he learned from being involved with the Pilot Project activities, a student responded,

*It makes me want to, it makes me want to stay connected with the Youth Leadership Group. It makes me wanna like form other groups like this for other kids to feel what I am feeling, to be, to feel like you are in a group that helps other people. [Participation in the Youth Group] makes you feel good about yourself and its [the younger] kids. I don't know, it makes me proud of them once they learn something, you feel like you accomplished something. (Student & Youth Interview .1, p. 13)*

Providing Aboriginal students with opportunities to make a meaningful contribution to their school community is significant. Having had previous experiences of alienation from institutions of formal schooling, opportunities to make concrete contributions provide affirmation and create respect, letting students know that they do indeed belong—they can have a place in school and school can have a place in their lives.

Organizing events that brought Aboriginal youth together from across the city allowed participating students opportunities to accomplish the following: collaborate on projects; develop skills in the process of accomplishing work that had value; use and grow their capacities in ways that were appreciated and recognized; and cultivate meaningful friendships and contribute to building a vibrant, visible urban Aboriginal student community.

### STORIES FROM PARENTS

Parents were united in their praise for the work being done by the Pilot Project staff. Virtually all felt that it was “*about time*” and confirmed that they wanted more Aboriginal Education integrated at the school level. Specifically, parents stated that working with the Pilot Project staff

- Had a positive impact on their child/children’s school experience;
- Had a positive impact on their own and their child’s attitude toward school;
- Provided them with information on how to support and advocate on behalf of their children;
- Improved communication between themselves and their child’s school; and
- On more than one occasion advocated on their children’s behalf by getting Aboriginal students who had been sent home from school back to school.

When asked about their child’s response to their work with Pilot Project staff, many parents spoke about the ways in which learning about their Aboriginal identity at school had a positive impact on their children’s attitude toward school. As two parents describe it:

*Definitely. This year's a better year for him. This year's been a really positive year, and I think a lot of it is that he does have Ms Evans coming in. (Parent.2, p. 7)*

*I know that when she comes home she's excited about it. She's looking forward to going the next time and doing the activities, so I know that she's happy about it. Well, I think because of this program she's had more of an acceptance of herself and an acknowledgement of where she comes from and the kind of people that she belongs to. And, culturally, she's more defined now. You know what I mean? So she feels more defined. She knows her background more. And I think that if it was offered to her at a younger grade or in the previous school at this point she wouldn't still be beginning to learn about her culture. She would already know a lot of it. (Parent.1, p. 4)*

Although a limited number of parents (6) participated in individual interviews, those who did so appreciated what the Pilot Project provided in terms of support and advocacy for their children, and information and direction for them as parents.

### STORIES FROM UAEPP STAFF

In her reflection on York Career Day, an event co-organized with the Native Women's Resource Centre intended to introduce Aboriginal high school students to Aboriginal people and programs at York University, one staff member noted the importance of mentorship. She describes the value and significance of the experience:

*...it really touches the students because when people talk about—especially people who are in sort of those positions of authority, talk about their own obstacles that they've overcome to get where they are, I think it could be really—it can mean a lot. And I remember one student said, "I never even thought about going to university before this moment. Like I never even contemplated that it would be possible for me to go to university." And then through that—just that day, the students started to see it as a possibility. (UAEPP Staff.3, p. 7)*

The AEC staff understands that the work they do requires that they build meaningful relationships of trust with students, and this often precedes any attention to academic skills. Recognizing this has been central to accomplishing the work of assisting students with academic success. As one staff member explained,

*So we go in and I find out if they want the support and it is mostly gaining trust, before you can do—student support it is a lot of [other staff]'s work, but I have to do that as well. Because if I walk in with books and say: "hey, we are doing math today" they are just going to look at me and they are not going to do anything. It's the same as another teacher coming in. So it is a lot of talking, we bring in snacks, we will bring in, depending on their age, coloring, stickers—and you know just kinda get to know each other. And then the trust comes the confidence comes and then we can start to work on the academics. (UAEPP Staff.2 I1, p. 10)*

Additionally, Pilot Project staff members have experienced success in supporting students to find their own strengths, and in helping them to create and sustain supportive peer networks.

*...seeing the change in the students that they're a lot more confident. And just doing a bunch of stuff. And now the teachers are aware that, they have these students in their class. And they've been asked to sing in community events that we've had. They've learned a strong woman's song that they're really proud of. They've done these t-shirts that they worked on for a few months reflecting on their gifts, what they have to offer to the community. They were able to share with one another what they think of each other, and the gifts that they don't see in themselves, but other people see in them. (UAEPP TC4, Staff.6, p. 3)*

Working with the students affirmed the Pilot Project staff's understanding that access to traditional teachings and culture was critical to students.

*The culture is a big thing to help them make sense of the world. (UAEPP Staff.8, p. 8)*



*I find that at that age, they're just very hungry to learn about their culture and they get very excited. You can see them when they're—when they hear the teachings. They, they get excited about it. (UAEPP TC2, Staff.8, p. 23)*

### STORIES FROM TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

Among our informants, classroom teachers were especially attentive to the ways in which individual and small group work between their students and the Pilot Project staff impacted how students felt about themselves as individuals and as members of the classroom and school community. Teachers described students as being happier and more “at home” in school as a result of involvement in Pilot Project activities. This indicates that those student participants were seeing school as a place for them, a place where they not only could be Aboriginal but where they could learn about and feel comfortable in their Aboriginality.

In casual conversations, in formal interviews, and in Talking Circles, teachers described the impact of participation in Pilot Project events.

*That girl is just a whole lot more alive! Did you know she did school announcements for a whole week during Aboriginal Education Month? She shared the 7 Grandfather teachings with the entire school. (CL Teacher.3, Personal Communication with PI, Winter 2010).*

*I think in terms of student self-confidence, it's really helped, because we've had children who were really reluctant to self-identify, or if they did self-identify, to take pride in their culture. And in this whole school perspective and the fact that we highlighted the Mural at our Parent Resource Open House has helped build their self-esteem and just pride in their own backgrounds. (Lead Teacher.1, I1, p. 3)*

School principals were also aware of the positive impact the project was having on the students.

*[A]ny student that Ms. Summers has come in contact with has done well as a result of her presence, has done better than they would have done had she not been involved. You can say that she's increased achievement of Aboriginal students by 100% with respect to every student that she's dealt with, putting in context that she is dealing with the marginalized within the marginalized. (Principal.1, p. 7)*

*[Ms. Summers] has increased student achievement phenomenally. The fact that she can get them into the classrooms and engaged in school is great, let alone going down to universities and taking courses. She is passionate and works tirelessly for each individual student. I think that without her, every student would not be doing as well as they did with her. (Principal.1, p. 7)*

*I spoke with a parent whose son had an opportunity to meet with Ms. Evans' group and she was very pleased that her son was learning about his culture. It had a positive impact on her son's experience and attitude toward schooling. (Principal.2, p. 1)*

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## 2.4 Markers/Indicators of Aboriginal Student Well-Being

*It's a difficult question, and it's an unfair question, because when you attack student achievement for a marginalized group, you can't expect change quickly. So, within the course of a year, you can't expect a Pilot Project to come in and see a significant increase in Aboriginal student achievement within a year. That's unrealistic to ask for. What you need to do is to establish the foundation upon which you can build. Ms. Summers has taken the time this year to really try and do that. (Principal.1, p. 6)*

While improved Aboriginal student achievement on standardized tests and increased credit accumulation are accepted markers of student success, participants in the Pilot Project were acutely aware that there are significant alternative indicators of learning and well-being. Important alternative indicators of student well-being included the following:

- Participation in events organized by the Pilot Project staff;
- Consistent school attendance and participation in school events;
- A positive sense of self, and specifically a positive sense of themselves as Aboriginal and as learners; and
- Participation in and contribution to school and community events.

During the two years of the project UAEPP staff witnessed an increasing number of students self-identifying and participating in AEC sponsored events. A significant indicator of success was when AEC staff and the research team heard stories about secondary school students who took what they had learned from AEC activities and in different ways passed on those teachings to students at their home schools. We heard stories about some students who organized assemblies for their school; others who took responsibility for sharing their knowledge through school wide announcements; and those who worked at educating their history teachers by speaking up and speaking out in class.

Well-being was also indicated by students' ability to imagine and envision their future success.

*She gave me—she made me feel more positive. Like, I actually saw my future. Like, I started looking forward to my future, I guess. I don't know what else to say. (Student & Youth, TC1, p. 9)*

*I want to have a continuation of the program, I am learning on a more personal level of what I am capable of, the group work involved, the sharing of ideas and how that adds to creating. (Drama Co-op, Discussion, Student.8)*

The Girl's Group provided opportunities for girls who previously were almost always silent during class to become more comfortable and confident about participating actively in discussions at school. Pilot Project staff heard reports from classroom teachers about the girls' increased participation in their regular classrooms, in particular how the project helped them "to break out of their shell and start speaking up." (UAEPP TC4, Staff.6 p. 3)

Students themselves were able to identify when they felt successful,

*My favourite assignment was definitely the last one because I just like connecting everything that I learned, and like taking the artefacts and just giving them a title of an identity that I learned from the course. And then, I don't know, I just felt really smart putting everything together. (RD Student.2, p. 11)*

A member of the Aboriginal community reminded us that adults involved in the education system sometimes miss indicators of Aboriginal Student Well-Being. Sometimes the expectation of failure gets in the way of seeing success.

*The only way our young people are going to be successful is if they know that, from this person to this person to this person, there's some trust there. That the people around them are giving them messages that, you know, they are strong, capable young people able to make the best decisions for themselves. That might include post-secondary, and that might include trade. What ever their choices they have options open to them. (CM.1, p. 7)*

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## 2.5 Barriers to Aboriginal Student Well-Being

Aboriginal students, parents, community members, and members of the Pilot Project staff have an acute understanding of the barriers that Aboriginal students confront when working for well-being and school success. According to informants, these include the following:

- A. The colonial legacy and its implications for students, families, and communities;
- B. A lack of knowledge, understanding, and support on the part of the school staff;
- C. School and Board policies that conflict with Aboriginal students' needs;
- D. Curriculum expectations that create the impression that there is little room for the integration of Aboriginal content; and
- E. Racism.

### THE COLONIAL LEGACY: IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Aboriginal students attend schools in spite of a long history of negative relationships between Aboriginal people and institutions of formal schooling. This negative history has its roots in the residential school system, which was imposed on Aboriginal peoples from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards by the Canadian government as part of its policy of forced assimilation. Students and their parents do not necessarily trust an institution—school—that for generations was responsible for causing harm. The consequent lack of trust and lack of familiarity with the system frequently contributes to conflicted relationships between home and school. Due to conflicted relations rooted in our colonial history, Aboriginal parents do not necessarily have knowledge of the school system that would allow them to advocate successfully on behalf of their children. In addition, the government-created reserve system still contributes to disruption and relocation of Aboriginal people as families move between reserve community and urban centers, often with the hope of improving living conditions and life opportunities for themselves and their children. This creates challenges for children in a school system that is designed to serve students whose families are less mobile or do not have to contend with on-going effects of colonization on their lives.

### LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

*And I saw it over and over again the people around it that just disregard people's circumstances, or what people were up against in terms of racism, poverty, forced assimilation. ... And so problems being located within people. (UAEPP TC1 Staff.1, p. 4)*

Aboriginal students and their families confront a system that has little understanding of the history of Aboriginal – non-Aboriginal relationships in this country and consequently have little understanding of

the needs, hopes, fears, issues, and challenges that Aboriginal students bring to, and encounter in, school. The vast majority of school staff are neither well prepared to understand or positively respond to the issues and challenges confronting Aboriginal families.

Students' shared stories of their negative school experiences and the significance of those experiences to their sense of identity, belonging, and engagement, and thus to their well-being and success. In our dialogue with students it became clear just how important their school experiences are to their understanding of themselves as students and as learners. When talking about their negative school experiences students looked down, fidgeted, spoke softly, lost their train of thought, and were reluctant to include details. In stark contrast when talking about their experiences with the Pilot Project and with Pilot Project staff, students sat up, looked directly at their audience, spoke clearly, provided detailed descriptions, and spoke with excitement and animated descriptions. (ON, SY TC1, p. 2) School systems and teachers and principals as key actors within the system have profound power to impact students' understanding of themselves. The lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of TDSB teachers and support staff contributes to the negative school experiences of Aboriginal children.

### **POLICIES THAT CONFLICT WITH NEEDS**

In their work with students and schools, Pilot Project staff encountered difficult situations in which TDSB policies and practices conflicted with student needs and hindered their ability to provide student support. For example, UAEPP staff worked with Aboriginal adolescents who are required to provide care for younger siblings prior to getting themselves to school. Under these circumstances the students often arrive late to school. Rather than continually penalizing students for being late, Pilot Project staff asked that students either be excused from coming late to class or if possible to be given a spare first period. Staff reported that some secondary school principals were respectful of students' home situations and were able to accommodate students and their family's needs. Other principals applied rules with an absence of flexibility stating "I will not have students determining their own schedules." (UAEPP Staff.4, l1, p. 4)

Pilot Project staff members were often frustrated by the lack of flexibility that was needed to support Aboriginal students return to school. School policies that require consistent and on-time attendance sometimes created a barrier as students were attempting to make the transition back to school.

*Well, it's even the school policies on certain things, right. [I] had a student, who wasn't attending, I got him to attend, but he was consistently late, but he was there. They suspended him for his amount of lates. You know, it's one step forward and throw us back twenty and then it's frustrating to the kid because, you know, it's like, 'I'm doing everything I can and it's still not good enough. I can't be bothered with this'. (UAEPP TC3, Staff.8, , p. 8)*

Policies with regard to testing are also experienced as a barrier by Aboriginal students. Aboriginal teachers and students are aware that the OME is especially concerned with test results, and while the ministry has faith in the tests and policies require testing for all students, the experience of constant testing can be negative and alienating.

*Because the Ministry is looking so much at stats and well, "you did this on your EQAO, you're at level one, two, three or four, and you need remediation." And what's being lost in that is the human being. (UAEPP Staff.4, p. 27)*

The obsession with testing impacts classroom teachers and principals who, under pressure for good test results, focus exclusively on drilling students. A school principal explained her solution for addressing the Aboriginal student achievement gap,

*She said her opinion was to hammer them with academics—you know, hammer them, hammer them, hammer them—and, eventually, they will get it. (UAEPP Staff.2, TC2, p. 18)*

Policies and practices that impact the number of secondary schools that offer Native Studies means that very few students have access to even a single course that addresses Aboriginal subject material. And as Pilot Project staff explained,

*A large part of the needs for some of the students that I [see], they do—they feel no attachment to the school. They don't—it's not relevant to them. They don't see themselves in the school. They don't see themselves accurately represented. They don't feel welcome. They're the invisible kids. (UAEPP Staff.8, TC3, p. 7)*

### **CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS AND ABORIGINAL CONTENT**

When asked to talk about what they liked least about school students told us about negative experiences with teachers and the lack of Aboriginal representation in the curriculum. By the time they reach high school many Aboriginal students are tired of, and legitimately angered by, the lack of representation or misrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples, histories, and cultures. Students continue to tell stories of having to sit in class and listen to their teachers' present Aboriginal people as a Romantic Mythical people of the past.

*I don't know some of them would care but most of them probably wouldn't. They're like, "Oh, they're dead." They actually thought we were extinct. 'Cause you don't barely see none here. Unless you're like a little community like here or at the corner of Spadina then there's Natives but if you go anywhere else we don't exist. Unless you're in Thunder Bay, it's like Native and White. Choose your way. (Student & Youth SA.1, p. 4)*

When students feel like there is no place for them in schools, they stop attending.

### **RACISM**

When asked about their school experiences many Aboriginal students describe encounters with racism and draw connections between racism and school leaving.

*One of the VPs, he said "You're not going to make it here so just drop out." So I dropped out and then I told my mom that so we went to school and he was like, "No I didn't say that." (Student & Youth SA.1, p. 2)*

This student did leave his local school but similar to other Aboriginal youth he met up with Pilot Project staff and found his way to the AEC. Through their involvement in various Pilot Project activities and events these students were working on both learning their history and culture and earning their high school diplomas.

*It is a connection to cultural pride that helps some of us. We like who we are and where we come from. Native Pride! Some of us used to be embarrassed to be Native. We think there is a connection between self-esteem and racism. Some of us were teased in elementary school—feeling alienated and not fitting in was hard to grow into a child. (YAWL Document, p. 4)*

Sometimes the racism is overt, other times it is subtle often it contributes to students feeling alienated, marginalized, and as if they do not want to be in school. However when students have access to knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal people's history, when students feel supported by counselors, mentors, and Aboriginal teachers, when students are not the only Aboriginal students in the classroom they can support each other and they can and do speak back to expressions of racism.

As one of the Aboriginal youth so accurately stated "you think that racism is going down but it's not – it is everywhere going up." As informed progressive educators it is difficult for many of us to accept the depth and prevalence of racism that permeates the system. This and the following chapters include stories of racism and the ways in which policies and practices contribute to the discrimination and oppression of Aboriginal people. The following list is included here as a way of drawing attention to the racism experienced by Aboriginal students, teachers, parents and community members in TDSB schools.

#### **Teachers apply their limited knowledge in inappropriate ways.**

- A principal told a student that because he was misbehaving in school "*he's bringing shame to his people with his behaviour.*" (Parent.6 IB, p. 7)
- A non-Aboriginal teacher asked a group of Aboriginal youth mentors "*why are those Aboriginal kids fighting over the markers, I thought sharing was a part of your culture.*" (Personal Communication PI and CM3, Spring 2009)
- An Aboriginal student was told by a teacher in his high school "*H1N1 is spreading in Aboriginal communities because they can't put hand sanitizers in the schools because the kids will just take it for sniffing.*" (Riverdale Class Discussion, Jan 2010)

These comments reflect the speakers' ignorance, and are an attempt to regulate Aboriginal students behaviors. It is as if by virtue of their being Aboriginal students must behave according to a standard imposed by non-Aboriginal person's stereotypical knowledge of Aboriginal people.

#### **TDSB teachers made hurtful comments to Aboriginal staff about Aboriginal students, Aboriginal people, and about Aboriginal teachers.**

- A Pilot Project staff person went to a classroom to see about withdrawing a student for individualized attention and was told "*of course you can take him just don't bring him back,*" (UAEPP Staff.2, IB, p. 2)
- A staff member was told "*you don't look like an Indian.*" (UAEPP Staff.4, I1, p. 1)
- In response to an Aboriginal student experiencing difficulties at school a classroom teacher stated "*apparently school isn't important to these people.*" (UAEPP Staff.4, I2, p. 2)

#### **PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON BARRIERS**

Each of the parents interviewed drew connections between the broader social-political context in Canada and the lack of attention to Aboriginal students and Aboriginal Education within their children's schools. Aboriginal parents understand that the lack of knowledge is continually reproduced. They did not have access to Aboriginal content when they were in school and now they see their children having

similar experiences. Parents recognize that teachers know very little about Aboriginal people, language, culture, and history and teachers cannot teach what they do not know. They draw connections between the lack of attention to Aboriginal Education, a lack of concern for Aboriginal people and their children's experiences of alienation and marginalization from school. (Parent Interviews 1-6)

The lack of knowledge contributes to the lack of respectful relationships between parents and school staff.

*You know they focus on Black History Month in February and everything, and I'd like to see them—I mean, I wish we had more, other than one day. You know National Aboriginal Day. (Parent.4, p. 8)*

One parent strongly believed that teachers dismiss Aboriginal students on the basis of a deficit model of thinking.

*[Teachers assume] it is just another poor poverty stricken kid from a [bad] family who's never going to amount to anything. And I truly believe that that's what they think. I think there's a lot of stereotype and prejudice that goes on, whether it's at the conscious level or the unconscious level. (Parent.3, p. 21)*

Parents felt the school staff were not hearing their concerns, they reported introducing the Pilot Project staff to Aboriginal students in the school because the school staff were not making the referrals, they expressed frustration at the lack of communication between the school and home.

*I think that it is really extremely important that teachers—or principals, rather—are aware that there is an AEC, and that there is assistance for Aboriginal students and families, because we probably could have, you know, had some assistance before the end of last year [June2009]. (Parent.2, p. 9)*

And as one parent reported with regard to the school staff:

*And [staff from the Pilot Project] came into that meeting. And I have to tell you, the teachers and the principals talk a whole lot nicer to you when you have someone from the board there with you, like night and day. (Parent.3, p. 9)*

Parents were especially appreciative of the support provided by the Pilot Project. Based on parents' experiences school staff did not have the knowledge, understanding, or in many cases the willingness to address their children's Aboriginality and the challenges their children were experiencing with school.

