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A Fond Farewell

Julian Kitchen
Editor
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This issue is my last as editor of Brock Education. It has been an honour to serve as editor for over 6 years!

In 2008, Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker and I became co-editors of the journal. During our tenure, we placed particular emphasis on practitioner inquiry and research of interest to educators in primary, secondary and tertiary settings. As the journal had just been placed on-line by Tony Di Petta, the previous editor, we worked hard to position Brock Education as an open access journal capable of attaining wider circulation than was possible when it was a limited circulation print publication.

As the sole editor since 2011, I have encouraged an eclectic range of scholarship grounded in issues of professional practice. While teaching and teacher education have been areas of particular interest, I am proud to have published articles from international scholars and ones that address the pressing needs in Aboriginal communities.

The next issue will be a special theme issue with guest editors, followed by the first issue by the new editor, Dolana Mogadime.

This editorial provides me with the opportunity to reflect on my tenure as editor before introducing the six articles and one book review in this issue.

I am pleased that the reach of Brock Education has increased tremendously since it became an open access journal. This is evident from an analysis of readership in 2013-2104. There were over 10,000 readers from 100 countries, with Canadians (29%) and Americans (24%) being the largest sources of readers. This wider readership makes the journal more attractive to scholars interested in disseminating their work to a wider audience.

During this time, Brock Education has also become more rigorous. The acceptance rate is below 40%, with a double-blind peer review process and careful line editing by two very capable editorial assistants, Catherine Longboat and Stephanie Tukonic.

It has been wonderful to contribute to the scholarly enterprise by helping scholars and practitioners bring their work to life and make it accessible to a wide audience. Journal editors play important roles identifying prospective pieces, selecting appropriate reviewers, guiding the revision process, encouraging authors to stretch themselves, and helping in the crafting of clear, accessible texts. The appreciation shown by authors has lightened the often heavy work of running a journal.

As a journal based in Ontario, Brock Education welcomes articles that address educational issues of local concern. In “Student Perceptions of Literacy after the Ontario Secondary Literacy Course: A Qualitative Inquiry,” Lianne Van De Wal and Thomas G. Ryan examine the impact of a remedial literacy course provided to students who fail the standardized provincial literacy test in Grade 10. While failure is difficult, the feedback from students suggest that courses that focus on self-esteem, engagement and skill development can “assist these learners in a holistic way that respects their abilities while encouraging positive, productive and
authentic growth.” While the need was identified through a standardized test, the authors suggest that this vision of literacy can be applied more widely.

During my tenure as editor, I have been interested in the experiences of those who are less represented in educational research. As the journal readership is broad, articles that make these issues accessible to all educators are particularly welcome. “A Comparison of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Students on the Inter-Related Dimensions of Self-Concept, Strengths and Achievement” by Jessica Whitley, Edward Rawana and Keith Brownlee achieves this goal by reporting on the ways in which self-concept affect learning for both groups. While she notes lower self-concept and academic achievement for Aboriginal students, Whitley sensitively positions this as a reflection on the limitations of school systems that may harbour prejudiced assumptions and “may not align with their traditional ways of learning and the measuring of competence and success.” She also notes the importance of faith and culture in fostering Aboriginal student self-concept and achievement.

In recent years, Brock Education has published a significant number of articles by teacher educators examining their practice. “Shifting Perspectives and Practices: Teacher Candidates’ Experiences of an Aboriginal Infusion in Mainstream Teacher Education” is an example of this kind of article. Melissa Blimkie, Diane Vetter and Celia Haig-Brown thoughtfully combine personal reflection and rigorous qualitative research design in this examination of a highly innovative Aboriginal Infusion initiative within the mainstream teacher education program at York University. They explore how infusing Aboriginal content and pedagogies for a cohort of teacher candidates can increase awareness and improve practice. They also suggest that such pilot projects can influence programming across the institution.