*It gets really—yeah, if it weren't for—honestly, I would have given up. I was just beside myself on how to deal with this school and everything. And if it weren't for me being able to e-mail my contact over there at the AEC telling me what the rules are and what my rights are and this and that, I don't know what I would have done ... So I'm still not sure sort of what happens after all this is done, but really, the AEC has really helped me in just sort of fighting for my kid and making sure he doesn't get lost in the shuffle .... (Parent.3, p. 4)*

Although parents wanted more support from Pilot Project staff members they were united in understanding that the staff were overwhelmed with the numbers of Aboriginal students who required

assistance. Parents observed there was simply not enough staff to ensure ongoing and consistent contact in many of the schools. They did express distress at not having enough time with the Pilot Project staff and sited that as a barrier to good home school relationships. Their children were developing positive relationships with the staff and parents were counting on the staff's support.

In spite of negative associations with school, children and youth need schools – schools are the place where their peer group is, where they have access to learning and belonging and recognition. Students need and want what schools have the potential to offer. When schools fail children and youth learning and belonging can be difficult and sometimes impossible to recuperate. The UAEPP staff and the *Talking Stick* researchers witnessed the difference it can make when a system takes seriously its responsibilities to Aboriginal students and youth.



# 3

## Urban Aboriginal Education: Teacher Roles and Responsibilities

**Written By: Krista Johnston**

*It was a humbling experience: I realized I was still wrong; the language I was using was not appropriate. (ABP Teacher.7, IA, p. 1)*

### 3.1 Defining Teacher's Roles and Responsibilities

Teachers play a central role in developing and delivering Aboriginal Education within the TDSB. They are the most regular and direct contact for Aboriginal students; they are the primary means through which students will learn about Aboriginal people, history, and culture; they are responsible for teaching about Canada's history of colonization and the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in this country. In other words, teachers bear a special responsibility for decolonizing and indigenizing schools. In order to fulfill these responsibilities, teachers require numerous resources and supports, as well as training and access to ongoing learning opportunities. They must also be prepared to reflect on and work through the painfully close relationship between institutions of formal schooling and colonization in Canada. For most teachers, this requires a significant shift in understandings of Canada's colonial history, in decolonizing their own understandings about relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and in approaches to pedagogy. Teachers must be prepared to take up their unique responsibilities and roles, and they must be supported in their attempts to do so.

### 3.2 Decolonizing Teacher Practice: Learning from the UAEPP

The UAE Pilot Project provided important supports to teachers. Pilot Project staff members worked with teachers on reaching curricular goals, as well as enhancing their professional knowledge base. They provided access to appropriate resources and suggestions for implementing curriculum goals and teachers' visions. Staff members visited schools, assisted teachers, and provided workshops, sample lessons and demonstrations. Through the Aboriginal Education Centre's resource library, a number of resources were made available to teachers, including the *Aboriginal Voices in the Curriculum* teaching guide, and a wide range of books, films, and other resources. Pilot Project staff also provided lesson and unit plans to go with some of these resources. Through workshops and individual meetings, staff introduced teachers to resources written and produced by Aboriginal people. A large, multi-disciplinary Arts-Based Project was mounted in 2009 and 2010, providing a series of professional development workshops for teachers, while also connecting schools with Aboriginal artists, storytellers, and musicians. Connections between the TDSB and the Toronto Aboriginal community were further strengthened in the second year of the Arts-Based Project, which was held in partnership with the Association for Native Development of the Performing and Visual Arts (ANDPVA). On May 31, 2010 the Aboriginal Education Centre hosted the Toronto and Area Region (TARO) Aboriginal Education Symposium at Humber College. While this Symposium included teachers from a number of regional school boards, the impact of the Pilot Project on fostering TDSB teacher interest was in clear evidence, as was the tremendous work being done by Pilot Project staff and TDSB teachers who presented at the Symposium.

In our assessment of the successes and challenges of the Pilot Project in helping teachers to fulfill their roles and responsibilities regarding Aboriginal Education, we interviewed 27 teachers in schools across the TDSB. Researchers also attended a number of professional development workshops conducted by Pilot Project staff, spoke with teachers about their experiences and their needs, and interviewed staff members about their work with TDSB teachers.

Several key findings emerge from our analysis of this data:

1. Teachers have a special responsibility for teaching about Aboriginal people, history, and culture; most of the teachers we spoke with recognize this.
2. Most teachers feel under-prepared by existing training and experience to teach this material.
3. Most teachers suggested that they needed more resources, and more support in evaluating the appropriateness of resources.
4. Most teachers felt that they needed more time and support to deepen their learning about this material and to fully integrate it into their teaching.
5. Teachers suggested that the most significant source of professional development for them was direct and ongoing contact with Aboriginal teachers, scholars, artists, and community members.

Without exception, teachers reported that the Pilot Project provided them with invaluable access to resources, expertise, training, and that their teaching practice, and their students' learning was directly enhanced as a result. Overall, an analysis of this data demonstrates a significant shift. Although teachers began (and remained) at very different levels of understanding, most made significant shifts in their understandings of Aboriginal people, history and culture, the importance of Aboriginal Education, and understandings of their roles and responsibilities as teachers and as inheritors of this colonial legacy. In short, this is a process of decolonizing teaching practice. Of course, such a shift is not easy, nor is it likely ever complete. A closer look at the stories teachers shared with us, and the Arts-Based Project provide some important insights into this process, and the challenges encountered along the way.

Teachers consistently reported that they feel they are expected to achieve curriculum goals with limited resources and time. They feel under-prepared by their training and in-school/in-board resources to address this aspect of the curriculum. Many also feel that Aboriginal people, history and culture are sorely underrepresented in the existing curriculum, meaning that many can choose to simply omit this from their teaching practice, rather than integrating it fully across the curriculum. Despite extensive training around issues of anti-racism, diversity, and multiculturalism, teachers feel under-equipped to address Canada's colonial legacy, to work with the Aboriginal students in their classrooms, and to set the tone for healthy relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, teachers, families, and communities.

### **3.2A The UAEPP Arts-Based Project and Professional Development**

The UAE Pilot Project ran the Arts-Based Project in 2009 and 2010. This multidisciplinary project included teachers and students across the TDSB and across grade levels. Interested participants were asked to submit a proposal for an arts-based project to be run in their classrooms and schools. In the first year 27 teachers from a range of grade levels participated in the project. They attended a series of four professional development sessions, where they worked through their project ideas and strategies for integrating these into the broader curriculum. Most teachers were connected with an Aboriginal artist, storyteller, or musician, who visited their classroom and worked with their students over a period of several weeks. In June 2009, the resulting work was showcased in an art exhibition and performance

at the Brockton Centre. At the end of the session, teachers were invited to type up their lesson and/or unit plans and post them on TEL, the online networking site for TDSB teachers. In the 2010 session, teachers from 24 schools participated in a series of professional development workshops, and most schools were again connected with a member of the Aboriginal arts community who visited their schools and worked with students on specific projects. Schools were asked to showcase the resulting work in an exhibition or performance to the school community.

Through the Talking Stick Project, interviews were conducted with 15 teachers in the 2009 session. Another set of interviews was conducted in the 2010 session. In addition, researchers attended some of the professional development sessions, observed artist workshops in participating classrooms, and attended the exhibition and performance in June 2009. Researchers were also provided with access to the anonymous evaluation forms collected by the UAEPP staff at the conclusion of each of the professional development sessions in both years.

What follows is an analysis of teachers' experiences of the Arts-Based Project and the learning accomplished. Our analysis of this case study focuses on the central themes encountered in our discussions with teachers. We then turn to an analysis of the challenges and barriers confronted by teachers and Pilot Project staff in their attempts to decolonize teacher's practice. The chapter closes with a summary of the lessons learned and a set of recommendations for strengthening Aboriginal Education across the TDSB.

## TEACHER MOTIVATION

It should be noted at the outset that the teachers who became involved in the Arts-Based Project were to a large degree self-selecting. The teachers we interviewed came from a wide range of backgrounds, representing a broad spectrum of previous knowledge about Aboriginal people, history, and culture. The commonality amongst them was their ready acceptance of their responsibility to teach about Aboriginal people, culture, and history.

Several teachers noted that their interest and commitment to the project stemmed from their personal connections to Aboriginal people and communities:

*Well, I was born in Mexico, and I'm Métis, Mestizo. My great-grandmother was Aboriginal. And then, you know, the mix happened with Spanish. So I'm Métis. So in that respect, I have been close to my own Aboriginal culture. When I came to Canada, I was just fascinated, even before I started teaching, with the Aboriginal culture, and I just started reading a little bit here and there. And then I became a teacher, and I just happened to land in Grade 6, which is where the curriculum emphasizes for Social Studies, Aboriginal people. And then I started learning more about Canadian Aboriginal people and just informed myself. And I took a summer institute in Peterborough, Trent, for Aboriginal Studies, and it was fantastic. And I just keep integrating it more and more and more. (ABP Teacher.5, p. 1)*

*I grew up in Winnipeg, which has a large Aboriginal population, and when I was a teenager my mom was a social worker, and she went back to school and got her master's and ran a social work agency in the core area of Winnipeg... So, that I guess, growing up in Winnipeg, which does have many issues, I was exposed to a lot of people when they come in off of reservations, and actually I was in business, and in the business world I dealt with a number of people that were First Nations that had gone to university, and they were saving for their kids' education. So, you know, I had several clients, so that was a very positive experience.*

*And then in terms of my relations, I have a cousin who married somebody who was First Nations, or is First Nations, and they adopted like six kids, all First Nations. I've met them a couple of times, and my brother is about to marry somebody who's Métis. (ABP Teacher.3, p. 1)*

Many of the teachers that we interviewed spoke about the projects and lessons they had conducted previous to their involvement in the Arts-Based Project.

*I start my unit usually by doing current events. I usually bring something that has happened, you know, just to make it real. To break away from the, "This isn't history. Aboriginal people were back in history. Teepees," whatever. So I start with current events, and I model, you know, what I am expecting... Some children know a lot, of course, and others have no clue... So, you know, it's the breaking away of all of that. And it's a fully integrated unit that I do. So I start with current events. Then we talk about the teachings or legends. And we talk about what they are for, what they were used for, why are they called teachings. (ABP Teacher.5, p. 2)*

Three teachers spoke about family members who were Aboriginal. One was prompted to get involved in the project out of concern for the learning opportunities of an Aboriginal student in her classroom. Some had specific interests in Aboriginal art, and considered themselves to be very knowledgeable about Aboriginal art and culture.

*And I've always appreciated the art of Daphne Odjig, and I bought one recently, I bought one of her prints. That was a highlight. And Norval Morrisseau. (ABP Teacher.3, p. 1)*

A few teachers self-identified as Aboriginal, and several noted that Aboriginal history, culture, presence are central to their teaching across the curriculum.

While many teachers expressed a previous connection to, and concern with Aboriginal Education, several noted that they had rarely encountered or taught about anything related to Aboriginal people before, and were very nervous about the curriculum expectations that they do so. Many of these participants sought out the Arts-Based Project, and Pilot Project staff to help them negotiate their sense of lack of preparation.

Whether relatively new to teaching this subject material or not, many of the teachers interviewed expressed concerns with the existing resources and documents at their disposal (curriculum documents, library holdings, etc), and said that they felt very unprepared to teach the material as it is laid out in the curriculum. A handful of participants noted that the limitations of the existing curriculum for the grade level and/or subjects that they teach led them to seek out projects where closer attention to appropriate representations could be found. This broad range of teacher preparation and prior experience provides an indication of the kinds of work undertaken by Pilot Project staff and teachers involved in the Arts-Based Project.

### **SHIFTING LANGUAGE**

In the 2009 session, Pilot Project staff began the first professional development session with a traditional opening and welcome. They then talked about appropriate representational practices, and the prevalence of stereotypical representations of Aboriginal people in the media and popular culture.

The document “Best Practices in Including Aboriginal Peoples in the Curriculum” was provided to teachers, and participants were invited to talk about their art projects and their ideas.

One of the first things that teachers reflected on was learning about appropriate language. For example, one teacher mentioned that she learned she shouldn’t say “Native” or “Aboriginal”, but “Six Nations”, Métis, and other nations. She also noted that in the Aboriginal studies unit, the word ‘legend’ is used, which is problematic (ABP Teacher.12, p. 1).

Another teacher similarly noted that she had come to understand that the word ‘legend’ is inappropriate when talking about Aboriginal teachings:

*...in past years—first of all, I call[ed] them legends. And in one of the meetings that we had, we had to share what we were working on, so I said, you know, my students are going to be creating [artistic interpretations] about legends. So very quickly I was told that they were not legends; that they were teachings. So I came back to my students, and I said, “You know, these—”. And I’m very honest with my students, and I said, “This happened. I have always called them legends,” and they all know them by “legends.” And this is a bright group of kids. So I said, “Now I’ve been told—”. And I felt really bad when, you know—I mean, ignorance. I was never told otherwise. And I told the children, “You know, this happened, and I was told they were called teachings.” “Why? Why are they called teachings? Why, you know, is it so important to call them teachings instead of—?” And they knew right away. They told me, you know, “Because they teach something.” (ABP Teacher.5, p. 5)*

The importance of employing appropriate language is reflected in the number of teachers who made this shift through their experiences with the Arts-Based Project. In particular, shifting from language of ‘legends’, which emphasizes a historical, mythical presence, toward recognition that these are teachings with an important place in contemporary cultural practice and survival is significant.

But such shifts take time. A debate between two teachers in a joint interview reflects the difficulty of changing language and determining which language is appropriate.

**ABP Teacher.1A:** So it was a story not a legend ...

**ABP Teacher.1B:** So we’ve got wonderful...

**ABP Teacher.1A:** No, I’m sorry. It was a story not a teaching.

**ABP Teacher.1B:** No, it was a teaching. Her story, it is a teaching, because the ending... that ending of that particular story...

**ABP Teacher.1A:** Oh, is a teaching...

**ABP Teacher.1B:** ... is ... is the teaching in it.

**ABP Teacher.1A:** ... is a teaching. Got it.

(ABP Teacher.1, p. 34)

While many teachers suggested that it was relatively easy to shift their language usage, there is evidence that even this shift, widely associated with diversity training approaches, was difficult for many. During the interviews, one teacher who has been deeply involved in Aboriginal Education and related initiatives repeatedly used the word “Natives” (ABP Teacher.14). Another teacher referenced Aboriginal people as “ancient peoples” (ABP Teacher.7 IB p. 4). The difficulties in shifting language are

symptomatic of the larger challenges of working through long-held colonial stereotypes and patterns of thought.

### **WORKING THROUGH DISCOMFORT, ANXIETY, FEAR**

Regardless of their previous knowledge and teaching practice, many teachers suggested that the professional development sessions provoked moments of self-reflection that often resulted in discomfort, fear, and anxiety. In addition to paying closer attention to the language they used, questions about appropriate representational practices weighed heavily on teachers' minds, with some suggesting that they had begun to question their previous teaching practice, as well as their ability to determine the appropriateness of resources and pedagogies.

At the first professional development session in 2008, Pilot Project staff provided some direction on appropriate representational practices for non-Aboriginal students, and suggested respectful ways for students to learn from and about Aboriginal culture. Many teachers noted that this presentation hit home immediately, forcing them to think carefully (and sometimes painfully) about their past teaching projects as well as common approaches to some curriculum content.

On an anonymous evaluation form completed at the end of this session, one teacher wrote:

*There is so much more to this issue than what has been presented. [It is a] huge issue and I/we need more time for open discussion to help us focus. I am worried that what I thought was respectful is/was in fact inappropriate in some way. I need to rethink what and I how I do some things. I will inform other staff and rethink past projects.*

Another teacher participant reflected on this experience in her interview:

*The first one [professional development session] was a little bit of a shock because, I mean, I know I'm not the only person but we all kind of were, I think, over-analyzing everything we've done up until that point because, you know, certain parameters were given and we were really just shocked that we in past projects have actually done some things that maybe weren't totally respectful, without realizing it. And I think we were over-analyzing it, like because you know things were mentioned like, "I don't think that the kids need to be able to emulate artists or copy, or if they're not First Nations artists then, you know, where do we draw the line," you know? And I, and some people had the ideas from the very beginning, my ideas were changing because I realized that, what is the learning that's gonna' happen, right? Like, yes we could work with this material and create this but what are they learning about the culture, like what are they learning about the struggle? Yeah, so I guess from the first PD session, I was eager for more information, and eager for more guidance. That's, I think – and I'm not the only one there, I think we were all interested in, you know, we need more guidance and we need more, you know, maybe things to avoid. I got a textbook from [Pilot Project staff]: *The Teachings from Turtle Island*, or do you know that one? And that was helpful. It was interesting, right away they were talking about the [four] directions and the medicine wheel and the different medicines and you know, you could see a couple of us just like scrawling notes and trying to, you know, I don't know, just academic or something. It was funny in a way, "What colour comes next?" You know, as if the information is like a, locked in a secret box. Anyway. They were very insightful and we've only had three or four and it already, you know, there's a really nice, I don't know, cohesion and ease with the group. (ABP Teacher.8, p. 9-10)*

Even amongst those who had entered the project with a great deal of confidence and experience, some of the materials presented in the sessions provoked a level of self-doubt that haunted teachers throughout the process:

*I was very afraid all the time to make a faux pas, all through the project... before the project, I was so confident. But after, you know, all the conversations I heard, after everything, then I became very self-conscious. (ABP Teacher.5, p. 6)*

Some teachers noted that they had never felt this degree of discomfort and uncertainty before:

**ABP Teacher.1A:** ... So things like that - like you can ask somebody where they're from, and step on their toes.

**Interviewer:** And, was this something that you had ever experience prior to these sessions? Or this...

**ABP Teacher.1B:** Uh uh.

**ABP Teacher.1A:** No.

**Interviewer:** Neither of you.

**In unison:** No

**ABP Teacher.1B:** No. Not feeling so awkward that you didn't want to say anything.

**ABP Teacher.1A:** Yeah.

**ABP Teacher.1B:** That's at one point. And I think they realized that. Because they had other sessions, and they kind of apologized. Like, "We don't mean to intimidate you or we don't mean to, you know, not make you feel comfortable," kind of thing but there were times when we did feel uncomfortable.

(ABP Teacher.1, p. 9-10)

While these moments of discomfort are difficult for teachers and facilitators to work through, they do stand as indicators of deeper learning, and of a significant shift in teacher self-perception and understanding.

### LEARNING ABOUT CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

In particular, discussions about appropriate representational practices centered on the issue of cultural appropriation. Many teachers spoke about their learning around this issue in specific. One teacher described her experience in this way:

*It was interesting. For instance: creation stories. It's quite common for a teacher to read Aboriginal creation stories and immediately afterwards have children make their own creation stories. But that's a bit like telling Bible stories and then say[ing], "Make up your own Bible stories." It's just these are sacred stories, and they're solid truth. They are these stories, and you shouldn't be making up any others. But it's something that teachers do quite typically. (ABP Teacher.14, p. 2-3)*

The same teacher reflected on the discussion about whether students should be copying the artistic works of famous Aboriginal artists, or working in these styles:

*We also talked about copying Aboriginal visual images and how the focus of all art projects should be personal to the children that we were teaching, not copying somebody else's work, but to embrace it in your own way... And there was quite an emphasis on that, and I thought that was, that's good. (ABP Teacher.14, p. 3)*

She goes on to explain:

*Someone asked if they could teach the children how to make a dreamcatcher, and one of the Natives [sic] there said, "No, I wouldn't recommend it, because I would teach your students how to do that. But that's because it's a gift from me to them. If someone, if a Native shows you how to do it, then you might pass that gift on along. But, for instance, for someone else to read about it on the Internet and make it with their children would not be appropriate." And that, I think it was through somebody who wanted to teach a dance, a Native dance, as well. A [Round] dance would be appropriate because it includes visitors, all kinds of people that might be invited to dance. But one of the Shawl dances or the Grass dances should not be taught by anyone except an Aboriginal. (ABP Teacher.14, p. 5)*

Another teacher notes that the discussion at this session helped her to think about her goals, noting:

*[M]y ideas were changing because I realized that, what is the learning that's gonna' happen, right? Like, yes we could work with this material and create this but what are they learning about the culture, like what are they learning about the struggle? (ABP Teacher.8, p. 10)*

While many teachers suggested that cultural appropriation has long been one of their concerns, others admitted that they were encountering new ways of thinking about this issue in regards to Aboriginal art. In one interview, a teacher tried to work through this:

*Well, before I would have the kids working the style of Norval Morrisseau to create, you know, a figure connected to the animal world with energy lines, to have them have an understanding of how energy moves between people and nature. And there's a lot more to it than that, you know. I'm questioning whether or not I'll even refer to Norval Morrisseau next year, I might just--. And also my view of what Emily Carr did. I always felt that Emily Carr went into the woods and documented totem poles out of total respect for the West Coast First Nations. And I realize now that, yeah, she was appropriating. Was it okay? Wasn't it okay? Well, if she'd been Aboriginal, it would have been okay... Like what can I do, and what can't I do? What is wrong? What is not wrong? What is right? (ABP Teacher.3, p. 7-8)*

For this teacher, the confusion lasted throughout the project and beyond:

*So, yeah, I'm still at a loss to know what I can do and can't do as a teacher in the classroom, at this point. (ABP Teacher.3, p. 8)*

While some teachers embraced their discomfort and trusted the process and guidance provided by Pilot Project staff, others felt that the concerns about cultural appropriation were overstated, and that they were standing in the way of meaningful cross-cultural learning. One teacher in particular felt strongly that in order to understand an Aboriginal perspective, students' learning must be participatory and experiential.



*I think it's an issue because if we are trying to teach children in a multi-cultural society to be tolerant and to learn about other cultures, I don't think we can reach them by saying, "See, but don't touch." You can sit down—because this person at the project, she told me, "We will gladly come and do a show for your kids." It's almost like see from afar but don't get involved... And I think that getting involved, especially for children, it's living it. You know? Like, now if I do, now I understand. And I do understand that some [songs, dances, arts], you don't touch them, etcetera. But I think if you do it carefully, if you do it respectfully, you know. And I felt upset. I was almost ready to say, "You know what? Maybe not." (ABP Teacher.5, p. 6)*

Another teacher noted that these discussions about cultural appropriation caused her to feel a great deal of fear about being judged.

**ABP Teacher.6:** And I was very uncomfortable with that, and I felt afraid.

**Interviewer:** What were you afraid of?

**ABP Teacher.6:** I was afraid of being judged. I was afraid that my artwork or the artwork my students produced would be rejected. I was afraid to push them to have it function more 'in the style of', and I didn't. I let them sort of—I let them go that way. I sort of let them create what they wanted to create and kind of just left it and didn't push those elements and principles of design to have something more formal, right?

And, you know, I can produce art that's about identity, if that's what you want me to produce, but that wasn't the project. That wasn't the project that [my co-teacher] described us doing or that we were accepted into. So, you know—and I felt afraid to be judged. I felt afraid. I felt afraid. I felt afraid that I was going to be rejected. I did not feel included. I felt definitely excluded, and I felt like my knowledge wasn't included in their perspective. My experience was not included in their perspective of me, their judgment of me. (ABP Teacher.6, p. 13-14)

In this interview, the teacher spoke a great deal about her personal identity and connections to Aboriginal people. Realizing that her previous experience and knowledge were not being recognized, she was particularly upset. Her desire to stick with the original proposed project ("that wasn't the project... that we were accepted into") also demonstrates her struggle with change and her capacity to respond directly to some of the concerns articulated in the professional development sessions. In other words, there seems to be a resistance to change, particularly if that change involves recognizing that her approach might not be entirely appropriate. In part, this includes modifying what she knows and consequently challenging her perception of herself as a 'knower' (an issue to which we return in section 3.3).

It should be noted that there is no clear consensus on what constitutes appropriation. Some performances and representations might be seen as acceptable when done by an Aboriginal artist, whereas a similar interpretation by a non-Aboriginal artist could raise concerns. Additionally, one artist may have no problem sharing certain images and symbols, whereas another might feel quite strongly that this is inappropriate. One of the Aboriginal teachers spoke to this debate directly. While he felt that all TDSB students should have some opportunities to experience Aboriginal culture, he noted that

approaches and opinions on this vary within the Aboriginal community. And while he did express some initial discomfort at seeing non-Aboriginal kids engaging in creative interpretations of Aboriginal cultural practice, his concern was more specifically that he felt most Aboriginal students did not have this kind of access to their culture or its re-interpretation. In part this is because of the colonial assault on culture, language, and art, which has left Aboriginal communities struggling to regain and preserve cultural practice, leaving less space for creative interpretation.

*I can see Native people dancing to drum beats and dancing to rhythm and rhyme, but when it happens in a Native context with non-Native kids, I'm thinking that's really strange, you know. It's, it's good, but it's strange to the extent that it doesn't, it takes away from the cultural content and makes it, like, pop music, you know, pop culture, you know... I guess, so I found that rather interesting, you know, that they would be given the opportunity to explore Native tradition and culture in the curriculum, but then because they're so focused on the arts in a different context, they re-wrap the package and give it back to us in a different form. Which is exciting, you know, it's, I found that really interesting. And I was thinking they, at the opening night at the Aboriginal Offices, when they had these kids dancing to drum, dancing to song, dancing to rhythm, rhyme and poetry, I was thinking, "Why can't our kids do that?" you know, "Why can't First Nations kids do that?" (ABP Teacher.15, p. 17-18)*

He goes on to explain:

*I think it's okay in the context that they used, that they want to interpret something Native through dance, that's their interpretation of the Native culture, right. But what I can't see happening is, is our kids doing that sort of, same sort of thing, right, you know. (ABP Teacher.15, p. 18)*

While this debate was difficult for some teachers, it does stand as an indicator of the ways in which cultural practice and representation have been central to the colonial project, and also of their importance in struggles to decolonize and indigenize. Claiming the right to self-representation is a central aspect of the contemporary struggles of Aboriginal people, and competent teachers must be able to navigate such sensitivities and tensions carefully. Therefore, it should not be expected that teachers would immediately grasp this distinction, but that their sensitivity is increased, that they travel a little further into the process of developing an internal barometer for determining what is appropriate. One teacher articulates this, and notes that she has also shared her increasing awareness with other colleagues at her school:

*But at least I think that might be a part of the process. At least I'm very sensitive to it, and I tried to share that with my colleagues here, and they were like, "Oh, come on." And I said, "Well, yeah," and I can see that, you know, we're currently making masks, and we were going to make First Nations type masks. And I said, "Well, let's just make masks and not put a label on it." Then if the kids want to add some feathers, they can, and they can be just animal masks. But they don't have to be masks that are ceremonial masks. They can just be masks. Let them look at those ceremonial masks first, right. So that part of going to this workshop probably led me to say something like that, which we then took—right. (ABP Teacher.3, p. 8)*

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF MAKING PERSONAL CONNECTIONS**

For many teachers, the confusion about appropriate resources and cultural appropriation led them to rely heavily on UAEPP staff and on the guest artists. One teacher stated this very clearly, saying:

*...and I thought, well, I'm going to go look for a First Nations artist, because if they teach them something, I can wipe my hands, and I don't have to worry about cultural appropriation. So, I was worried myself. (ABP Teacher.3, p. 5)*

She went on to explain exactly how the artist that worked with her students put her mind at ease:

*...once I found my artist, you know, that was kind of the highlight of it for me. And he was sensitive to my concerns too, which was really good. I kept saying, "What about cultural appropriation?" you know. And he kept saying, "Don't worry. Clan symbols are pretty safe. Don't worry." I'm like, "Okay. I trust you!" (ABP Teacher.3, p. 16-17)*

Ultimately the hope of staff development is to have teachers gain competence in determining what is and is not appropriate on their own. In this regard, it is a problem when non-Aboriginal teachers rely so heavily on Aboriginal artists, teachers and staff members to determine the appropriateness of all materials used. Teachers cannot abdicate their responsibility for learning what is and is not appropriate. However, the importance of having connections to living members of a culture cannot be underestimated.

Many teachers noted that the most significant moments of learning – for teachers and students alike – came through contact with Pilot Project staff members, guest artists, and storytellers. These personal connections helped many of the teachers to move from mythical and stereotypical conceptions of Aboriginal people toward more complex, realistic, and sometimes more difficult understandings of Aboriginal people, and the history of colonization in Canada. As one teacher noted: *"When you make a personal connection, you learn so much more"* (ABP Teacher.7, IA, p. 2).

In many cases, these personal connections helped teachers to dramatically shift their understandings and approaches. One teacher reflected on her process:

*I wanted their artwork to be a response to something engaging and authentic. My original vision was to talk about circle and family and community and when I spoke to [UAEPP staff members] about it, [one staff member] said, "I'll come". And "I wanna', it's not all gonna' be positive. So I said, "Well, you know maybe we can use your presentation as a launch". And so her presentation focused quite a bit on kind of the residential schools and the loss of connection to community and the loss of culture and the loss of family, or at least during those years. And, we followed it through; it became totally a political response to residential schools and a loss of culture. I was thinking, actually I was trying to think of how to keep it respectful without ignoring, you know, really, real issues and I actually thought about land disputes and I was actually gonna' go that direction — (ABP Teacher.8, p. 3)*

As a result, the project that the students were working on also changed. She goes on to explain:

*Yeah it changed after [the presentation by UAEPP staff member] [laughs], it changed. I guess I just had to kind of let it go, you know, to give them their freedom to explore their anger and their responses and their questions. We read a few books afterwards as well, we talked about *Shinchi's Canoe* [a story about two children's experiences of going to residential school]... If I didn't have help I couldn't have done this because on one hand, like, the process was so involved but on the other hand you're sitting there talking it through, like, okay "Do, do you*

*remember how [UAEPP staff member] talked about her grandfather?" So what did, you know, what was that about? (ABP Teacher.8, p. 7-8)*

Another teacher noted that the storyteller who came to her classroom immediately shifted the project into a contemporary frame, dispelling some of the common stereotypes – including those held by these teachers:

**ABP Teacher.1A:** *I think the big shift was ... the storyteller.*

**Interviewer:** *Can you explain to me why?*

**ABP Teacher.1A:** *Because I personally thought it was going to be a teaching from the past... You see I thought it was someone going to be coming and telling us a story that maybe we'd already heard. I knew it was going to have something to do with nature or animals in some way. But I didn't... and I didn't really know what kind of illustrations the children were going to do. So when she came, she ... and so I thought it was going to be something from the past, like... an elder from ... this was passed down from my grandfather... but she wrote a modern day story for the kids.*

**ABP Teacher.1B:** *And if the children really understand the ending, then they've... they've...*

**ABP Teacher.1A:** *They've got ... yeah.*

**ABP Teacher.1B:** *... learnt a great deal...*

**ABP Teacher.1A:** *... relating to each other... and... and relating...*

**ABP Teacher.1B:** *Yeah.*

**ABP Teacher.1A:** *... to the world around them.*

**ABP Teacher.1B:** *Um hum.*

(ABP Teachers.1, p. 33-34)

One teacher's experience with the Arts-Based Project enriched the learning experience immensely, and led her to think about ways to ensure 'real' connections and relationships for her students in future projects:

*...this year I brought in somebody from up North who came in and she showed some stuff, and she talked about what it's like to be First Nations today, etc., etc., and she shared some stories with the kids, etc. And then they get to look at all her handiwork. But you know I'm thinking it might be more effective to actually go to one of these First Nations schools with my kids next year on a bus and like, do a Reading Buddy program with them or do some kind of program with a classroom there. I think they might get more out of that when they meet kids their own age. (ABP Teacher.3, p. 10)*

Non-Aboriginal teachers also benefited tremendously from the opportunity to meet and learn from Aboriginal teachers:

*The thing that I found was the level of understanding across the board of the teachers in terms of Native culture and tradition and content, in terms of Native content, was varied, right. There were some people who had a good understanding of Native teachings that could be incorporated into a project. Or they were doing Native studies within the Ontario curriculum where they participated in certain activities to promote Native culture.... But the*

*non-Native teachers in the room, across the board, didn't necessarily have those teachings. So they were sort of, maybe in some sense, wrestling with those concepts, in terms of tradition, culture and teachings. But they had main stream thought, which meant they knew what art is, but in some cases art, it's just not visual art, right, sometimes it's sculptures, sometimes it's music, sometimes it's dance. So they have a broader spectrum in terms of what these different art forms are, but they didn't have the context what the art forms are in tradition culture, in tradition understanding. So bringing them together and being in the same room with them as Native teachers, Native educators, we were in some respects able to share our thoughts and our teachings with them, that would broaden their idea of what tradition, culture and teaching is in Native, in the Native perspective. (ABP Teacher.15, p. 16)*

For many, these personal connections provided the important opportunity to broaden knowledge, to dispel persistent stereotypes and misconceptions, and to build meaningful connections with Aboriginal people and communities. These connections formed the basis for significant shifts in learning for teachers and students. The healthiest of these relationships were those in which a reciprocal trust was built:

*And they [the visiting artists] want me to write a reference for them for a grant, so I said I'd do that. So, you know, that's another person in the art community that I've met that I might not have necessarily met. So, that's a benefit, and that'll indirectly benefit the kids that I teach, right. Yeah. (ABP Teacher.3, p. 17)*

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF APPROPRIATE RESOURCES**

*What good are those Tool Kits? They have to come with books. They have to come with films. They have to come with hands-on newspaper articles, with maps, with perhaps a contact person. You know what I mean, how we got the Aboriginal artists in there. (ABP Teacher.13, p. 3-4)*

To a large extent, indigenizing the curriculum requires access to appropriate resources. Teachers indicated that some of their greatest concerns centered around resources. One Aboriginal teacher involved in the Arts-Based Project noted that the other teachers at her school were eager to integrate Aboriginal Education into all aspects of the curriculum, as long as she gathered the necessary resources. She explained:

*So long as they have the resources, they'll do it. So, I got to scramble and get the resources in September, make sure all the films and books and everything that they need to conduct the classes is there. And then what we're going to do is reach out to another school and provide those resources to that school so that they can do the same thing. (ABP Teacher.13, p. 2)*

When pressed further on what kinds of resources were missing, she clarified:

*Well, they're not readily available. Like, for example, let's say you're doing a document, you're doing a unit on the Mohawk steel workers, guys that worked in New York City and Chicago and stuff like that. What if you haven't got the book? Or what if you don't know where this Reserve is located? You've got to do a lot of prior preparation before you teach something, and then you've got to get the kids engaged in it somehow. But if you haven't got that book there, Skywalkers, it's really hard to proceed on that kind of a unit, you know. It's a very historical thing that the Mohawk people would leave their families to find work, and they*

would have to do that. And the myth about the men being able to walk on high altitudes, you know, that's just a myth. They had to do that to feed their families. It wasn't that they had innate ability to get up there and, you know, on the high steel. It's because they needed to feed their families and find work, and a lot of the other men wouldn't do it. So, the Mohawk people would do that, you know. But there's that myth that they, you have to demystify some of the, you know, things that, the beliefs that are circulating, and then you can teach the lesson. So, if they haven't got that book that's a really good resource, it's hard to teach that from that curriculum. (ABP Teacher 13, p. 2-3)

In another interview, the teachers repeatedly spoke about their concerns with having the right resources. Not only were they concerned that they didn't have the right resources to teach the material, they were also concerned that some of that materials in their school might be inappropriate. They did not feel that they could or should be the ones to make such determinations:

**ABP Teacher.1A:** *Like, the teacher resources. And having maybe somebody who can go through schools, and filter and see. Like, there are texts that are in libraries and in classrooms that are old... And you don't know if they are valid, if they are correct, if they are incorrect... if they're biased. How do you know?* (ABP Teacher.1, p. 64)

In fact, throughout her interview this teacher emphasized the importance of having someone to 'check' her resources. She talked about calling the UAEPP staff, and about having material checked by Good Minds, a distributor of Aboriginal Education materials. This is despite a shared understanding that the intention of the Arts-Based Project sessions was to help teachers develop their own understandings of what is and is not appropriate:

**ABP Teacher.1B:** *Their whole idea was that they weren't going to tell us... about what was right and what was wrong. We had to kind of discover these things, or else we wouldn't really appreciate it. Was that how you felt?*

**ABP Teacher.1A:** *Errr... It's just very open... It was very open... It was like... We want you to learn. What do you want to learn? ...How do you want to learn it? Okay, go do it. We're here if you need us. Right?*

(ABP Teacher.1, p. 8)

As was evident in this interview, teachers' concerns with appropriate resources can be traced to their general sense of lack of preparation and training related to Aboriginal Education. It can also be attributed to teachers' concerns about ensuring that their instruction is respectful and appropriate. While many teachers seemed certain that with the right resources they could teach the material, in longer discussion, it became evident that often, uncertainty about appropriateness of resources (or the desire for the most 'authentic' resources) was rooted in a deeper uncertainty about how to teach this material, and how to relate to it, and the Aboriginal students in their classrooms. In other words, resources alone are not sufficient. In the hands of a well-meaning but ill-informed teacher, even the most useful resources may be used inappropriately. The larger project of shifting understandings and ensuring that teachers are using the resources appropriately, is part of the larger, much longer process of decolonizing and indigenizing.

### 3.3 Challenges

Teachers confront a range of logistical and ideological challenges that create barriers to change.

#### 3.3A Logistical Challenges

Research participants indicated that they encountered a number of logistical challenges impeding the professional development goals of the Pilot Project. Given the geographical size of the board, the number of teachers, and the small Pilot Project staff team, it was difficult for staff members to attend to all of the needs teachers expressed. Given the anxieties and needs expressed by teachers, it is no wonder that Pilot Project staff felt incredibly stretched in their attempts to support teachers through the projects and difficulties encountered.

#### 3.3B Ideological Challenges

Of course, even when they were able to devote significant amounts of time to professional development and teacher support, Pilot Project staff and teachers encountered resistance. Whether teachers were facing this resistance from administrators, parents or other teachers, or staff experiencing it from teachers, this resistance fell into three dominant narratives

##### **‘BUT WE DON’T HAVE ANY ABORIGINAL STUDENTS’**

One teacher indicated that the staff at her school questioned her participation in the Arts-Based Project, asking: *“Why have an Aboriginal [teaching] at the entrance to the school when we are not an Aboriginal school?”*. Her response was that ‘this is Canada’ (ABP Teacher.9).

Teachers and Pilot Project staff members alike reported hearing this phrase used to question the utility of professional development sessions and other activities around Aboriginal Education. Whether coming from principals, other teachers, staff members, or parents, this sentiment suggests that unless there is a large number of Aboriginal students, teaching and learning related to this content is unnecessary. Suggestions that there must be a significant percentage of Aboriginal students in order to merit professional development related to Aboriginal Education are problematic on two main counts. Firstly, they are rooted in an assumption that is often faulty (for example, the assumption that there are no Aboriginal students in a school or community is often a result of the tendency to simply ‘not see’ Aboriginal students). Secondly, it assumes that this learning is only necessary if Aboriginal people are present, suggesting that otherwise, TDSB students do not need to know about Aboriginal people, history and culture, Canada’s colonial history, or about contemporary relationships.

##### **“IT WAS A REFRESHER SESSION”: REFUSING TO SEE ONESELF AS NOT KNOWING**

Teachers are expected to know most things. In some regards, this is an unfair expectation. It also becomes a barrier to confronting the pervasive ignorance surrounding Aboriginal people, history and culture in Canadian society. A couple of the teachers that we interviewed were hesitant to admit that they learned something new, or that their existing understandings were significantly shifted by the professional development sessions. Some teachers suggested that while *others* were really challenged by what was presented, for them, it was more of a refresher session:

**ABP Teacher.1A:** ... and, like, that kind of stuff, it was refresher, it wasn't ... it wasn't like, you know, we were given something that was, or we were told something that we were like, "Oh, I shouldn't say that in the classroom" or "Oh, I was going to do that tomorrow... let's not do that." There wasn't any of that, but there were many teachers in there who did have those moments... Oh yeah, there were teachers in there who... you literally were sitting and you... you heard someone saying, "Ohhh" ...  
[Group Laughter]

**ABP Teacher.1A:** Right? (Laughing)

**ABP Teacher.1B:** (Laughing) Yes, there were.  
[Group Laughter]

**ABP Teacher.1A:** There were. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Okay. (Laughing). There were some moments then?

**ABP Teacher.1B:** Yeah (Laughing)

**ABP Teacher.1A:** Yeah. I mean, not for us, but you... you heard some in the room.

**ABP Teacher.1B:** Um hum. Yeah you did.

(ABP Teacher.1, p. 42-3)

This was despite the fact that elsewhere in their interview these teachers expressed a great deal of insecurity and discomfort, noting that they repeatedly called Pilot Project staff to 'check' and see if certain resources were appropriate. At another point in their interview they did admit that to feeling uncertain at times:

*And it's ... it's subtle. And... and it was something that we learned every time we went because it was... and at some points (Laughing) we didn't want to say anything because we thought, Oh, we're really putting our foot, foot in our mouth because of how we would approach things. Because we didn't know... (ABP Teacher.1, p. 8)*

In order to engage in meaningful professional development, teachers must be prepared to (and allowed to) admit what they do not know.

#### **"WE HAVE ALL GONE THROUGH DIFFICULTIES": MULTICULTURAL DISCOURSE**

Many of the teachers interviewed referenced the multicultural teaching context of the TDSB, noting that they have long been trained to attend to this diversity in an inclusive, respectful way. Many responded to the professional development sessions using a similar approach. As one teacher explained:

*We could all benefit from that. Because we are mixed, we are not all White or all Black. One of the teachers in the workshop told a story about Ukrainian grandfather being called a "garlic eater"... There are many benefits to storytelling, we have all gone through difficulties. (ABP Teacher.4, p. 2)*

Another teacher made a similar observation, noting that the same concepts employed in anti-racist pedagogy could be turned toward Aboriginal Education.