Brock Education has expanded its reach nationally and internationally thanks to on-line accessibility. “Exploring the Inner and Outer Cultural Landscapes of Counseling Candidates towards Diverse Students and Families through Self-Reflection” by Adonay A. Montes, Fernando Rodriguez-Valls and Laurie Schroeder from California is an example of the journal’s international scope. The authors offer interesting perspectives on the preparation of counselor candidates. Results from student surveys suggest that understanding their own identities can help ease the process of creating bridges between counselors and the cultural richness of students and parents with whom they work.

The journal also examines contemporary issues in higher education. For example, “Today’s University Students and Their Need to Connect” addresses challenges posed by technology in university learning. Theresa Russo, Moira Fallon, Jie Zhang and Veronica Acevedo surveyed 390 students to determine how they perceive technology in learning. Findings suggest that students believe that supportive communication has the potential to promote relationships among students. The challenge for higher education instructors is to make this a reality.

While most articles in Brock Education address education in institutional settings, we also welcome articles that explore other issues or adopt a different slant. “Autism Spectrum Disorder in Popular Media: Storied Reflections of Societal Views,” by Christina Belcher and Kimberley Maich, is interesting because it prompts readers to reflect on the representations of characters with ASD as typified by popular media. They explore how characters from TV, film and literature colour our views of people with exceptionailities. Although these media depictions are well-intended, their unwitting status as truth presents challenges for people with ASD and those who live and work with them.
Student Perceptions of Literacy after the Ontario Secondary Literacy Course: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

Adolescent literacy has emerged via the high-stakes standardized test known as the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) as a critical area of debate and study. Research has indicated a direct connection between literacy and identity, and that student literacy practices differ from traditional measures of literacy located in school curriculum and evaluated via standardized tests such as the OSSLT. Outcomes such as limited achievement, difficulties with literacy and the development of literacy skills, and subsequent below standard scores can diminish student self-concept, lower self-esteem, and impede self-efficacy. This ethnographic case study illuminated the impact of OSSLT and subsequent mandatory enrolment in the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course using semi-structured interviews involving high-school students from a northern Ontario secondary school. Previous related research outcomes, which demonstrated a connection between standardized test scores and self-concept, were realized via participants’ understanding and perception of literacy, and through mitigating factors impacting literacy engagement and achievement.

Keywords: Literacy, standardized testing, secondary school, failure

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Measuring secondary student literacy achievement has been a dominant educational focus since the inception and implementation of the Ontario (Canada) Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) in 2002, despite the fact that standardized testing has drawn criticism from stakeholders (McNeil, 2000; Nezavdal, 2003; Ricci, 2004; Sweet, 2006). The OSSLT compartmentalizes students as “literate” and “illiterate” on the basis of being “successful” versus “unsuccessful” on a single high-stakes standardized test (EQAO, 2011). Standardizing literacy may only serve to perpetuate the idea that if a student is not successful on the test, he or she is not literate (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009). Students, particularly those who do not find success on the test, run the risk of viewing reading and writing as a chore rather than an effective means of conveying their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (Moon, Brighton, Jarvis, & Hall, 2007). In Ontario, passing the OSSLT is a graduation requirement, and since 2003 an added provision of the requirement has read that students who are unsuccessful at least once and who have been eligible to write twice (or since June 2004, students who at the discretion of the school principal are deferred from writing) may enroll in the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2009). Essentially the OSSLT was repackaged in an instructional course framework. Passing the OSSLC (with a mark of 50% or greater) allows students to fulfill the literacy graduation requirement for an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD).

In the OSSLC, students may enter with a negative view of their own abilities after one or more (usually two) on the OSSLT (Van De Wal, 2012). Often students enrolled in the OSSLC do not begin the course as eager students who are excited about learning; they habitually enter with negative self-image (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009; Van De Wal, 2012). In some cases it is evident that frequent literacy testing is creating an adverse reaction to reading and literacy, and is in fact promoting, encouraging, and potentially increasing aliteracy, which is the ability to read but the desire not to (Bouchard, 2003; Johnston & Winograd, 1985; Volante, 2006). In other cases a disconnect between school literacy and after-school literacy is overt (Alvermann, 2001; Beth, Reed, Schallert, & Woodruff, 2004; Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005).