*In Teacher's College you're made to be aware of these things and as you grow up you're made to be aware of these things, you know. If you grew up in like a very diverse background,*



*in a very diverse city, you're made to be aware of these things, and I think the sessions made us aware of the same ideas, but brought to a different group... So it's the same concepts... and ideas of be sensitive to this, be conscious of this, be aware of this, watch your vocabulary... like it's the same ideas, right? (ABP Teacher.1, p. 51-2)*

Noting the absence of materials relating to Aboriginal people, history and culture, one teacher (who has moved to Toronto from a Western province where this material figures prominently) noted that the project was a start – that they receive a lot of material for Black History month, and that this project will begin to fill the gap of Aboriginal content. (ABP Teacher.9, p. 3)

While these are important observations, they also serve to minimize and misrepresent very distinct experiences of colonialism. Although 'we have all gone through difficulties' may be seen as an attempt to build empathy and find common ground, it also serves to suggest that the genocide, assimilation and assault on Indigenous peoples in Canada is comparable to name-calling and other forms of racism. This is not to suggest that there is a hierarchy of oppressions, but rather to argue that the specificity of colonialism and its relationship to Canadian nation-building and formal schooling deserves particular attention. For example, while racism has shaped many peoples' experiences of schooling, the impact of residential schools on Aboriginal people cannot be captured by an exploration of racism alone; colonialism and the attempts to decimate Aboriginal families, cultures, and nations must be addressed. Similarly, using the same concepts applied in anti-racist education to Aboriginal Education runs the risk of minimizing the very specific experiences of Aboriginal people and children in institutions of formal schooling in Canada.

This shift toward a singular focus on colonization and its impacts was difficult for some teachers to accept as it does run counter to a multiculturalist narrative. For one teacher, being asked to attend to the specificity of colonization led her to suggest that a single perspective was being forced on her, that attention to colonization could not fit alongside her anti-racist, multicultural pedagogy. Being told that certain practices were only acceptable when done by Aboriginal people ran counter to her endorsement of the multicultural narrative of inclusion. She explained:

*And everyone seems to have those kind of feelings, and they also felt the same way about their identity, that there was a judgment being made about them because they were non-Native. And maybe the students that they wanted to participate should've all been Native, and you know, the multicultural perspective that I have to bring—I am required to bring into my classroom by virtue of working in this city, in this school, wasn't there. There wasn't a multicultural perspective being brought to this, to how to communicate this. (ABP Teacher.6, p. 14)*

This reflects a particularly multiculturalist stance which suggests that equality can only be achieved when everyone is given the same rules and roles. However, the goals of the professional development sessions were to demonstrate that in fact, due to the history of colonization and its legacy, this is not a possibility, nor will it result in equality. Indeed, portraying Aboriginal cultures and Aboriginal people as merely part of a multicultural mosaic in which everyone can partake and everyone is equal belies the very violent colonial processes through which this land has become a 'multicultural nation'. The misunderstanding of the kind of shift required to decolonize experiences of formal schooling was evident when one teacher stated:

*I think it's an issue because if we are trying to teach children in a multi-cultural society to be tolerant and to learn about other cultures, I don't think we can reach them by saying, "See, but don't touch." (ABP Teacher.5, p. 6)*

The language of tolerance and cultural competence (learning *about* others) is common in what Schick and McNinch (2009) term 'diversity training' approaches. Such approaches limit the possibilities of change in their emphasis on 'prejudice management', and actually work against engaging an analysis of colonialism and teacher complicity. In order to make schools safe and welcoming places for Aboriginal students and teachers, and ensure that curriculum and pedagogy reflect the importance of acknowledging and taking responsibility for the painful parts of Canadian history, teachers must be prepared to learn differently as well. They must be prepared to engage with the very real structures of inequality that dominate Canadian society, and are replicated across the school system.

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### 3.4 Reflecting on What Was Learned and Recommendations

While recognizing that the decolonization of formal schooling is a collective responsibility, it must be noted that teachers play a particularly important role in this project. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, many teachers readily accepted this responsibility, seeking out opportunities to deepen their teaching practice.

Despite the challenges and anxieties, it is evident that a great deal of learning was accomplished through the arts-based project and related professional development activities. Teachers were able to articulate this very clearly:

*Well, how to deliver the Aboriginal curriculum, even though I was very nervous because of all the, you know, bashing. [laughs] I don't know if I should call it that way, but I felt, you know. But it was a learning experience for me. It really was. And the way you should deliver the curriculum. The difficulties of it, and how to overcome those difficulties. Those are some of the things that I learned. And I think a lot of teachers will benefit from being involved in something like this. (ABP Teacher.5, p. 11]*

Another teacher reflected: *It was a humbling experience: I realized I was still wrong, the language I was using was not appropriate* (ABP Teacher.7, IA, p. 1). He suggested that through his involvement with the Arts-Based Project he learned what is correct, and what is sensitive, and the difference between cultural acquisition and cultural appropriation.

And another teacher suggested that in working through the methodology suggested by Pilot Project staff, her students had gained important insights not only into Aboriginal art, but also into the history (and potential future) of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships in Canada:

*I'm surprised at my response and how some – I liked that, I mean I'm very visual and, so I thought we would have, you know, twenty-three Daphne Odjig's to show [laughs]. But I had to let them do what they needed to do to express themselves and, and I do have students who would have been happy to trace or to completely copy... But I guess they realized, you know, that's not what this is about, this is about their own connection and their understanding and their empathy and our whole concern for social justice and an injustice that a government that we think is taking care of us committed, basically. And so, you know, our direction is*

*social justice so their response to me is more impressive that they, they saw the injustice rather than, "Oh we can paint like Daphne Odjig". (ABP Teacher.8, p. 9)*

Perhaps most importantly, some teachers noted that they have gained new insights that will increase their sensitivity when working with Aboriginal students. As one teacher noted on an anonymous evaluation form:

*I am more aware of the prevalent issues in this community now. I am more sensitive to my students needs when I'm teaching and talking about Aboriginal culture.*

As one of the staff members noted, this is learning that could not have been accomplished outside of the Pilot Project:

*we're changing teachers in the art project we have here. I see the difference in them. They don't want to just build a little Iroquois village anymore, [laugh] you know. They want—they want artists coming in, and they want storytellers, and they want to learn, and they want to understand. And we are able to facilitate that through this project. And that's what becomes meaningful; otherwise, they couldn't—it wouldn't have been available to them.*

(Staff TC1, p. 11)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations emerged in our discussions with teachers, Pilot Project staff members, and our analysis of the data.

### Improve Teacher Training

Through their involvement in this project, many teachers have become aware of their own depth of ignorance. Many are frustrated at the information that they have not had access to, and several expressed a renewed interest in deepening their personal knowledge. Many were alarmed that little of this history had been a part of their previous learning experiences. One teacher noted:

*Teachers College needs to teach more about relationships. Learn from Aboriginal ways of educating children. Teacher Colleges are often places where students experience racism. Racist experiences observed in York University. They should seek out outstanding teachers and invite them to teach their teacher candidates. (ABP Teacher.7, IA, p. 2)*

### Provide Ongoing Professional Development Opportunities

While most teachers noted that they knew something about residential schools and the colonial history in Canada, many only became aware of the implications of this history for their teaching practice through their involvement with aspects of the Pilot Project. Through their involvement with the Arts-Based Project and through presentations by Pilot Project staff members, many teachers noted that they gained an understanding of the legacy of the residential school system and the consequent alienation of Aboriginal people from institutions of formal schooling. This is vitally important to teachers not only so that they can teach *about* this history, but also so that they can understand the impact of this legacy on Aboriginal students and their relationships to formal schooling. To learn about this long and difficult history is, of course, more than can be accomplished in one professional development session, or even

in a series of sessions, it must begin in teachers' college and be carried throughout ongoing professional development opportunities.

Teachers spoke about wanting to know more, and wanting more time to learn about the history of colonialism, residential schools, and their contemporary ramifications. Many were pleasantly surprised at the amount of release time granted for their participation in the professional development sessions, noting that without this it would have been impossible to participate fully in the project and attend to their other responsibilities.

### **Be Prepared to Work Through Discomfort**

Despite (or perhaps because of) some of the discomfort provoked by the professional development sessions, all of the teachers interviewed reported that they learned important things through their involvement in the Arts-Based Project. Meaningful learning is often uncomfortable and difficult. The ability – and support – to work through this discomfort is crucial. Feeling uncomfortable, or having one's sense of oneself challenged cannot be employed as an excuse to not take up one's responsibility to teach respectfully and appropriately.

### **Integrate Aboriginal Perspectives into the Curriculum**

In addition to gaps in their own understanding, teachers suggested that the Ontario curriculum needs closer scrutiny. Teachers noted that at times the curriculum itself is not in line with instruction provided at the Professional Development sessions and presented in the *Aboriginal Voices in the Curriculum* document produced by the TDSB. One participant noted the language of 'explorers', 'pioneers', and 'legends' in the curriculum (ABP Teacher.12). Another noted:

*Like, for me, I ... I had never taught. When I opened the book, I was like, "Okay, so I have to teach about, you know, this Aboriginal stuff. What is this stuff that I have to teach?" So I start opening the Teacher's Guide, and it... there's... it's just overwhelming and there's so much stuff and there's... all these pictures and it's like, I don't know what I'm allowed to do, what I'm not allowed to do because from my perspective, like, I see biases, but I don't know because I have my own personal bias... (ABP Teacher.1, p. 6)*

Another participant suggested that the curriculum requires that a tremendous amount of content be covered, with little attention to Aboriginal perspectives:

*Quite frankly, the curriculum itself has, such a limited First Nations— even in the curriculum, First Nations is covered, like, for one part of a unit about explorers in grade six. So covering current events, the history of First Nations in Canada plus explorers, that's an enormous amount of information to cover, right? (ABP Teacher.6, p. 5)*

Yet another teacher concluded that the curriculum is in urgent need of re-tooling:

*And when they talked about curriculum as well, like I do think having the grade six token, you know, 'Canada's trading partners and First Nations' [laughs]... I think it is an insulting curriculum... I'd like to see it changed, I'd love to see European explorers changed in some capacity and I would like to see more Aboriginal, teachings within all the social studies and sciences curriculum. (ABP Teacher.8, p. 2-3)*

Finally, one teacher noted that changes to the curriculum have resulted in *less* attention to Aboriginal people, rather than more:

*Before children learned about Aboriginal people in grade 3, now it does not happen until grade 6. It needs to be ongoing throughout the curriculum and throughout the year because it's part of Canadian culture and history. It should not be discussed only during Aboriginal week, but all the time. (ABP Teacher.12, p. 2)*

Despite the limited attention to Aboriginal Education across the existing curriculum, many teachers noted that their involvement in the Arts-Based Project and related activities inspired them to seek out greater integration of Aboriginal perspectives.

*I am beginning to understand the very important distinction between embedding Aboriginal perspectives/worldview into the curriculum and just "adding" it on. It will significantly change the substance of work with students. (anonymous comment on evaluation form after PD session 1).*

Another teacher suggested:

*I'd like to see Aboriginal based curriculum in other subject areas, for example, science... Yeah, with medicine, all kinds of stuff in science... And math... And reading... (ABP Teacher.13, p. 6).*

### **Ensure Access to Appropriate Resources**

As discussed above, teachers expressed a great deal of concern about having access to appropriate resources, as well as unit and lesson plans for putting these resources to good use. It is vitally important that teachers and students have access to good resources, particularly those in which Aboriginal people are able to give voice to their own experiences and representations. In this regard, the resource library at the Aboriginal Education Centre will be a lasting contribution to ongoing attempts to indigenize classroom materials across the TDSB. Having ongoing access to staff members with whom teachers can engage in discussions and conversation about bringing these resources into their classrooms is also of vital importance.

However, in addition to ensuring access to appropriate resources, it is important that teachers continue to work to develop their own assessments of materials. While it is important that teachers have access to knowledgeable members of the Aboriginal community (including staff at the Aboriginal Education Centre), requests for assistance must recognize the limited time and material resources of these key community members.

### **Establish a Respectful Classroom Environment**

The successes of professional development sessions provided by Pilot Project Staff were also felt in the classroom. Teachers reported that their students were able to engage in meaningful learning about important issues through their involvement in the Arts-Based Project. It is crucial that a respectful classroom environment be nurtured, so that students are able to learn and work through their own questions, and emotional responses. One teacher spoke about her students' responses to a presentation on residential schools provided by a Pilot Project staff member:

*You know certain things, there were certain experiences that they - just infuriated them, surprisingly it was, and it was the hair...The braids being cut. An image that she [the presenter] had, very powerful image, was the prayer, in the bunks. There were students kind of stiffly in positions and poses of prayer and that was, kind of stuck with a few of them.*

She went on to explain that a number of her students also took up the stories of students' attempts to escape the residential schools:

*that's something that definitely resonated after [the] presentation, you know. There weren't pictures of that but the stories of children trying to escape, even in the dead of winter, just to get away and not being prepared for the weather... And you could really feel the, "Why didn't they escape? I would have escaped, I would have... why? what was?". They were, they were angry, "Why?", they had a lot of "Why?"*

This anecdote demonstrates the possibilities of learning from this history, rather than simply about it. Such learning has the potential to spill over into contemporary relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the classroom. In particular, one teacher noted that through the respectful instruction about Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture encountered through the Pilot Project, relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students were fostered. In addition, Aboriginal students gained some sense of belonging and worthiness, while non-Aboriginal students were provided with the opportunity to learn directly from their Aboriginal classmates and to think about their relationships. When asked what she will remember most about the Arts-Based Project, this teacher said:

*How [the non-Aboriginal] children were surprised, especially with the video [I'm Not the Indian You Had In Mind]. They started to behave differently with other Native students.*

This teacher has two Aboriginal students in her classroom:

*One... had no friends. After watching the video, the other students were a lot more tolerant of her behaviour. She was more confident, too. The other students asked her about her culture. She felt that she belonged. (ABP Teacher.12, p. 2)*

### **Work Respectfully and Supportively with Aboriginal Students**

Aboriginal students can be found in most schools and classrooms across the TDSB, regardless of whether they are visible, or comfortable enough to self-identify. While all learners bear a responsibility to learn about Canada's history of colonization and its contemporary impacts, it is crucially important that teachers find ways of valuing their Aboriginal students, and working respectfully and supportively with them, their families and communities. Schools have long been very dangerous places for Aboriginal students. In order to bring this long legacy to an end, classroom environments in which Aboriginal students feel comfortable and confident self-identifying to teachers and classmates must be built. Aboriginal students should feel that they are represented in the classroom and curriculum in positive and appropriate ways, and that they are not asked to represent all Aboriginal people or to bear sole responsibility for teaching about this material. Only then can the traumatic legacy of residential schools and colonialism be addressed.

### **TEACHERS CONTRIBUTIONS TO AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR DECOLONIZATION**

Reaching these goals requires a large shift in teacher perspective, preparation, and an acceptance of their responsibilities. It requires that teachers be seen as – and see themselves as – central to the project of decolonization. Given the short period of time and the small number of staff, the UAEPP was successful in helping teachers to fulfill their responsibilities. But to achieve such a significant shift, more time, staff, resources, and patience are needed. This is important for non-Aboriginal students who need and want to learn about Aboriginal people, history, and culture. But it is *crucial* for Aboriginal students and their families.





## 4 Urban Aboriginal Education: School Responsibilities

*The whole school came. And we had a guest speaker, Tanya Senk from York University came and spoke about the importance of National Aboriginal Day. 8We also had Martha Toulouse, our Native Ojibwa instructor, she taught the children about the Seven Grandfather Teachings. So they explained the Teachings and read a book in the Ojibwa language about the Teachings. And then we unveiled – we did an art mural on the Seven Grandfather Teachings across the whole school. And then we unveiled that on the DVD and showed the children what it looked like, and then we followed that with the singing. (Lead Teacher.1, IB, p. 6)*

### 4.1 Defining School Responsibilities

Children come to know themselves and themselves in relationship with others through their home and school experiences (McLaren, 2007). Consequently how schools address or fail to address Aboriginal Education has a significant impact on all students. The UAEPP in the TDSB worked in collaboration with staff at the school level identifying useful strategies for creating decolonized and indigenized school environments. These were learning environments where Aboriginal students felt safe and supported in exploring their Aboriginality and where non-Aboriginal students had opportunities to know themselves in relationship with Aboriginal students. The Pilot Project staff were most successful in schools where the principals and vice principals were supportive of their presence and actions.

School principals have important roles and responsibilities in terms of establishing Aboriginal Education as a priority within their schools. A school's physical environment can be an initial indicator to students, their families, and visitors that there is a respectful acknowledgment and awareness of Aboriginal people and attention given to Aboriginal Education in the school. However concern cannot stop at the physical environment. The experience of belonging and respect that Aboriginal students and families have a right to expect is premised on staff attitudes and understanding, and the inclusion of Aboriginal experiences and perspectives in the school curriculum. Some principals are taking an active interest in understanding the concepts of decolonizing and indigenizing and are working in collaboration with the Pilot Project staff and with their school staff to transform the school environment.

In this chapter we report on the work Pilot Project staff did in schools. The chapter includes a description of school audits, and draws in particular on our interviews with librarians, school principals, and a Lead Teacher.

**Key Question: What are school level responsibilities for Aboriginal Education?**

### 4.2 Creating Decolonized and Indigenized School Communities: Learning from the UAEPP

There are 595 schools at 562 sites in the TDSB and when fully staffed the Pilot Project had 12 people. In order to be successful the staff had to be strategic. The Board is divided into quadrants and further divided into groupings referred to as "families of schools." Although there was always flexibility and all

staff members worked in collaboration planning events, on a day-to-day basis different staff took responsibility for specific areas of the Board. Additionally, particular schools were identified as key sites. These schools were identified based on the presence of Aboriginal students and/or the presence of interested teachers or principals. Given the short timelines of the Pilot Project, it was necessary to work with schools where interest, need, and or support existed from the start.

Schools came to be involved with the Pilot Project for different reasons including the following:

- Schools identified as having a high concentration of Aboriginal students;
- Schools that offered Ojibwa language classes;
- School teachers and principals identified Aboriginal students who were in need of support;
- Parents of children attending certain schools requested support from the Pilot Project staff in advocating on behalf of their children;
- School teachers self-identified as having a particular interest in participating in the project; and
- Aboriginal teachers working in particular schools requested support.

Schools were involved in the Pilot Project in different ways such as:

- Pilot Project staff worked with individual students in schools;
- Pilot Project staff held small group teaching circles for students in schools;
- Pilot Project staff did workshops for teachers;
- Classroom teachers participated in the Arts-Based Project and had Aboriginal artists do school visits;
- Schools hosted Pilot Project sponsored events;
- Classroom teachers took their students to workshops, assemblies, and events at the AEC; and
- Students who participated in Pilot Project events did teachings in their schools.

The level of involvement depended on both needs and staff availability.

## 4.2A School Stories

This section includes the stories of four schools and the varied ways in which the Pilot Project supported Aboriginal Education at the school level.

### **BURNT SAND SECONDARY SCHOOL**

*Burnt Sand is a Secondary School for grades 9 to 12 located in Scarborough, with a student population of 608 students. Of Burnt Sand's student population, 23% of the students have a language other than English as their primary language; 11% of students speak a language other than English at home; and 10% of the students have lived in Canada for less than five years.*

Pilot Project student success teacher Ms. Summers spent a considerable amount of time working in collaboration with teachers and students at this school. The principal noted that her involvement was particularly helpful to the Native Studies teacher who was teaching the course for the first time. During a site visit to the school Ms. Summers was observed interacting with students who clearly appreciated her support: she checked in with them regarding the status their of classes, asked about their homework assignments, and inquired about how things were going at home and if they needed anything. Students reported that Ms. Summers had a positive impact on their attitude toward school and their school attendance. They appreciated her interest in how they were doing. The principal stated that prior to her

work at the school few students were self-identifying as Aboriginal. As a result of her work and the Aboriginal focused events that she supported at the school, many more students chose to self-identify in what was becoming a safer, less discriminatory, and more positive learning environment.