**Background and Significance**

The significance of adolescent literacy and the learners’ identity has been noted by many scholars (Alvermann 2001; Dillon, Moje, and O’Brien 2000; Freire and Macedo 1987; Luttrell and Parker (2001). The identification of literacy has been shown to be a powerful tool for establishing voice (Dillon et al., 2000) playing a role a role in empowering or disempowering individuals (Freire & Macedo, 1987), and recognizing that the conventional or traditional practice of literacy that dominates school culture is, at times, at odds with the social practice of literacy (Alvermann, 2001; Luttrell & Parker, 2001). Graham and Neu (2004) concluded that standardized tests “encourage the internalization of disciplining activities” (p. 301), or assessments of above average or below average status, and reproduce them in subsequent behaviours.

Teachers also sense the stress and pressure of the standardized testing movement and, as a result, the day-to-day classroom conduct is impacted, influenced, and changed (Moon et al., 2007; Ryan, 2003). Drawing upon Foucault’s work on governmentality, Graham and Neu (2004) claim that “what gets measured gets done” [because] “the publication of the results not only informs the electorate and other audiences, but builds pressure to conform” (p. 312). This pressure provides a somewhat invisible undertow and can cause students and teachers to become
passive subjects rather than active agents (Moon et al., 2007). Students that internalize societal norm” and conduct themselves as passive subjects further serve to impact the identity and self-concept of the adolescent literacy learner who is in need of an authentic and productive learning experience (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009; Moon et al., 2007).

**Problem**

As more students are graduating high school with lower literacy proficiencies—25% of students graduate with inadequate (below provincial level 3) secondary literacy skills (Maxwell, 2010) and 37.8% of adults ages 16-25 have low literacy (Statistics Canada, 2005)—secondary teachers are faced with the need to go “back to basics” and teach what may be remedial level literacy in some cases. Within the secondary school domain, the assumption that students enter high school with the ability to read and write, and that students’ literacy skills will serve them well across the curriculum and in varied subject matters needs attention. Teachers need more insight to serve their students to the best of their ability (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009), before it is too late.

Research has indicated that literacy acquisition is much more difficult once individuals leave school (Ryan & MacGregor, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2008). If we can better understand the journey of the adolescent literacy learner in the age of the OSSLT (and the OSSLC), educators can develop their methods to strengthen and enhance not only the literacy skills of these students, but also impact self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy, and, in turn, their overall positive identity and productivity as contributing members of our society (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009).

**Purpose**

The purpose of this research was to examine student perceptions of literacy within a secondary school while exploring literacy at this level. We determined what each student, who experienced failure with the OSSLT, identified as key factors that contributed to their views on, and definitions of literacy. Data concerning the types of literacy activities adolescent literacy learners were engaged in, and how this engagement and achievement, or lack thereof, impacted their self-concept, was identified, gathered, examined and interpreted as part of an ethnographic case study framework.

**Research Questions**

Following a review of the research literature, and based upon our own teaching experience, we determined that our primary research question to guide the study (Agee, 2009) would be: What are secondary students’ perceptions of literacy following the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course?

Next we asked participants:
1. What does the term “literacy” mean to you?
2. How have your beliefs about reading and writing changed since grade 9? Be sure to comment on feelings after the OSSLT and OSSLC.
3. How do your in-school reading and writing practices differ from your reading and writing habits outside of school?
4. How have your experiences with literacy from grades 9-12 impacted your self-concept?
Review of Literature