*People should be proud of their identity and their background no matter what. And so it's all about the school environment and creating a welcoming place so that students are free to disclose. If they choose to disclose, will know that they'll not be ridiculed, bullied, put down. I think as we celebrate this and have staff and students become more knowledgeable—because that's the biggest thing—understanding. The more I understand of the Aboriginal people and their culture, the more I appreciate it and the more articulately I can speak about it. (Principal.1, p. 4)*

A Native Studies class was being offered at this school for a second year and the school was holding Aboriginal focused events that Aboriginal students were involved in planning. Aboriginal art and posters were displayed in both the main office and the guidance office. As a result of Pilot Project involvement the school has been moving toward decolonizing and indigenizing their community. They have been accomplishing this important task in a number of ways:

- Improving curriculum offerings by supporting the development of Native Studies;
- Actively attending to and supporting the well-being of Aboriginal students;
- Educating non-Aboriginal students about Aboriginal peoples and cultures, the history of colonialism, and contemporary issues, challenges, and strengths;
- Providing opportunities for Aboriginal students to become leaders and advisors in the education and “consciousness raising” of non-Aboriginal students and the whole school community; and
- Changing the physical environment to reflect Aboriginal presence in the school.

### **CRANBERRY RIVER JUNIOR PUBLIC SCHOOL**

*Cranberry River is a junior public school in Etobicoke representing grades JK to 5, with a student population of 250 students. 36% of the students have English as a Second Language with a total of 20 different languages spoken by the student population, and 16% of the students have lived in Canada for less than five years.*

Teachers from Cranberry River were involved in the Arts-Based Project for each of the two years of the Pilot Project. Pilot project staff worked with the classroom teachers sharing resources and providing direction for integrating Aboriginal content across the curriculum. Teachers stated that it would be hard to know how to hold events and support students without direction from the Pilot Project staff, as non-Aboriginal teachers they simply did not have access to the knowledge and understanding that staff brought. The Community Liaison held lunchtime Girls Group +1 meetings at the school and these students performed during an Assembly at the AEC.

An Aboriginal artist, who had visited the school during the week of June 21, reported, “it was the first time I saw National Aboriginal Day announced on a school sign that is usually reserved for announcing upcoming parent interviews and school holidays.” This might seem inconsequential. However, not only did it have a positive impact on the artist who had never heard a school publicly announce National Aboriginal Day to the community, but it signified the attention given to Aboriginal Education at this school. Working in collaboration with Artist/Educators Tanya Senk and Vanessa Dion Fletcher, the school also took on a mural project reflecting the Seven Grandfather Teachings. Aboriginal students took an

active role in creating the mural. Finally, a parent resource room was established that included a number of resources with a specific Aboriginal theme.

This school is also in the process of decolonizing and indigenizing their community in the following ways:

- Improving representation of Aboriginal peoples and perspectives in the curriculum by encouraging the integration of Aboriginal content across the curriculum;
- Recognizing how processes of colonization have affected Aboriginal women and men (and girls and boys) differently by actively attending to the well-being of Aboriginal young women;
- Using opportunities like National Aboriginal Day to educate non-Aboriginal students about Aboriginal peoples and cultures, the history of colonialism, and contemporary issues, challenges, and strengths (as in the Burnt Sand case);
- Providing space and opportunity for Aboriginal students to become leaders and advisors in the education of non-Aboriginal and the whole school community;
- Intervening in and overcoming historical relations of mistrust and alienation between Aboriginal families and communities and school through establishing a parent resource room; and
- Changing the physical environment (as in the Burnt Sand case) to reflect Aboriginal presence in the school.

### **SWAN LAKE MIDDLE SCHOOL**

*Swan Lake is a Middle School in North York offering grades six to eight, with a student population of 587 students. 63% of the students have a language other than English as their primary language and 14% of the students have lived in Canada for less than five years.*

Pilot Project staff organized a boys and girls group at this school and met during the lunch hour on a semi-regular basis. During the schools "Culture Day" events student success teacher Ms. Evans did an opening ceremony and song. The school gymnasium was filled with students, the vast majority of whom were first or second generation Canadians. When the assembly began, four young women joined Ms. Evans and were her 'helpers' in the opening ceremony. After the assembly students participated in a series of workshops that focused on learning about different cultures. Ms. Evans presented workshops to six groups of students and while the content of the workshops provided a simple introduction to Aboriginal people and issues, it served as an important opportunity to begin the process of decolonizing the school environment. During the opening and the workshops the Aboriginal students took on leadership roles serving as assistants to Ms. Evans, thereby accepting responsibility for sharing some of what they had learned with the whole of their school community.

Through these activities, Swan Lake Middle School has initiated the process of decolonizing and indigenizing the school environment in a few significant ways:

- Using school events such as the Culture Day workshops to present Aboriginal Education from Aboriginal perspectives;
- Practicing indigenous-informed teaching philosophy that charges learners with responsibility to share, when appropriate and safe, some of their teachings with others; and
- Changing the physical environment (as in the above two examples) to reflect Aboriginal presence in the school.

### **AURORA SANDS MIDDLE SCHOOL**

*Aurora Sands is a Middle School in Etobicoke representing grades six to eight, with a student population of 850 students. 67% of the students have a language other than English as their primary language with a total of 30 different languages spoken by the student population. 24% of the students have lived in Canada for less than five years.*

The Pilot Project staff became actively involved in this school community under tragic circumstances. During the 2009-2010 school year an Aboriginal student and her father were killed in a house fire. Pilot Project staff went to the school and met with the staff and students. They worked in collaboration with the staff to plan and lead a memorial service grounded in Aboriginal practices. On the day of the memorial 30 members of the student's family participated in the service. Through this process two teachers and six students from the school self-identified. One of the teachers became involved with the Arts-Based Project and working in collaboration with an Aboriginal artist engaged staff and students at the school in creating a mural in memory of the student. Art produced by Aurora Sands students became part of the Spring 2010 TDSB Aboriginal Art Show at the Toronto Police Academy. Students from the school visited the Police Academy to view the Art Show.

By the end of the first week of school in September 2010, teachers from Aurora Sands were already in touch with the staff at the AEC, asking about current projects and how they could continue their involvement with the AEC.

Aurora Sands Middle School likewise has initiated the process of decolonizing and indigenizing the school environment in some significant ways:

- Bridging the gap between Aboriginal families and school systems by reaching out to support families encountering significant loss and tragedy;
- Practicing indigenous-informed spiritual traditions and ceremonies when safe and appropriate in ways that do not involve non-Aboriginal people appropriating Aboriginal practices;
- Recognizing how changing the social and cultural environment to reflect and value Aboriginal tradition and presence (through the memorial service) creates space for Aboriginal teachers and students to self-identify as Aboriginal; and
- Using positive imagery and arts-based interventions (as in the previous three examples) to showcase Aboriginal presence and creativity in the school.

### **4.2B UAEPP Staff Working in Collaboration with Schools**

The collaborative work between Pilot Project staff and school staffs was especially successful. Genuine collaboration created conditions that made it possible for schools to move toward decolonizing and indigenizing.

#### **ABORIGINAL STUDENT CONFIDENCE, PARTICIPATION AND SELF IDENTIFICATION**

The principals at Burnt Sand SS and Cranberry River MS were surprised to learn that their schools included a substantial Aboriginal student population. Both explained that they had not "recognized" the Aboriginal students in their schools. When Pilot Project staff became involved in organizing events and meeting with students and parents, students began to feel comfortable enough to self-identify.

*So, I was saying that the self-identification of students and their ability to say that they are of Aboriginal descent, to see themselves in the curriculum, to see themselves reflected in the school community, was a huge part of the work that the Aboriginal Education Centre did with us this particular year (Lead Teacher.1, I2 p. 1).*

*And I think we need to make it easier for children to self-identify and build more programs like this into, like embed it into the curriculum so that there is that Aboriginal voice, and the children see themselves in the curriculum, and they'll feel more confident and willing to identify. (Principal.2, p. 5)*

If principals want Aboriginal students to feel comfortable and accepted in their schools they cannot wait for students to come forward. They must actively support the inclusion of Aboriginal Education.

### **CURRICULUM SUPPORT**

Both the Lead Teacher and the School Principal at Cranberry River described the significant support Pilot Project staff offered classroom teachers, by providing resources and in-service workshops on how to use the resources in respectful ways. This guidance was especially important for preventing some common misuses of Aboriginal content.

*They're getting direct support in curriculum. We're having things set aside specifically for the Aboriginal community, and they [Aboriginal people] are also integrated—integrated, but also given a highlight in everything we do" (Lead Teacher.1, IB, p. 1)*

Pilot project staff met with teachers individually, held workshops for teachers at schools, and delivered professional development in-service teacher education workshops.

### **UAEPP AND TDSB SCHOOL COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS**

Schools were invited to view and participate in a variety of events organized and presented by Pilot Project staff. These events included

- Aboriginal Education Month Assemblies in November 2008 and November 2009;
- Louis Riel Day Student Symposium in November 2009;
- Aboriginal Veterans' Sunrise Ceremony & Community Breakfast in November 2009;
- Showing of the documentary film "Reel Injun" on Hollywood representations of Aboriginal people; and
- Drama Co-op Presentation titled *NDA BIBAAMSE (My Journey)*.

Schools were invited to attend and participate in these events that provided opportunities for teachers and students to access Aboriginal teachings and perspectives, to learn about the Pilot Project and the AEC, and to come to know about the Aboriginal community within the TDSB.

Some Non-Aboriginal teachers and parents expressed concerns to school principals about the amount of time being spent on Aboriginal Education.

*When we were thinking about being culturally responsive, and we look out and see a whole sea of Black faces, that's culturally responsive for that, right. But how then do you maintain that cultural responsive approach and then embed the Aboriginal perspective in that, and why would that be important for some students? (Lead Teacher.1, IA p. 3)*

*In terms of awareness it's [the Pilot Project has] helped, because the teachers are wonderful. They want to include all perspectives, but it may not have been obvious to them that the Aboriginal voice was an important one as well. (Principal.2, p. 2)*

When this happened Pilot Project staff helped teachers' and administrators' respond to their questions and concerns by explaining the importance of Aboriginal Education for all students. The Pilot Project staff had key contacts in each school, these were people committed to the project of decolonizing and indigenizing who could respond to questions and concerns.

### **SUPPORTING SCHOOL CONNECTIONS WITH THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY**

*They've (UAE PP staff) been supporting us through most of the year through our programs here, either with resources or with access to other resources like performances, artists. Of course, Sara has come in as the liaison, so she's worked extensively with a group of our students and with some of our parents. We've also received support from them with our Ojibwa teacher. (Principal.2, p. 1)*

Pilot Project staff visited schools on a regular basis supporting and facilitating connections between schools and the Aboriginal community. Through the Arts-Based Program, for example, staff facilitated connections between Aboriginal artists and schools. The Seniors' Aboriginal Literacy Project, a project that linked Aboriginal Elders with elementary school students, also operated in two schools with support from the UAEPP. The UAEPP staff also facilitated and sponsored the practice of restorative justice circles. The Restorative Justice training involved approximately 35 participants from Equitable and Inclusive Schools, Safe Schools, social workers, teachers, principals, and behavioural teachers from the TDSB, and Aboriginal Education Centre staff. It involved two-day training sessions and subsequently was put into practice in classrooms, with families, school administrators, and students.

### **RESOURCES AND LIBRARIANS**

We interviewed two elementary school librarians who were known to have an interest in Aboriginal Education. While one of the librarians was aware of the UAEPP and had accessed support from the AEC, the second librarian was not aware of either the project or the AEC. Both librarians expressed a desire to have increased opportunities to work with the Pilot Project staff. As one informant put it: *"I think the librarians role is so important for letting teachers know what is available"* (Librarian.2, p. 9). Both librarians stated that unless they are doing the Grade Three or the Grade Six Aboriginal related Provincial Curriculum Units, teachers do not request Aboriginal resources. These librarians take their responsibility for introducing classroom teachers and students to Aboriginal content very seriously. They expressed the need for in-servicing with regard to resource acquisition: they themselves and surely other librarians would like to know what books and resources are available so that they can pass that information onto teachers and students.

As part of their focus on curriculum development, Pilot Project staff worked on creating an extensive Aboriginal Resource Centre. The Centre is housed in the AEC and includes many relevant, appropriate, and excellent resources:

- Literature Based Resource Guides and Classroom Kits;
- Resource guides revised and published for Aboriginal Education Month, Louis Riel Day, National Aboriginal Day;
- Aboriginal authored picture books and novels; and

- An extensive collection of books for staff interested in decolonizing and indigenizing the self and school.

***The principals and teachers interviewed were adamant in their support of the Pilot Project staff, they recognized both their own need for support as well as the exemplary work the staff were doing in terms of supporting students and school communities in creating change.***

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### 4.3 Barriers and Challenges Confronted: Audits, Attitudes, and Resistance to Change

The lack of representation and the misrepresentation of Aboriginal people contribute to ongoing conditions of oppression (Churchill, 2002; King, 2008; Staurowsky, 1999). Schools are named as key sites in which children are introduced to stereotypical representations (Dion, 2009; Francis, 1992). The relationship between representation and oppression is complex and investigating that relationship provides opportunities for people to uncover what they know and what they do not know about Aboriginal people. The Arts-Based Project provided an opportunity for the Pilot Project staff to address issues and questions of representation with teachers. See Chapter 3 of this report for a detailed description of that project.

In this section of Chapter 4, we draw on data collected through our auditing of schools and a school case study to report on the absence of positive and presence of negative representations of Aboriginal people in TDSB Schools.

#### 4.3A Physical Environments: Reporting on the School Audits

*My son is mixed race, his father is Aboriginal and I am a Haitian-Canadian. During black history month at his school there are assemblies and morning announcements “celebrating” and informing him about his “blackness,” I see posters on the walls of his school and books in the school library that represent his blackness, and don’t get me wrong I appreciate it. But what about his Aboriginal side, how come there is no representation of his Aboriginal side? (Parent.6, p. 1)*

The question posed by this parent draws attention to the lack of positive representations of Aboriginal people in schools.

The TDSB has been attentive to acknowledging particular kinds of diversity. Students see posters emphasizing respect for racial and language diversity in their schools. Although the effectiveness of these messages in actually contributing to equitable relationships is called into question by many critical race theorists, most acknowledge the importance of representation to students’ identity and belonging (Dei, 1996; James, 2010). In this study, *Talking Stick* informants were unified in their belief that the absence of positive representations of Aboriginal people contributes to the reproduction of stereotypical ways of knowing. This often-made point is supported by much of the existing research literature (Battise, 1998).



## DESCRIPTION, PURPOSE AND METHOD

School audits were conducted in 18 TDSB schools. In the majority of cases, research assistants<sup>1</sup> (RAs) conducted the audits when they were doing school visits to interview teachers and or observe Pilot Project sponsored events. RAs toured public spaces in the school including the main offices, lobby, hallways, and when possible, school libraries. RAs provided descriptions of what they saw displayed on walls, bulletin boards, and library shelves, and in display cases, library databases, and other common features and resources of schools.

The school audit report included 3 questions.

1. Does the school display any posters, images, and messages celebratory of difference and diversity? Describe location, content, and impact.
2. Does the school have any Aboriginal positive art, messages, and images? Describe location, content, and impact.
3. Does the school library have books, magazines, films, or other resources with Aboriginal content? Please give a detailed description of the content.

## RESULTS OF THE AUDITS

1. In 17 of the 19 schools audited, professionally produced and what appeared to be permanent posters representing and celebrating racial and/or language diversity were displayed. This included for example the “Legacy of our Leaders” poster featuring important figures of African descent and a “Celebrate Asian Heritage” poster.
2. In one of the 19 schools, a poster announcing National Aboriginal Day was displayed.
3. In five of the 19 schools, student produced (and what appeared to be temporary) Aboriginal themed artwork was displayed.
4. In four of the five schools where student produced Aboriginal themed art was displayed, these schools had participated in the ABP.
5. In two of the 19 schools audited, there is a large identified Aboriginal student population. These schools had a variety of professionally produced posters with positive representations of Aboriginal people and student produced art displayed.
6. In one school that bears the name of an Aboriginal Nation, permanent Aboriginal themed murals adorn the walls.
7. In one school, student produced projects on an Aboriginal theme were displayed. These projects included inaccurate information about Aboriginal people including for example “*The Algonquians hunted eagles in July, Indian tribes had flags, Mohawk men wore breech clothes with leggings and Mohawk women wore tiaras, Mi’kmaq does not use boats like normal people [sic].*”
8. Principals were reluctant to have their schools audited.

## DISCUSSION

Although this audit was limited by both time constraints and the lack of access to schools, it does provide a snapshot that reflects typical physical environments of TDSB schools. The most striking result

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<sup>1</sup> Research Assistants were graduate students working in the Faculty of Education or the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University invited to work on the project by the Principal Researcher on the basis of their interest in Aboriginal Education.

is the lack of reference to or acknowledgement of Aboriginal presence even in schools where there is significant attention to “diversity” on display. The experience of attending a school where diversity is acknowledged and celebrated but where your diversity is ignored can be especially alienating. The inclusion of posters can be seen as a simple first step. Some would argue that the posters should not appear until school staff members are prepared to act in ways respectful of Aboriginal people. Nonetheless, posters could also act as a reminder and/or as an introduction to the need for attention to Aboriginal Education.

Participation in the Arts-Based Project significantly increased the probability of finding respectful Aboriginal themed student produced art on display. And as part of the work of the Pilot Project, a poster with the word “Welcome” in Aboriginal Languages was developed and is being distributed to schools in the Fall of 2010.

The school that did have permanent Aboriginal themed artwork raised concerns. The RA noted that neither the artist names nor biographical notes were included with the work. Given that there was no plaque acknowledging the significance of the artwork, there was no way of knowing whether Aboriginal artists produced the art. A greater concern was the disconnect that exists between the name of the school and the art itself. The artwork is representative of the woodland tradition typical of Ojibwa First Nations yet the school is named for a nation whose traditional territory is not even in close proximity to that of the Ojibwa. There is no connection between the art and the name of the school. This suggests that one nation is interchangeable with another, collapses the differences between nations, and reproduces the understanding that all Aboriginal people are the same.

The display of student-produced work that includes inaccurate information is also problematic. Schools are in part student spaces and their work must be displayed. However, teachers have a responsibility to ensure that work displayed in public spaces be accurate. This is especially important when the work being displayed reflects what students are learning about people. In her audit notes the RA wrote, “These poster board assignments were inaccurate, dispassionate, and backward-looking to say the least” (Audit #17). In response to this audit more than one researcher has asked, “What impression does this give about the teachers attitude toward Aboriginal people? It is as if it did not matter that the work was full of inaccuracies.”

Completing the school audits brought the RAs into contact with school principals. Principals were often extremely defensive about the audits. The research team had a letter of support from the superintendent responsible for Aboriginal Education yet principals were reluctant to have their schools audited, they failed to return phone calls, and stated that an RA visiting the school would be too disruptive even when the RAs explained that they would visit after school hours and would only do a walk through the public spaces of the school. While some of this defensiveness can be attributed to the over-surveillance that schools are experiencing, RAs reported that the response from principals and office staff was especially heightened when “Aboriginal Education” was mentioned. “Oh Aboriginal Education, that has nothing to do with us, why would you want to visit this school” was a typical response. On more than one occasion principals told the RAs because there were no Aboriginal students in their school, there were no positive representations of Aboriginal people and no need for such representations in the school.

Two critical lessons emerge from the content and conduction of the school audits:

- The understanding that decolonization is an ongoing process, that neither a single administrator nor school is to “blame” for Canada’s colonial history or Aboriginal children’s negative experiences of school, and that audits can teach us much about the presence, absence, and overall contents of imagery and messaging about Aboriginal people in our schools.

- The understanding that introduction of positive representations, though necessary, is not sufficient to achieve student well-being or the decolonization and indigenization of schools. To work toward these objectives, in-service activities and resources that prepare school staff members to act in ways respectful of Aboriginal people should be introduced along with images and materials that emphasize respect for Aboriginal people.

### 4.3B The Issue at Crystal Lake: Encountering Resistance

At different times and in different ways, Pilot Project staff encountered resistance from TDSB employees including school principals, classroom teachers, and administrative staff. The incident at Crystal Lake provides the opportunity to look closely at and understand resistance on the part of non-Aboriginal people to the process of decolonization.

#### THE ISSUE

In the fall of 2008 staff at the AEC was contacted by representatives of a school Equity Committee requesting assistance with efforts to engage their school community in replacing the school's logo. The school's logo was a stereotypical image of a "Red Indian wearing a feathered headdress." Committee members were concerned that the logo reflected a negative representation of Aboriginal people. Although the logo had been a part of the school's history for more than 50 years and many members of the school community were deeply attached to the logo, the Equity Committee wanted help from the AEC to initiate change.

#### AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

Beginning in the fall of 2008, meetings were held to develop a plan for involving the school community in the design of a new logo. The process became exceedingly difficult as individuals with shared commitments to issues of equity and respectful representation came up against individuals with shared commitments to their experience of history and tradition, and a firm belief that there was nothing disrespectful about the logo.

The TDSB Equity Department was called in and according to the equity policy the logo had to change. The school's Equity Committee worked in collaboration with Pilot Project staff to develop a series of events to involve the school community in learning about and learning from Aboriginal experiences and perspectives. Teachers on the school Equity Committee firmly believed that education would lead to change. Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA) was commissioned and developed a short drama presentation to explore the issues. Working in collaboration with Pilot Project staff and the school Equity Committee, members of NEPA developed a play titled *Takin Pride*.



**What's in a name? A school battles over its team name and logo.**

Takin' Pride deals with the use of Aboriginal imagery in sports logos. The show was commissioned by a TDSB Secondary School in 2009 to facilitate the discussion around the desire to change their team "Warrior" logo. Using material from interviews with teaching staff and students alike, Yvette Nolan's piece is a funny and poignant look at the appropriation of and misinformation about First Nation's iconography. Takin' Pride was also generously supported by the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project at the Toronto District School Board.

The show was presented during three assemblies so that all students would have the opportunity to view the play. After each performance members of Native Earth and Pilot Project staff members participated in "Question and Answer" sessions with teachers and students. While students and staff were aware and were talking about the decision to change the school logo, presentation of the play was the first opportunity to introduce issues to the student body. The Q & A sessions created a space for some students to express their anger and frustration at what they experienced as "outsiders" coming into their school and telling them what they could or could not do. Teachers who did not support changing the logo demonstrated their resistance by continuing to wear clothing bearing the logo.

In the weeks following the play, two workshops were presented at the school and about 70 students who expressed an interest were invited to participate. Patricia Schuyler, who at that time was the coordinator of the group for residential school survivors and Andrew Wesley, a residential school survivor made a visit to the school and spoke with students. A second session presented by an Aboriginal historian focused on the history and culture of Aboriginal people in the vicinity of the school. Finally, approximately 20 students made a trip to the Woodland Culture Centre in Mohawk Territory at Brandford. The students who participated in these events shared what they learned with fellow students during their regular classes.

Student dialogues with each other recorded during a *Talking Circle* reflects their emerging understanding and their working through of their understanding of themselves in relationship with the logo and with racism.

*Hailey: I got the email, saying, "Oh, yeah, that is the logo—or the logo is the tribe that was from here," but I know it's not because I've done my research. So yes, it is very racist. But at the same time, we do look up to it. So changing that is the problem.*

*Nicole: I'm so confused now. I don't know. I think it's racist, but it's not. I don't know.*

*Sima: It's like I can understand how it's racist, but what it really means to us, it's all good stuff.*

*Nicole: I know. I've been saying this over and over, that it's all in perception—*

- Angel: *Because of how we're conditioned...*
- Nicole: *And your perspective and the way you look at it.*
- Angel: *It's because we've been conditioned and not properly educated, so we think of it as a positive thing. So now learning that it's a negative thing, we're like—but the way I learned it from when I was younger, I was always taught it was a positive thing. So that's why if you were to go up to a lot of kids in the school, they'd be like, "Oh no, there's nothing wrong with it at all." That's because of how we learned it, and once you learn it, it's hard to get it out of your head after that.*
- Sima: *Yeah. Because we—I don't think any of us ever thought of the logo as anything bad. We always thought of it as a good pride thing, and then when this issue came up, we were all kind of—*
- Angel: *Lost. In the dark.*
- Sima: *Yeah, lost and confused. Like, wow, could it be something like that? Because we never even looked at it like that—*
- Angel: *And then you start thinking about it different—yeah, because you start looking at it with a different perspective.*
- Sima: *As racist or as stereotypical because we always thought it was something good. So when that came up, we were all kind of lost and confused.*

With support from the Pilot Project these students took on the task of difficult learning (Britzman, 1998). They were engaged in a process of seeing themselves implicated in supporting a stereotypical representation of Aboriginal people. Although this was a small group of students they were active in sharing what they were learning with their classmates. However not everyone was interested in learning and supporting the change.

### UNDERSTANDING RESISTANCE: PROTECTING THE SELF

The depth of resistance encountered by the Pilot Project staff was at times overwhelming. Some teachers, students, and members of the school's alumni association rallied in support of keeping the logo insisting that there was nothing disrespectful about the representation of Aboriginal people.



Looking closely at the data including individual interviews with teachers, students, and school administration, a Talking Circle with students, and observation notes made at a series of meetings, what

emerges are forms of resistance premised on deeply held beliefs that operate in complex and interlocking ways to protect the self.<sup>2</sup>

*I loved the logo, personally. I did not find it offensive. I can understand that the logo is offensive to certain people and I understand that it contravenes the Board's Equity Foundation statement and that because of that, we needed to go down a new path. But personally, I liked the logo, and I was not offended by it. (Staff.4A, pg. 3).*

*I've heard comments from teachers in this building who've said things like, "well, we're not racist. I mean we already know this stuff." I've learned that people are really resistant to change and sometimes sort of challenging their own thinking and so that makes this work more difficult. (CL Teacher.2, p. 18)*

*Why is [the logo] suddenly offensive 12 years later?...we've been to groups and a Mohawk group that was consulted said it was a true representation of their warrior. They did not have a problem with it. It is a proper representation, not cartoonized. (CL Teacher.8, p. 3)*

*And the most difficult part for a lot of people is that [the logo image] is that it doesn't offend Aboriginal people. It didn't offend some Aboriginal people. (Staff.4A, p. 17).*

*You've got a staff who are predominantly hostile towards this change. You've got a staff that takes offense you know when certain issues are being raised and you have to a certain extent a student body that is mimicking the same thing. (CL Teacher .5, p. 13)*

*The teachers at the school, they're very special. Their resistance, they felt that they were being talked down to, or they thought that they were not being treated with professional courtesy in the sense of "oh, you're coming in and your talking to us about stuff that we already know" and you know, the fact that you're coming in here and talking about this stuff are you insinuating that, you know, that we are anti-Aboriginal or anti-Indigenous. The sense, the sense was that there was some tension in the room. (CL Teacher.5, p. 9)*

*Some teachers don't even care. I guess. They don't try and talk about it in class. I don't know if they feel like it's not needed. I feel like they're not looking at, at different perspectives and, like, when somebody in our class says, "Oh, changing the logo is dumb, it's so dumb. I don't get it." The teacher wouldn't say-this is one of the teachers, she'd be like, "Oh, it's just the school board; they're going to change it." They won't even try to explain it. (Student.4, p. 13)*

*Most of my teachers think its [logo change] just pretty stupid. But my history teacher wants it to change; my geography teacher was thinking about who would have to pay for it; and the rest of my teachers were like, they think it shouldn't change because it's really, it's just, it's no word for it, its just something silly to fight for and argue about. (Student.3, pg. 5)*

The desire to protect the self from accusations of racist practice and the need to protect the stories that enhance one's sense of self, including stories of a proud high school tradition associated with the warrior experience, informed people's actions. Many people rejected the suggestion that the logo was racist because they did not in any way want to be seen as racist but at the same time, wanted to identify with the meanings and emotions the logo held for them as current and former students and teachers.

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of resistance and protection of self see Piper (1993) and Dion, Susan (2009).

Specifically, some staff, students, and alumni, resisted any discussion of racism on the grounds that:

- While some people may find it offensive it is not racist;
- Some Aboriginal people like the logo further proving that it is not racist;
- The issue is about “political correctness” not about racist stereotyping;
- It is more comfortable and easier to talk about ‘resistance to change’ than it is to talk about racism and the history of racism in Canada; and
- As teachers we have already done anti-racist education, we know what we need to know about racism further in-service education and or professional development is a waste of our time.

During the Q & A sessions after one performances of *Takin Pride* the discussion became hostile when students, angry about the change of logo, directed their anger at the Aboriginal performers. During professional development sessions Pilot Project staff experienced anger and frustration from the school staff. While Aboriginal educators, performers, and artists have accepted a pedagogical responsibility and engage non-Aboriginal people in learning—learning about Aboriginal issues from Aboriginal people must be accomplished in respectful ways and not at the ‘expense’ of Aboriginal people.

#### REFLECTING ON THE PROCESS: WHAT WAS LEARNED

The incidents at Crystal Lake emphasize the need for decolonizing and indigenizing education for all students and staff, and the importance of not targeting only those schools with an identified Aboriginal student population. When asked about his knowledge of Aboriginal issues and involvement with Aboriginal Education prior to the “logo issue,” the principal responded,

*I would say very little, next to nothing, because it wasn’t—didn’t really—never came out as an issue. And I’ve tried to find out how many kids here have Aboriginal ancestry or roots. And it’s very difficult to glean that information because it’s not on their records. As far as I know, there’s only one student here. (Principal.4A, p. 2)*

And, looking back at the series of events the principal reported,

*I should have put more thought into this, more education for students and teachers would have helped, it was an incredibly stressful time at the school. (Principal.4A, p. 19)*

Teachers and students at the school shared similar thoughts on the need for more education.

*Definitely in terms of Aboriginal history, I mean I didn’t learn it in school, haven’t learned it formally [pause] still, I definitely don’t know a lot about it. (Teacher.5, p. 4)*

*I would think that we would really have to look at our curriculum in areas, say for example, history, geography, art as a start, or even music...look at how we can...uh...well, let’s face it, we are living in Canada and how much knowledge do I have of Aboriginal art? As a young person living in Canada either as a new immigrant or as a second, third, fourth generation Canadian? What exposure do I have? What exposure do I have in history? In geography? In politics class? (Principal.4B, p. 8)*

*I think the main thing is that we never—we weren’t educated before, that is why there is so much struggle. But, if we were educated, there wouldn’t be so much worry and everything*

*like this. So, I think education if we were educated before on this issues. Not like two pages in a textbook, right? (Student.4, p. 15)*

When this report was going to print I received a good news email message from a student who reported:

*My school no longer has our old logo anymore, the gyms have been re-furnished and painted, The only old logo we can find now are in the school's old pictures of our athletes and such. I thought you would be happy to know the great news :)*

Not wanting to deal with the lingering animosity and stress, one of the teachers who played a key role in instigating change left the school. Yet as a result of the Pilot Project's interventions and the commitment of staff and students at the school, both she and the principal indicate that a great deal of learning took place.

*I see a number of students teaching each other...and speaking to each other...about the issue...so it's not just teacher to student or adult or experts from outside to student, it is student to student and sharing with one another. (Principal.4B, p. 5)*

*So, but for some people, watching that last piece, you know, the shift happened. So, that was meaningful I think, in terms of watching that shift for some people, but it was really problematic in terms of resistance. (Teacher.6, p. 5)*

Understanding how to support change at the school level is a lasting legacy of the Pilot Project's involvement at Crystal Lake. In summary, three significant lessons emerge from the resistance encountered at Crystal Lake:

- When given the space and opportunity, many students will take on the task of difficult learning and decolonization. Those who participated in Talking Circles organized by the research team were engaged in a process of seeing themselves implicated in supporting a stereotypical representations and active in sharing their perspectives with their classmates.
- Lack of knowledge about Aboriginal people and Canada's colonial history combined with non-Aboriginal people's emotional investments in stereotypical symbols that affirm their sense of self in large part fuel resistance to change. This suggests that some resistance is to be expected and that school administrators, teachers, and staff need more knowledge, resources, and support to positively contend with and overcome such resistance.
- Difficulties encountered in changing the logo speak to the absolute necessity of decolonizing education for all students and staff, non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal alike, and not only within those schools with an identified Aboriginal student population.

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## 4.4 Key Components of Decolonized and Indigenized School Communities

### PHYSICAL SPACE

The integration of permanently displayed Aboriginal art produced by Aboriginal people and posters acknowledging Aboriginal presence would be an important step in transforming the physical space within TDSB schools. The Pilot Project cultivated positive relationships between schools and a number of emerging Aboriginal artists in the city of Toronto. Art could be purchased from these artists for display in schools where the artists have worked in collaboration with teachers. This would be an excellent form of reciprocity and contribute to positive ongoing relationships between Aboriginal artists and school



communities. Additionally, in-service education with teacher librarians is a critical next step for the AEC. Teacher-librarians have a direct line to classroom teachers. Thus they need to know what resources are available and where to purchase those resources for their schools. Students need access to stories written by Aboriginal authors. Those books need to get into the hands of teacher librarians who will, with some education themselves, know how to get them into the hands of students and teachers. Principals must communicate to staff that when displaying student-produced work that involves the representation of Aboriginal people. It is the teachers' responsibility to ensure that the work is respectful. School principals cannot wait for an equity committee to take up the issue of racist logos or the absence of positive representations of Aboriginal people.

From these learnings, two recommendations for changing physical and social spaces to Aboriginal Education at TDSB emerge:

- Change the physical and social environment to reflect Aboriginal presence in the school. Recognize how changing the social and cultural environment to reflect and value Aboriginal presence creates space for Aboriginal teachers and students to identify as Aboriginal. At the same time, appreciate that to achieve student well-being and to decolonize schools, positive representations must be supplemented by in-service activities and resources that prepare school staff members to act in respectful and knowledgeable ways toward Aboriginal people.
- Anticipate resistance from non-Aboriginal students and staff, especially where people lack knowledge about Canada's colonial history and have significant emotional investments in stereotypes of Aboriginal people. Support school administrators, teachers, and staff with knowledge, resources, and support they need to positively face and deal with resistance.

### **ABORIGINAL CONTENT ACROSS THE CURRICULUM FOR ALL STUDENTS**

The inclusion of Aboriginal content cannot be limited to the Grade Three "Pioneers and Aboriginal People" and the Grade Six "Explorers and Aboriginal Peoples" Provincial Curricular Units. Aboriginal content can and must be integrated across the curriculum at all grade levels and for all students. This is critical to creating a decolonized and indigenized space for all learners. Non-Aboriginal students' perceptions and understanding of Aboriginal people and themselves in relationship with Aboriginal people will not change and or develop in positive ways until schools take active steps to integrate opportunities for non-Aboriginal students to 'come to know' Aboriginal people. For generations school were responsible for constructing Aboriginal people as the "Romantic, Mythical and sometimes Savage Other" schools must now accept responsibility to actively participate in recognizing the humanity of Aboriginal people. Providing opportunities for all students to engage with Aboriginal subject material across the curriculum and at every grade level will contribute to that change.

These findings point toward two main recommendations for incorporation of Aboriginal content across the curriculum:

- Work towards improving course offerings and creating better balance and fairer representation in curricular material by supporting the development and implementation of Native Studies classes and by encouraging the incorporation of Aboriginal content and perspectives across the curriculum.
- Educate non-Aboriginal students, teachers, and administrators about Aboriginal peoples and cultures, the history of colonialism, and contemporary issues using opportunities like National Aboriginal Day. In addition to content, decolonize education by including methods for engaging learners in a process of seeing how they are implicated in the reproduction of stereotypes and

colonial relations. Provide ways for all students to become active in sharing their new knowledge and perspectives with their classmates.

## PARENT OUTREACH

In different ways Pilot Project staff worked consistently, patiently, and respectfully to reach out and support parents' involvement with their children's school community. The Pilot Project staff worked with students and without pressure or judgment parents were invited to participate.

*[A] lot of parents do come out for the events. And I found that the response was very—the response was very happy having the children participate. That is probably more of what I've seen through the events we have here. The people are happy. The parents are happy about the Aboriginal Education Centre. (Staff.8, p. 9)*

*And then one parent said to me at the parent opening of the Resource Room, "I would like books to keep on my own culture, but where do I buy these?" So, I called GoodMinds, so again, we acted.*

*I know of one parent who, in particular, that came to our Learning Institute. We had a learning community through the SCEE Project (School and Community Engaged Education Project)<sup>3</sup>, and she was the one that said that she wanted to see the Seven Grandfathers' Teachings incorporated into the curriculum here. She knew something about that, and we decided to act on that immediately. She saw that what she had suggested was valued by us and would be used immediately. So, we did. (Lead Teacher.1, 11B, p. 3)*

*"Well, we've seen a huge change this year. Like, we often in our conversations use the term 'transformed', the learning environment at Cranberry River. So the children are happily engaged, and their parents are happily engaged in the school community." (Principal.2, p. 1)*

There is a long history of Aboriginal people being questioned and researched and then having their contributions ignored. Our data show that responding to parents' contributions demonstrates respect and fosters further participation, which thus constitutes our fifth recommendation.

- Invite parents of Aboriginal children and youth to participate and contribute to the school community and act on parents' contributions.

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

As part of their work with schools, Pilot Project staff nurtured positive relationships between and among parents, Aboriginal community members, and schools. This was accomplished through various projects including the Arts-Based project, Native Earth Performing Arts, and the Senior Literacy Project. In some instances Pilot Project staff joined community members on their school visits in other instances community members visited schools on their own.

When members of the Aboriginal community visit schools, staff must take responsibility for not only providing a warm welcome but for extending the warmth through the whole of the visit. During casual conversation a community member shared the following story:

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<sup>3</sup> The School and Community Engaged Learning Project (administered by the York Centre for Education and Community) is a three-year partnership between the Faculty of Education, York University and the Toronto District School Board (TDSB).

*I was on a trip to Nunavut this past summer. I found myself in a boat with people I had just met, who spoke a different language than I did, and who lived on a different land than I did. Yet, I felt more at home, more welcomed, more seen in that boat than I did in TDSB school staff rooms. Teachers invited me to their schools and then did very little to make me feel welcomed or comfortable. (CM3, Personal Communication with PI, July 2010)*

To a certain extent schools are closed communities. Teachers, principals, secretaries, care takers, and students make school their home and can sometimes forget how outsiders experience the space. Cultivating positive and on-going relationships requires consistent attention and this represents another significant recommendation for schools undertaking the important work of de-colonization and indigenization:

- Cultivate relationships with Aboriginal community members by inviting them to participate in school events, offer opportunities for teaching and learning experiences, and demonstrate appreciation for their presence.

### **ACKNOWLEDGING AND CELEBRATING PRESENCE**

Student, parent, teacher, and Pilot Project staff insights and experiences emphasize the importance of not waiting for or expecting students (and teachers) to come forward and not waiting for a classroom teacher to take the issues on, but actively seeking support and accepting the responsibility to learn. Acknowledging and celebrating Aboriginal presence is not the sole responsibility of Aboriginal people. Canadians live in relationship with Aboriginal people and all Canadians have a responsibility to come to know and understand that relationship. Following from these insights, we make two final recommendations for decolonizing our schools:

- Intervene in and work to overcome historical and contemporary relations of mistrust and alienation between Aboriginal families and communities and schools through outreach to parents and communities, in on-going ways and in times of difficulty and celebration.
- Where and when appropriate and safe, provide opportunities for Aboriginal students to become leaders and advisors in the education of non-Aboriginal students and the whole school.



## 5 Make it a Priority: School Board Roles & Responsibilities

*It takes an understanding, it takes an acknowledgement, it takes the willingness to work and support, to listen and to provide concrete programs and resources. It's—but the attitude is everything, and the understanding is everything. And that is—that will certainly stay with me. (Admin#3, 1, p. 23).*

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### 5.1 Identifying Board Responsibilities

With some limitations, the UAEPP in the TDSB did have a positive system wide impact. Additionally, useful strategies for addressing Aboriginal Education were identified. Most importantly the research revealed that in order to accomplish comprehensive change, Aboriginal Education must be recognized as a priority by the Board and must be actively supported at all levels. Attention to Aboriginal Student Well-Being and Aboriginal subject material must be made a priority across the system.

Addressing Aboriginal Education in the urban context is a complex challenge that involves:

- Decolonizing of learning environments and experiences;
- Provision of decolonizing and indigenizing in-service professional development for all staff;
- Support of Aboriginal Student Well-Being; and
- Development and maintenance of positive relationships with the urban Aboriginal community.

The work is both multi-faceted and difficult. It requires fundamental shifts in approaches to education and requires those involved in the system to confront ignorance, fear, and firmly established belief systems tied to conceptions of self and nation.

In this chapter we describe some of the varied events and activities organized by the UAEPP in partnership with both internal and external departments/organizations. Addressing responsibilities for Aboriginal Education at the Board level, we focus on two projects that were particularly successful. These are the Riverdale Project completed in collaboration with external partner York University, and the Drama Co-op, an internal partnership supported by the Arts Department, Co-op Education, and Food Share.

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### 5.2 Accepting Responsibility: Learning From the UAEPP

The success of the project was accomplished in part through the positive partnerships that the UAEPP staff was able to establish. Collaborations with both internal and external partners, including departments, institutions, and agencies (identified below), allowed Pilot Project staff to create sustainable change by laying the groundwork for integrating Aboriginal Education across the curriculum.