Definitions of Literacy

Many have investigated adolescent literacy in a variety of ways, most notably from its relationship with engagement (Casey, 2008), to at-risk students (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009; O’Brien, 1998; Taylor & Nesheim, 2000), and best practices (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000). However, in order to better understand the concept of adolescent literacy, it was important to first reflect upon the multiple definitions of literacy and what it means to be “literate” from both educational and socio-cultural perspectives (Agee, 2009). Contemporary definitions of literacy stress the multiplicity of literacy behaviours, practices, and activities. Truly, what it meant to be literate a century ago—that is, having “the simple ability to read and write” (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2005, p. 2) was a definition of literacy that many scholars (Beth et al., 2004; Brozo & Simpson, 1991; Hinchman & Moje, 1998; Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007; Kamil & Kim, 2004; Moje et al., 2000; O’Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995; Street, 1994) would deem too exclusive and one-dimensional at present.

Secondary school students’ views of literacy vary from those of their parents and teachers in that they are often broader and more inclusive (Beth et al., 2004). In a review of the disconnect between adolescents’ literacy practices and teachers’ definitions of literacy, Beth et al. (2004), argued that the likelihood that teachers have overlooked the extension of literacy to include new literacies and those that may prove essential in students’ futures is great, consistently creating traditional literacy tasks rather than challenging the scope of literacy.

While numerous and diverse definitions of “literacy” can be found in the existing body of literature (Brozo & Simpson, 1991; Hinchman & Moje, 1998; Irvin et al., 2007; Kamil & Kim, 2004; O’Brien et al., 1995; Street, 1994), a productive definition that is appropriately inclusive stems from Street’s (1994) qualitative research focused upon literacy practices in varied contexts from South East Asia in the 15th century to contemporary South Pacific, to more recent accounts of New Guinea and Philadelphia. Street’s (1994) aim was to demonstrate “the variety and complexity of literacies” (p. 139) while locating literacy practices in the context of power and ideology rather than as a neutral and technical skill. As a result, Street (1994) composed an “ideological” model of literacy that recognizes multiple literacies by claiming, “literacy practices are constitutive of identity and of personhood” (p. 140).

Adolescent Literacy and Identity

Moje et al. (2000) defined adolescent literacy simply as the “distinctive dimensions of the reading and writing of youth” (p. 402) noting that these youth have “multiple literacies” (p. 402) that stem from changing and varied texts that have grown to include the Internet, film, music, magazines, and television among other mediums. While it is important to understand that multiple literacies exist and play an important role in the lives of today’s adolescents, it is also imperative to explore the research on the role of literacy in the identity formation of youth. Freire and Macedo (1987) proposed that literacy was a set of practices that function to empower or disempower people, and according to Freire (1970) this “self-deprecation is . . . characteristic of the oppressed, [deriving] from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them” (p. 49).
Hall (2012) recognized the connection between literacy and identity and focused on finding ways to allow students to rewrite their reading identities. The objective of the study was to help “students evolve into the kinds of readers they wanted to become” (p. 368). Hall’s (2012) justification for the study was the fact that “students’ reading identities are created over time based on their experiences in school and their understanding of the different identities available to them” (p. 369). It was these “available identities”—“poor/struggling, average, and good/excellent” (Hall, 2012, p. 369) that prompted Hall to investigate and challenge the institutionalized norms found within schools. Hall discovered students recognized that their teachers often had expectations about their reading identities based on test scores, and they believed they “could be the kinds of readers they wanted to be when at home,” as they were “generally free to simply read” (p. 371). Consequently, repeated failure, particularly failure associated with high-stakes testing, greatly reduced motivation, increased student helplessness, decreased students’ self-efficacy, and greatly affected the ways in which adolescents viewed literacy as a whole (Johnston & Winograd, 1985).