## 5.2A Internal Partnerships

### LEARNING FROM INTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

*I certainly developed a deeper understanding of what it means to be an ally and what it means to do, you know, that work. (Admin#3, 1, p. 11)*

*[D]eveloping the AEC staff, having people in place to do the work was a huge accomplishment of the project, without them the work would not be possible, and given the needs of the board what we've done is only just a beginning, and so what is necessary is a system change so that in addition to the AEC doing specific work that Aboriginal Education become a recognized priority and integrated across the system, what we've done is a start in terms of creating the environment in which the partnerships can continue to develop and the integration can happen. (Admin.1, IB, p. 15)*

Project administrators explained that while working in partnership could be time consuming, internal partnerships were essential for integrating and addressing Aboriginal Education across the system (see internal partnerships chart). And although Pilot Project staff recognized the significance and necessity of these collaborations, they also reported some of the challenges involved in establishing good working relationships with TDSB departments.

DEPARTMENT	YEAR	EVENT & DESCRIPTION
Guidance Department	08/09/10	Ongoing collaboration – present at quadrant guidance meetings, introducing the AEC and highlighting services available for Aboriginal Students
Outdoor Education	08/09	60 Students attended Culture Camp on the Toronto Island
Arts Department	08/09/10	Arts-Based Project, Drama Co-op
Co-op Department	09/10	Drama Co-op
Student Success	09/10	Presented at a Workshop in Sept 2009 – Identifying and Responding to the Needs of Aboriginal Students
Staff Development	09/10	Orientation for Beginning Teachers
Equity Department	09/10	Louis Riel Day Student Symposium, Presentations and workshops for 200 Students in Grades 7-12, Co-sponsored a showing of the film <i>Reel Injuns</i>

Interviews, Talking Circles, and observation notes of collaborative projects with Pilot Project staff and internal partners indicate that partnerships worked best when the non-Aboriginal staff had a commitment to Aboriginal Education, when there was mutual respect for each department's expertise, and when there was a shared goal. The challenges in accomplishing successful partnerships derive in part from a lack of understanding on the part of some TDSB staff of the significance of Aboriginal Education. At times Pilot Project staff had to work extremely hard to convince TDSB staff why collaboration "made sense" or as one staff put it, "address and respond to the resistance to seeing the relevance of Aboriginal Education" (Admin.1). Thus, while Pilot Project staff was impressed with the commitment of the non-Aboriginal TDSB community, the lack of knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal issues and the all too frequent demonstrations of disrespect shown to them as teachers overwhelmed them.

***Providing an introduction to Aboriginal and decolonizing education for all TDSB employees is a necessary step in addressing Aboriginal Student Well-Being and in creating a safe teaching / learning / work environment for all Aboriginal staff and community members.***

## 5.2B External Partnerships

The Pilot Project provided opportunities to cultivate links between the TDSB and Aboriginal agencies, support services, and arts and culture associations. These partnerships allowed for the integration of Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives into schools, thus supporting the goal of indigenizing and decolonizing of schools.

### LEARNING FROM EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

Establishing links between the TDSB and community organizations (listed below) has proven to be extremely important to the work of the project. These organizations have the capacity to provide students and families with culturally appropriate services and learning experiences. While many Aboriginal students and families know and make use of these services, others are unaware of the supports and resources available to Aboriginal people within the city. The joint projects initiated by the UAEPP in collaboration with community organizations provided opportunities to bring Aboriginal knowledge and content into the schools and to put Aboriginal students and their families in contact with community in the city. External partnerships support the positive and healthy growth of the Aboriginal community in the city of Toronto with positive effects on students' well-being and learning.

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION CENTRE WITH EXTERNAL AGENCIES	SCHOOL YEAR	EVENT	DESCRIPTION
Council Fire	09/10	7 Grandfather Teachings Workshops	16 Students
Native Canadian Centre (NCC)	08/09/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remembrance Day Sun Rise Ceremony and Breakfast</li> <li>• National Aboriginal Month Launch at Dundas Square</li> <li>• Ongoing collaboration linking schools with the Centre's Visiting Schools Programs</li> </ul>	<p>Collaborated to organize a community ceremony and gathering on Remembrance Day and to showcase of Aboriginal Cultural Production at Dundas Square</p> <p>Aboriginal Educators worked with the NCC did school visits sharing traditional teachings, stories and cultural practices in schools</p>
Association for Native Development in the Performing & Visual Arts (ANDPVA)	08/09	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arts-Based Project</li> </ul>	ANDPVA provided professional development for teachers participating in the ABP as well as facilitating connections with Aboriginal artists.
Native Child and Family Services	08/09/10	<p>Collaboration on a # of projects including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early Start Program</li> <li>• Nutrition Program</li> <li>• Summer Camp</li> <li>• Youth Employment</li> </ul>	UAEPP staff developed collaborative working relationships with NCFS, putting students and families in contact with the agency
Toronto Police Services Aboriginal Peace Keeping Unit	09/10	<p>Hosted</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NAD Art Show</li> <li>• Humber College Camp</li> </ul>	Provided space at the Police Academy and security for events, and participated in Aboriginal school

		• Community Outreach	Events
Riverdale Project	09/10	Aboriginal People, Identity and Education University Course	8 Students completed the course
Humber College Camp	09/10		21 students participated in the 3 day camp at Humber College
OISE/UT	08/09/10	Senior's Literacy Project	
George Brown	09/10	Pathways	Provided 3 days of programming for Aboriginal SS students interested in pursuing post-secondary education

In interviews with external partners, contacts were unanimous in reporting that staff collaboration increased linkages between and among schools, Aboriginal students and families, and Aboriginal agencies. For example, the community contact at the Native Canadian Centre (NCC) indicated that since the collaboration more Aboriginal educators from the Centre have been visiting schools and greater numbers of TDSB schools, students, and teachers have increased their participation in the Centre's events. (CM.4, p. 1)

***Having Aboriginal community liaisons with the capacity to nurture relationships between TDSB schools and external Aboriginal agencies is critical to indigenizing the education system and Board policies and practices in support of these relationships are crucial.***

## 5.2C The Riverdale Course and The Drama Co-op: Partnerships that Worked

The Riverdale Course and the Drama Co-op were identified by students and staff as two sites where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students worked in collaboration, experienced a sense of belonging, and had responsibility for their learning and for contributing to the learning of others.<sup>1</sup>

Grounded in the experiences and perspectives of project participants, we define "success" of partnership projects along three criteria:

- Fostering of student engagement in courses evidenced by consistent attendance, active involvement in class activities, completion of course assignments, and the sense among participating students that significant learning had occurred;
- Acquisition of meaningful knowledge relevant to students' identities, communities, histories, and lives including the history of colonialism, an introduction to indigenous knowledge, relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, indigenous cultural traditions, and urban Aboriginal identities; and
- Development of skills such as oral and written communication skills, capacity for self-expression, and discovery and honing of creativity in writing, oratory, art, music, theatre, and dance.

The **Riverdale Course** was delivered in collaboration with the Faculty of Education at York University. During the fall term of 2009 an Aboriginal instructor<sup>2</sup> taught a first year university level course titled *Aboriginal People, Identity and Education* to Aboriginal secondary school students<sup>3</sup> from across the city.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for detailed reports on each of these projects.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Susan Dion, the instructor who taught this course, is Principal Investigator of the *Talking Stick Project* and author of this report. In an effort to mitigate the potential for conflict of interest that can arise when researchers occupy multiple roles in projects, data collected on the course was given to Samantha Cutrara (RA) for analysis, interpretation, and write-up.

<sup>3</sup> Most students were Aboriginal although some non-Aboriginal allied students joined the class.



After attending their regular day school, students gathered in a downtown school classroom to read, write, talk, and to learn from and with each other about what it means to be Aboriginal.

The **Drama Co-op** is a four-credit performance-based co-operative education program offered by the TDSB. The program has run for about twenty years and this is the first time it had an Aboriginal theme. Titled “Across Difference” the focus was on Aboriginal people, history, and culture and was grounded in traditional teachings and issues of social justice. During the winter semester of the 2009-2010 school year, 26 secondary school students participated in the program. Of these, 10 were Aboriginal.

When reflecting on their participation in these learning experiences students reported:

*I was sitting there, and I’m trying to write about it, and I was just so confused because it was just so complex, and that kind of relates to how I feel about this whole situation between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. It’s like, well, it’s really, really, really complicated, and until you learn like history from, you know, way back until now, you’re not really going to understand what’s going on. So, I think that was the most important thing for me is just learning how complicated it all is, and to not make assumptions until you know. (RD Student.2, p. 10)*

*Ah, I don’t know, I liked the assignments. Ah, most of, a lot of the work I did was like this is straight from my mind, so it was just a lot easier for me to like, do the work instead of like, having to answer a question. Like you know, it was more like reflecting on who, on what I think. So, like I liked that a lot better than most school courses. (RD Student.1, p. 14)*

*My favourite project would be the creation story, just because it gave—it was a time for like self-exploration. Like, just time to sit back and think like, “Oh, these are like, the little things in my life that came for me to find my Aboriginality, and it really helped me with who I am because--.” It was kind of like a time to accept my Aboriginality. (RD Student..3 p. 16)*

*I want to have a continuation of the program, I am leaning on a more personal level of what I am capable of, the group work involved, the sharing of ideas and how that adds to creating. (Talking Circle, DC Student.8)*

*Communication skills, working with others, applying my creativity to my everyday life. (Surveys, Student.16)*

*Before I joined [the Co-op program] I didn't have too much knowledge, I learned a lot, it's good to respect your culture. I learned a lot from the elder's stories and now I'm interested in my own culture. (Regional Symposium PO Notes, Q & A Period).*

The success of the Riverdale Course and the Drama Co-op is credited to the provision of decolonized and indigenized learning environments. In summary, the learning environments and the learning experiences each offered included many of the key components previously identified that contribute to Aboriginal Student Well-Being. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students participated and worked together constructing respectful ways of knowing what it means to be Aboriginal and what it means to be in relationship with Aboriginal people.

Reflecting on the data from these projects, indigenizing and decolonizing learning environments were accomplished by addressing the following key elements.

### **CONTENT**

In both programs, students had access to and received credit for Aboriginal language instruction and traditional teachings. As part of the Drama Co-op, this content was integrated within the hours of a regular school day. Aboriginal history, culture, and the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people were part of the required curriculum for all students in each program.

### **TEACHERS**

Teachers who had participated in and/or were in the process of participating in their own decolonizing work taught the programs. They brought knowledge of the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada, and were conscious of the implications of that history for themselves and their students. This consciousness included understanding that many Aboriginal students were coping with a host of issues deriving from the violence of the colonial relationship. Teachers integrated Aboriginal content across the program and took the time to work in relationship with Aboriginal community members. They also were willing to teach and learn in collaboration with their students.

### **INDIGENOUS INFORMED PRACTICE**

In keeping with Aboriginal educational approaches (Ermine, 1995), students were offered identifying and reaffirming learning processes based on subjective experiences and introspection. Instructors paid attention to context, and relationships between and among students, between themselves and their students, and between students and the texts presented. As in traditional settings, teaching and learning were intertwined and accomplished through listening, speaking, observing, and experiencing. The ability to use language was developed through participation in telling and listening to stories, in song, and in oratory. Traditional educational practices used included approaches such as oral histories, teaching stories, ceremonies, apprenticeships, learning games, formal instruction, tutoring, and tag-along instruction. In addition, there was an emphasis on human relationships, which stressed in particular respect and consideration for the self and others.

### **A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS**

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students were working as allies and in collaboration. Students did not learn in isolation from their peers, but rather their peers were significant in the learning processes. The shared knowledge, understanding, and attitudes of all members of the classroom had a significant impact on the learning that happened.

### **COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS**

Aboriginal community members were invited to participate in the learning community. Pilot Project staff members visited the class and shared personal stories as well as traditional teachings. This sharing of oral histories and teaching stories provided opportunities for students to build relationships, to see themselves as belonging to the community. During the Riverdale class, Pilot Project staff often participated in class discussions and in class writing assignments, in this way sharing what they were learning from participating alongside the students.

## 5.3 Board Responsibilities to Aboriginal Teachers, Students, and Communities

*Yeah, but—so it's been consuming. It's been frustrating at times. It's been a lot of fun at others. I've never been in a place where people laugh so much. It's been—in that sense, it's been really fun. (Admin.3, 1, p. 18)*

The TDSB Aboriginal Education Centre is located at the Brockton Learning Centre situated in a central downtown neighbourhood. During the past two years the AEC has been a hub of activity and it is coming to be recognized as a space where Aboriginal students, teachers, and community members are welcomed and experience a sense of belonging. Students report encountering a place of welcome and belonging, remarking that “they are always happy to see you there” and “they have work for me to do.” The physical space and the sense of camaraderie found there draws attention to the Board’s responsibility for supporting existing Aboriginal staff and to the need to create policies and practices that will serve to sustain and build on what people have worked to accomplish.

### 5.3A Supporting Aboriginal Teachers

During individual interviews and Talking Circles, Aboriginal staff and their allies identified i) sources of strength and support that allowed them to do their work, ii) sources of stress and challenges that were barriers to their ability to work, and iii) what they needed to accomplish their work.

#### SOURCES OF STRENGTH AND SUPPORT

- Capacity to work in collaboration with other Aboriginal educators and informed allies;
- Respect and support for Aboriginal ways of knowing and being; and
- Access to mentors, especially those who possessed a commitment to Aboriginal Education and TDSB institutional knowledge.

#### SOURCES OF STRESS AND CHALLENGE

- The legacy of residential schools and the implications of this history for teachers and staff as well as the students;
- Exhaustion, especially due to the demands of working in a non-Indigenous institution;
- Ongoing pressures to justify and explain the need and significance of Aboriginal Education;
- Constant confrontation with resistance to Aboriginal Education; and
- The trauma in Aboriginal families and communities, which is painful to empathize and identify with in ongoing ways.

#### NEEDS

- Recognition that the work of transformation takes time, that Aboriginal people have certain practices, protocols, and ways of being in relationship with one another, that these relationships take time to nurture, and that change will not happen over night but it will happen;
- Stance of respect for our responses, recognition that what happens to our children in educational systems is personal as our very survival has depended on us taking what happens to our people personally;

- Acknowledgement that we have shared history of trauma, that this history is a part of our own and our families/communities' recent past, and that we need time and space to take care of ourselves and each other;
- Appreciation for our process of learning, recognition that we need time for learning as well, and that we do not know it all; and
- Acknowledgement of the urgent need for more Aboriginal staff to do the work of decolonizing our schools.

We heard again and again from the UAEPP Administrators who have spent the past two years dedicated to Aboriginal Education the following belief based on their knowledge and experience:

***If the Ministry of Education in Ontario is committed to addressing Aboriginal Education, school boards must take responsibility for decolonizing schools.***

### 5.3B Recognizing and Responding to the Needs of Aboriginal Students

*That's one of the things we found. That when there were alternatives for kids, there was success. (Admin.3, 1, p. 25)*

As with Aboriginal staff and their allies, during interviews and Talking Circles Aboriginal students and allies identified i) sources of strength and support that created conditions for their well-being, ii) sources of stress and challenges that were barriers to their well-being, and iii) what they needed to accomplish well-being.

#### SOURCES OF STRENGTH AND SUPPORT

- Opportunity to learn about Aboriginal Education in collaboration with other Aboriginal students and committed allies;
- Greater access to teachers and counsellors who have familiarity with the issues that students confront;
- Better access to Elders, traditional teachings, Indigenous languages, and cultural knowledge; and
- Capacity to participate in creating community and improved access to existing community and agencies that nurture an understanding of what it means to be Aboriginal.

#### SOURCES OF STRESS AND CHALLENGE

- Dealing with isolation and alienation as outcomes of being alone in a classroom or school where our culture and history are disregarded or misrepresented, and where we are expected to speak for all Aboriginal people;
- Coping with the legacy of colonialism in an institutional structure that operates as if colonialism never happened;
- Being expected to learn in an environment that ignores or distorts our history, knowledge, and culture; and
- Constant confrontation with teachers who know very little and/or carry many misconceptions about us as Aboriginal students and about Aboriginal peoples' experiences and histories more generally.

## NEEDS

- Recognition that to change our attitudes toward school and increase our success at school we require teachers and counselors who have some familiarity with the issues we are confronting;
- Acknowledgment that having access to our Elders, our traditional teachings, and our languages and cultures is necessary to our education as Aboriginal students;
- Appreciate that giving us space and opportunity to create community and to connect with community will help us to nurture an understanding of what it means to be Aboriginal; and
- Recognition that to reach Aboriginal students and allies, we must have a seat at the table, that our voices must be heard in planning, and that we be given opportunities to participate in Aboriginal focused events to increase student self-identification and involvement.

***Boards are responsible for the provision of programs that reflect and respond to the lived realities of Aboriginal students.***

### 5.3C Board-Community Relationships

*Any time the communities had to make any decisions, people were always reminded of specific philosophies that kind of were like the posts that kind of upheld community life and decision making. (CM.1, p. 2)*

*Partnerships “the arts-based project not only accomplished some of our goals in terms of staff development, but it also enlisted the community and it helped to strengthen our ties with community. (Admin.1, IB, p. 5)*

A key challenge confronting Pilot Project staff was how to bring Aboriginal people, philosophies, and practices into a non-Aboriginal educational system. As Aboriginal educators, they approached the task guided by Indigenous educational principles of responsibility, relationship, reciprocity, and remembering. Bringing Aboriginal educators and approaches into a non-Aboriginal system also necessitated community outreach and involvement. When confronted with the issue of stereotypes, the Pilot Project staff turned to Native Earth Performing Arts, a theatre group with expertise in using the arts to challenge representations and in inviting audiences to question commonly-held assumptions and beliefs. Collaboration with Native Child and Family Services allowed for holistic support of children and families associated with the TDSB. The Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts shared their knowledge and as part of the Arts-Based Project, and put the Pilot Project staff in contact with artists who worked with classroom teachers.

Positive, collaborative, and supportive relationships with community organizations and agencies are part of the legacy of the Pilot Project in the TDSB. To build on that legacy, the board must continue to value and cultivate those relationships including in the following ways:

- Respect the expertise that the Aboriginal community brings to the classroom;
- Value Aboriginal community contributions (pay people and agencies for their work);
- Recognize that for community members schools can be uncomfortable places such as by providing a warm welcome and attention for the length of their stay;
- Practice reciprocity by giving back, recognizing that if you want community members to participate in and support change in TDSB schools, then TDSB staff must support and participate in the activities and initiatives of community agencies; and

- Recognize that Aboriginal people should not be the only TDSB staff members who participate in the community events by charging non-Aboriginal senior staff members with responsibility to attend and participate in events.

### **ABORIGINAL EDUCATION CENTRE: SUPPORTING THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY IN THE TDSB AND IN THE CITY**

In June 2010 as the Pilot Project wound down the staff held a community BBQ to celebrate and express thanks and appreciation to the many students, staff, and community members who had contributed to the success of the project. Participating in that event was the most significant indicator of the success of the project. TDSB teachers, principals, and a representative from Board level administration, Aboriginal artists, elders, children and youth, and partners from York University, University of Toronto and Ryerson University attended the event. There was drumming and dancing, games, conversation, laughter, and good food. The diversity of participants in attendance was evidence of an established Aboriginal community within the TDSB, a strong community with the capacity to grow. Most importantly, this event indicated that the TDSB was not only taking from the Aboriginal community in the city but it was now in a position to give back in ways that was contributing to the well-being of Aboriginal people in Toronto.

## **5.4 Board Responsibilities: Serious and Ongoing Work**

### **PRIORITY**

TDSB has not yet recognized that teachers, principals, and other school and board administrators lack knowledge, understanding, and experience of Aboriginal Education. The depth of ignorance plays a significant role in perpetuating profound isolation, widespread alienation, and an achievement gap in the Aboriginal student population. The Board must take responsibility for addressing that ignorance to redress systemic barriers to education faced by Aboriginal students.

Aboriginal Education has not yet been recognized as a Board-wide priority. The Board must raise the profile by letting board and school senior administrators and teachers working throughout the system know that Aboriginal Education is a matter of significance. Research participants at all levels from inside and outside the system with different roles and responsibilities in teaching and learning have identified the following four tasks that the Board must undertake to decolonize TDSB schools:

- Offer and support teachers in acquiring decolonizing and indigenizing teacher development courses;
- Require all principals to participate in decolonizing and indigenizing professional development;
- Expect senior level Board employees to attend events sponsored by the AEC; and
- Require all departments to demonstrate a plan for integrating Aboriginal Education.

### **SUSTAINED FUNDING**

In interview after interview, Pilot Project staff noted how they spent significant amount of time over the last two years attending to one crisis after another. All concluded that ongoing support of students to improve home, school, and community relationships, a comprehensive staff development plan, and integration of Aboriginal subject material across the curriculum would transform school communities, thus alleviating conditions which contribute to crisis situations.

While the TDSB has committed to funding staff for the 2010-2011 school year, a commitment to sustained funding would allow the Central Coordinating Principal of the UAEPP to establish long term

goals and plans for accomplishing those goals. In order to build on of the work accomplished by the Pilot Project staff, sustained funding is necessary.

## HIRING

*Hiring practices are a major barrier; the limitations imposed make hiring frustrating, time consuming and take a lot of energy. (Admin#3, IB, p. 19)*

The work of the Pilot Project required staff who would have knowledge of and experience with the day-to-day lived realities of Aboriginal people. Hiring Aboriginal people to do the work was a priority; however, barriers to accomplishing that goal were a major source of frustration and imposed serious constraints. The history of colonialism means that Aboriginal people have not always had access to 'formal' education that would give them the qualifications required to occupy positions in the TDSB. In addition, even when the qualifications are achieved barriers to employment mean that qualified Aboriginal people may not have the same extended record of employment as non-Aboriginal employees. When teaching and staff positions involve working with Aboriginal children and families priority must be given to hiring qualified Aboriginal candidates, including allowing for alternative sources of qualification.

Only 1-2% of TDSB employees are Aboriginal. If the TDSB is committed to Aboriginal Education and positive relationships with the Aboriginal community, the Board must develop an Aboriginal staffing plan, which includes the following:

- Set realistic goals to increase that number;
- Actively recruit and hire more Aboriginal staff;
- Alter hiring policies and practices to support the hiring of Aboriginal people; and
- Recognize alternative qualifications.

Over the past two years, a significant portion of Pilot Project senior administrative staff time was consumed with mentoring junior staff. While mentoring staff was a project goal, at times the work of mentoring distracted from accomplishing the day-to-day tasks of the project. This is understood as neither a failure nor even a weakness on the part of the Pilot Project but rather as another obstacle faced by the project as a result of colonialism. Aboriginal people have been excluded from teaching roles and positions of responsibility for a long time and it will take time to build capacity. While this work is underway, it is expected that Aboriginal employees will spend energy and time doing the mentoring work.

## COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE BOARD

Pilot Project staff worked in a variety of ways to address the challenge of communication within and across the institutional structure of the school board. Staff attended quadrant meetings, department meetings, and meetings with families of schools to inform people about the existence of the AEC, the work of the Pilot Project, services available for Aboriginal students and families, and professional and curriculum support available to teachers. Staff members targeted schools that offered Ojibwa language classes and schools with recognized Aboriginal student populations. Announcements regarding events were sent out through the TDSB electronic communication system "Direct Line" on a regular basis. However, given that over 40,000 employees use this system and that people are often inundated with announcements, information about the UAEPP and the AEC was often lost in the deluge.

Through interviews with various school and board staff throughout the system, the research team concluded that a small group of TDSB staff were closely connected, a larger group were aware that the project was happening, and many people had no idea that the project even happened. However responsibility for communication does not lie solely with the Pilot Project staff. The vast majority of Board employees operate on the understanding that Aboriginal Education has nothing to do with them, consequently do not attend to information from the AEC. As an integral part of the process of decolonization, this must change.



## Appendix A

### A.1 Riverdale Project Report

### A.2 Drama Co-op Project Report

#### Riverdale Project 2009 Report

Dr. Susan D. Dion

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The **Riverdale Project** is a joint endeavor between the Faculty of Education at York University and the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project at the Toronto District School Board.

#### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

During the fall of 2009 the Faculty of Education at York University offered a first year university level course to Aboriginal High School students<sup>4</sup> from the Toronto District School Board. The course titled *Aboriginal People, Identity and Education* (ED/INDS 1200 3.00) was offered Monday evenings from 4:00 until 7:00 at Riverdale Collegiate. Each week a small group of students gathered in a downtown Toronto high school classroom, together they read, reflected, wrote, questioned, and explored what it means to be an Aboriginal person living in Canada. Dr. Susan D. Dion, an Aboriginal Professor from the Faculty of Education at York University, taught the course. Each week support staff from the TDSB Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project joined the class. They provided the students with food, books, TTC tickets, and both moral and academic support. During the first year of the Riverdale Project the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project covered the cost of tuition.

#### PURPOSE

The purpose of the Riverdale Project is to establish positive relationships between self-identified Aboriginal secondary school students in the Toronto District School Board and York University. The project provides senior High School students with the opportunity for Aboriginal youth from across the city to meet and learn together in an environment where Urban Aboriginal youth and their issues are the focus. The class is open to students in Grades 11 or 12 who have the prerequisite Grade 10 English credit.

#### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course provides students with the opportunity to learn from Aboriginal authors, filmmakers, and artists who are telling their own stories. What does it mean to be an Aboriginal person in Canada? What does it mean to be an Aboriginal person attending an institution of formal schooling? How do encounters with teachers and texts in schools impact one's understanding of being Aboriginal and being Canadian? In this class students read books, watch films, and listen to each other's stories. They investigate and develop their own responses to questions of identity and Aboriginality. The course explores Aboriginal perspectives and allows students to develop their own understanding of what it means to be Aboriginal and what it means to be Canadian.

#### RATIONAL FOR THE PROJECT

In addition to alienation and marginalization from institutions of formal schooling experienced by Aboriginal students wherever they live (Kirkness and Bowman, 1992; Battiste, 1998; Dion, 2000), students

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<sup>4</sup> While Aboriginal students were the majority, a couple students asked if they could bring a non-Aboriginal friend. Having allies in the class had a positive impact. Students talked with each other and encouraged deep questioning and listening.

in urban settings confront particular problems. These include concerns that they may not be recognized as Aboriginal students, that they do not see themselves represented in the curriculum, and that their teachers are ill prepared to respond to their needs. If recognized at all, they may be expected to have access to, and be willing to share, cultural knowledge; they may be asked to speak for all Aboriginal people; and they are susceptible to being judged according to a deficit model. Aboriginal students attend school in spite of a long, negative, and harmful relationship between Aboriginal people and schooling. Given these challenges, it is not surprising that many Aboriginal secondary school students leave school prior to graduation. This includes the Toronto District School Board: in the 2006-07 academic year 32% of the grade nine Aboriginal student population in the TDSB were considered “at risk” for on time graduation. For those Aboriginal students who do finish high school, attending university is often not considered an option. An overwhelming 71% of the 17 and 18-year-old Aboriginal students in the TDSB did not apply to a post-secondary institution in the 2007 application cycle. These numbers represent only those students who self-identify as Aboriginal. There is no information on the vast majority who has not disclosed their Aboriginality in TDSB schools.

### **SUCCESS OF THE PROJECT**

To varying degrees 16 secondary school students participated in the class and 7 of the students completed sufficient course requirements to earn their first university credit. One of the students, a recent arrival to the city, received a personal call from the chief of his reserve. It seems that this student was the first person from his reserve to earn a university credit. During individual interviews students who were not able to complete the course requirements reported that while they appreciated the course and wanted to participate fully, individual and family issues drew their time and attention away from their studies. Students in the class decided to have an “open door” policy and failure to complete the assignments and an “official” dropping of the course did not mean students had to stop attending class. Some of the students have expressed interest in enrolling in the course the next time it is offered.

### **WHAT THE STUDENTS HAD TO SAY**

During the final class students agreed to participate in a discussion focused on what they had learned from the course. The discussion was recorded and transcribed, and key quotes are included here. In order to protect students’ anonymity, pseudonyms are used. Students were positive and enthusiastic about the course. Their recommendation was that they should have had double the class periods and they wish that they were able to come to know each other earlier on in the course. It was clear that the class was important to them and that they were leaving having learned content knowledge, cultivated a positive sense of themselves as learners, and acquired a deeper understanding of and pride in their Aboriginality. More specifically, grouping their responses in themes, the class provided students with: a greater sense of self, a greater sense of their world, exposure to new resources and content, and a chance to think and share in ways they had not done before.

#### A Sense of Self

Students were aware of positive effects the course content and pedagogy had on their sense of self. They felt that the course content allowed them to learn and discover more about themselves as Aboriginal people and that they would want other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth to learn this content so that it could curtail negative feelings and produce awareness and pride. Students identified that they were able to discover the “specialness” of their Aboriginality and find the inner resources to define their Aboriginal identities separate from mainstream expectations. Students expressed their surprise at digging deep to learn about themselves in this course and their surprise in their desire to do so within the context of a university class. Students identified that although they were doing critical thinking in this course, because the content was important to them, this thinking was easier than the rote learning they have come to expect in their high school classes.

- *The thing that I wasn't expecting that I learned from this course that I really enjoyed was kind of a sense of myself. Like through various of the projects, like the creation story kind of helped me discover my role as an Aboriginal person, and it's something that I wasn't expecting through this course. (RD Student.3, p. 4)*
- *Like I'm Native and really what's so special about it, but then when I came here to this class I learned that Aboriginality, that [it is] something special that everybody needs and everybody needs to find that out for themselves. (RD Student.6, p. 6)*
- *It was kind of like a time to accept my Aboriginality. (RD Student.3, p. 15)*

### Understanding Their Worlds

Students learnt more about the world, history, and struggles of other people, which provided them with a sense of context and appreciation of the world they inhabit. Although some students knew, for example, about residential schools, life on the reserve, or the Indian Act, the course materials provided them with new points of view and a depth of understanding of these aspects of history and the present. Students were able to connect history with current events and stereotypes, which allowed them to learn about and understand their Aboriginality. The course taught students about the connections people and cultures have with each other and how some of these connections are more complicated than popularly presented. Students expressed their desire for this type of learning and the importance the information has for them to move forward.

- *The beauty of culture – the fact that culture does bring so many people together, and it's what helps people understand who they are. That's what I learned. (RD Student.3, p. 3)*
- *You don't really realize how ingrained the stereotypes are in this society. (RD Student.5, p. 4)*
- *[We did more thinking because] it's something that we all want to know. (RD Student.1, p. 5)*

### Exposure to New Resources and Content

Students were enthusiastic about the resources used and the content covered in this class, they were able to read, watch, and learn things they would not have ordinarily encountered. They expressed that these resources gave them a greater awareness of Aboriginal perspectives and experiences, as well as an appreciation of things that were left out of mainstream history and news coverage. Their enthusiasm indicated their surprise at learning through these resources that challenged them, but also their desire to confront and work through these challenges using higher-order thinking. Students said that they found the assignments relevant to both the course and to their lives and that they enjoyed working through the issues the course covered.

- *Everything was great. I loved the assignments. I liked the movies, and the books were amazing. (RD Student.7, p.12)*
- *I was just kind of fascinated with all the things that made me discover my Aboriginality. (RD Student.3, p. 15)*
- *I feel like I've been cheated in some level of the actual Canadian history that has happened - It kind of bothered me that I don't know. (RD Student.4, p. 2)*

### The Opportunity to Think and Share in New Ways

Students indicated that by the end of the class they felt bonded as a group of people they could share with, listen to, and collaborate with; in other words, a community of learners. They were able to come together to express their pride and knowledge in their Aboriginality, but also learn what they didn't know

and draw on each other's experiences. They liked the in-class assignments in which they could work through issues from the readings and appreciated the round table discussions that gave all students an opportunity to share. The class provided the students with a structure in which everyone was active in listening and respecting each other and gave students a greater sense of their own opinions and perspectives. The students' comments indicated that this class was unique in providing them with this community to learn in and that they were able to learn better and deeper because of it. One student reported to her high school teacher *"in that class I learned how to write."*

- *We want to give the people a better understanding about who we are and what we stand for. (RD Student.7, p. 3)*
- *What I liked the most was, just learning how to discuss everything. (RD Student.6, p. 16)*
- *Class discussions I feel like it was very different and in a good way, because I like knowing what everyone's thinking, and it makes me think. It's like, 'Oh, yeah, I think that too'. (RD Student.6, p. 16)*

## **“Across Difference” TDSB Drama Co-op Program**

### **2010 Project Report**

**Dr. Susan D. Dion**

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#### **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

During the winter of 2010, TDSB students had the opportunity to take part in a four-credit performance-based co-operative education program. This “Drama Co-op” has been offered by the board for twenty years, as one of the few centrally run co-operative education programs. A teacher is hired to oversee the course and it is run out of a TDSB facility, in this case, the Brockton Education Centre. This year was the first time the board decided to integrate both drama and dance components. Students were invited to audition for their positions, and in the end, 26 students from across the city, 10 of whom were Aboriginal, participated in the program. This year the program was called “Across Difference” and the focus of the work was on Aboriginal people, history, and culture. The program was funded through the Arts Department of the TDSB, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Aboriginal Education Centre. FoodShare also supported it. This year was unique in that two facilitators, instead of only one, were hired to run the program: Silvy, a drama teacher from Central Tech who was hired through the TDSB, and Métis artist, filmmaker, storyteller, and educator Kat, who was hired through the Ontario Arts Council. The AEC played a key partnership role in the project: each of the staff participated in or shared teachings, and they provided support and counselling for students. Food for the program was provided by FoodShare.

#### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of the Drama Co-op program is to provide TDSB students with an opportunity for experiential learning. The program aims to bring students together from across the TDSB to learn drama, dance, and production skills in an environment different than the usual classroom setting. The program is open to students who are interested in learning skills in a workplace environment, in lieu of their regular high school classes. The TDSB supports this endeavour through its “ARTS = Student Success Arts Advocacy” program, which supports the beliefs that the arts:

- Help students explore, represent, and think critically about ideas and concepts;
- Are inclusive, that learning in and through the arts can help all students be successful in school;
- Develop skills that can be transferred to other areas of the curriculum;
- Connect learning experiences to the world of work;
- Teach self-discipline;
- Teach students how to interact with one another and work effectively in groups;
- Build students self-confidence; and
- Teach empathetic responses to others and help in the understanding of and a respect for a multitude of cultural traditions and values and because of this contribute to safe, orderly environments in schools and the community, and prepare students to imagine, visualize, and shape a better world.

#### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This year's Drama Co-op, “Across Difference”, was grounded in Aboriginal cultural teachings and social justice issues. The teachers tried to create a space where Aboriginal cultural teachings could provide a framework for the whole project. For instance, many mornings would begin with a smudge circle. Throughout the semester, Aboriginal elders, community workers and artists came to share their

knowledge with the class. The program also made sure to situate the teachings as being from specific Nations, rather than generalizing to a stereotypical “pan-Indian” culture. While the focus of the course was on cultural teachings, the program also tried to integrate social justice issues. For instance, the class took a field trip to Queen's Park where they marched in solidarity with the Aboriginal community of Grassy Narrows.

The students used the knowledge they were gaining to create a performance centered on the topic of a search for identity. They incorporated each of their own stories into the narrative, and tied them to the history and contemporary realities of Aboriginal peoples. The play they created focuses on a young girl who is coming to terms with what it means to be Aboriginal. Throughout the play, she gathers different teachings and the students also have a chance to tell their personal stories. The dancers interpret the Seven Grandfather Teachings throughout the performance. The students who participated in the Drama Co-op maintained control over the entire creative process and had the chance to learn new skills from one another.

### **SUCCESS OF THE PROJECT**

There were 26 students who participated in this year's Drama Coop program, 10 of whom were Aboriginal. Through their involvement, the students had the opportunity to acquire practical skills, such as acting, dancing, and storytelling, as part of a dynamic learning community. From surveys that 18 students completed in May 2010, it can be noted that they all felt that participating in the program had a good or exceptional impact on their school experience, that two thirds now attend school more regularly, and that over half feel happier at school. The instructors noted in interviews that three of the Aboriginal students who came regularly to the program do not usually attend their high school classes. After the completion of the program, it was also noted that half of the students participated in a youth-elder gathering to which they had been invited by one of their instructors.

### **WHAT STUDENTS HAD TO SAY**

During the final stages of the co-op program, students had the opportunity to provide feedback through surveys, a Talking Circle, and a question and answer period following a performance at Humber College. Through their responses, it is evident that the students were excited and inspired by what they had learnt about Aboriginal culture, themselves and the process of creating. One of the instructors noted how it was wonderful seeing the students “coming alive to their stories, coming alive to their own art, and supporting each other in it and inspiring each other it, and . . . taking ownership of it” (DC Instructor.1, p. 6). Particularly, students were eager to speak to their new knowledge about Aboriginal cultural teachings, their new understanding of themselves, and their appreciation of experiential learning. The Aboriginal students in the group found the process important in terms of gaining new insights into their Aboriginality.

#### New Knowledge of Aboriginal Culture

Many of the students spoke of how they have appreciated the opportunity to learn about Aboriginal culture, history, and people. Several noted that they have come to a new awareness of the importance of the medicine wheel, ceremonies, and dancing. As one student said,

*I have learned about the importance of the medicine wheel and the Eagle Feather and how important these things are and more importantly how the aboriginal culture is really, how aboriginal people originated here, and what they really are all about. (Talking Circle, Student 10)*

While this comment indicates the existence of a single Aboriginal culture, it also shows that students came to an awareness of the complexity of Aboriginal culture in a way that they had not been taught before. Through the students' comments, it is evident that many of them used cultural teachings to develop new understandings of the world around them. Their engagement went beyond simply memorizing the lessons taught, to understanding how the teachings applied to their own lives.

*I have learned about the medicine wheel and its importance, the importance of the wheel to teachings. I have learned about the 7 Grandfather teachings and what they are meant to do, the meaning they are supposed to give people that everything is connected and everything has purpose big or small. (Talking Circle, Student 12)*

*I learned the importance of respect, how to respect the differences in people, also about ceremonies and why they are important, their connection to the spirit and about drumming. (Talking Circle, Student 4)*

*I learned about the medicine wheel, and how to connect that to our own experiences how to connect drumming to our own culture. (Talking Circle, Student 6)*

Some of the students noted how they felt uncomfortable learning certain teachings because of their identity as non-Aboriginal, and others noted new understandings of colonialism and the struggle for Aboriginal rights.

*I felt weird because I didn't think I was legit, because I'm not Aboriginal. So I wasn't supposed to be doing it. But elders came in and I got to try things. I understand it more now. (Q&A Session)*

*Most of our teachings came from Ojibwa nation. I wasn't supposed to speak to it because it's stereotypical. I connected to medicine wheel because connects everyone, so that's where I fit in." (Q&A Session)*

*"That Aboriginal rights are a current, ongoing issue because Aboriginal people are the most oppressed and least recognized minorities in Canada. (Surveys, Student 3)*

*That they're not "Indians," that they don't wear head bands, that most first nations peoples don't get to enjoy the fact that they get money, and that most have gone to residential [school]. (Surveys, Student 8)*

*Aboriginal culture was stolen from them. It's time to give them back their culture and way of life. (Surveys, Student 16)*

### Deeper Self-Understanding

Another theme that emerged through the student feedback is that the participants had the opportunity to learn about themselves and to grow during their time in the co-op program. Students particularly mentioned improved social interaction skills, a greater ability to deal with responsibility, and becoming more self-confident. The use of art and creativity in the program also allowed students to develop new relationships with themselves and with each other.

*I want to have a continuation of the program, I am leaning on a more personal level of what I am capable of, the group work involved, the sharing of ideas and how that adds to creating.” (Talking Circle, Student 8)*

*Communication skills, working with others, applying my creativity to my everyday life. (Surveys, Student 16)*

*I have learned how to handle responsibility. (Surveys, Student 2)*

### Appreciation of Experiential Learning

The students expressed how much they appreciated learning outside of the classroom context. The students enjoyed obtaining knowledge in a variety of ways, especially from guest speakers with a wide range of backgrounds. They also expressed the benefits of learning together, connecting with one another and developing a sense of community.

*We are making our own sense of context in our own way other than just one way, just what the text book tells us or what someone tells us. (Talking Circle, Student 11)*

*Art is a different way of knowing and integrating it allows us to express ourselves better, in an art based setting we are using different skills and living those skills other than writing a test, there is no pressure. (Talking Circle, Student 10)*

*When in the TDSB I learn from a set curriculum, here it is practical, I can also be myself, express myself and feel good to do that in an open environment I get excited to come here and to be able to do that. (Talking Circle, Student 8)*

*I learned community, this is my family from different culture. (Q&A Period)*

### Aboriginal Students

Through the data collected it is also apparent that the Aboriginal youth participants responded to the co-op in a particular way because of their relationship to the content and to the process. Of the students who identified as Aboriginal or mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and who completed the surveys, two thirds of them said that the co-op impacted how they felt about their Aboriginality. They responded that the co-op made them feel more comfortable expressing themselves, more interested in their past, and caused them to realize how much more they would like to learn about Aboriginal culture. Many students also expressed that the program helped them in becoming more comfortable with their identity, and that it was important to have the opportunity to share their knowledge with their peers. A common sentiment was that the students knew very little about their culture beforehand and now their confidence, interest and knowledge has greatly increased.

*Before I joined I didn't have too much knowledge, I learnt a lot, it's good to respect your culture. Learned a lot from the elder stories now interested in my own culture. (Q&A period)*

*I didn't know lots about Aboriginal culture, which sucked a lot because I am Aboriginal, I learned a lot. (Q&A period)*

*I didn't take it seriously at first, but now realize I've learned so much. Didn't know they had their own language. Learned a lot from other Aboriginal students. I'm proud to be Aboriginal. (Q&A period)*



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