Adolescent Learners’ Perspective

In seeking to illuminate student perceptions of the OSSLT, Klinger and Luce-Kapler (2007) sought to analyze perceptions of the OSSLT, focusing on three aspects of the test: students’ preparation, the impact and value of the test, and the influence of test-style programs on students’ views about literacy. They found that test preparation often came at the expense of their regular classroom instruction and that students responded to questions in a “formulaic” manner because of the rigid test instructions that sent a message to students that there was a right and wrong way to answer questions, further suggesting “a narrowly expressed view of literacy” (p. 29) inherent in the test. They discovered obvious differences between the responses of successful and unsuccessful students. Participants concluded that the test “focused more on demonstrating formulaic writing structures as opposed to literacy” (p. 43). As for the impact and value of the OSSLT, researchers found that support for the test was minor with successful students, and that unsuccessful students were “almost unanimously against the OSSLT” (p. 45). Klinger and Luce-Kapler (2007) concluded: “The test seemed to impede students’ understanding of literacy and even the importance of literacy” (p. 47).

Kearns (2011) interviewed 16 unsuccessful test takers discovering that the OSSLT caused participants to feel “shame” and marginalization due to their participation, had negative effects on their identity formation as they were “named as different, deemed not up to the standard” (para. 41), and caused them to have altered perceptions of themselves. Kearns (2011) noted that many students found their failure to be a shock, suggesting that “students who fail the literacy test have a different perception of what it means to be literate and successful than the standards upheld by this high-stakes, large-scale literacy test” (para. 40). She also found that the experience made her participants feel “degraded, humiliated, stressed, and shamed” (para. 22), even “like a loser” (para. 29). Kearns suggested “the literacy test was alienating for some youth involved in the study because it undermined some of their positive identity-confirming experiences, and forced them to negotiate a negative label” (para. 48).

Zheng, Klinger, Cheng, Fox, and Doe (2011) elected to examine the relationship between students’ background, their in-and-out-of-school literacy activities, and their perception of the OSSLT through the use of a three-part questionnaire. Zheng et al. (2011) claimed that, while the “students’ views of the OSSLT varied according to their group membership, those who had not
taken the test generally reported more positive perceptions of the OSSLT” compared to those who had not (pp. 119-120).

Reflecting upon the research to date it appeared to us that we have not heard from the student who has been deemed unsuccessful on the OSSLT and who has fully completed the OSSLC as an alternate literacy graduation requirement. However, Main’s (2008) study did document the teacher’s perspective and shed light on the adolescent learner through personal experiences as a teacher of the OSSLC. The researcher documented how a “notoriously rowdy” group of teens sat in the classroom on the first day of school, silent and “demoralized” (p. 47), with a “low self-concept in terms of literacy” (p. 50). Main (2008) claimed that the OSSLC, with a sound and sensitive pedagogical approach, had the ability to help adolescents form positive identities, and have positive and productive literacy experiences making meaningful and authentic connections with tasks that are inclusive of multiple types of literacies rather than restricting students to “the traditional literacies of the classroom” (p. 51). Like other researchers we concluded that the adolescent individual’s perspective of literacy was underrepresented in the research literature (Jeong-Hee, 2011).

Methodology

Research Mode

This qualitative (ethnographic) investigation required daily presence at the research site (secondary school classroom) and utilized a semi-structured interview process with four participants over one full secondary level semester (Creswell, 2012). Our ethnographic inquiry provided a detailed day-to-day portrait of events and captured the culture of the students as a group with shared values, language, beliefs and goals over a period of time (Creswell, 2012, p. 462). Creswell (2012) describes how “culture is everything having to do with human behavior and belief” (p. 462).

Participant Selection

All participants were grade 12 students between the ages of 17 and 19 who had just completed the OSSLC and failed (less than 75% ) the OSSLT twice. As a result of the need to create a study sample that shared OSSLT failure as a defining characteristic, purposeful and homogeneous sampling (Creswell, 2008) was used to select individuals who had just completed the OSSLC, attempted the OSSLT, and received an OSSLT score of unsuccessful at least twice. Therefore, the defining characteristic of the homogenous sampling procedure was not only the defining characteristic of age, but of OSSLT failure.

Data Collection

The main method of data collection was one-on-one audio-recorded interviews. The semi-structured interview format allowed for the exploration of emergent questions and topics. Additional data were gathered through field/observation notes, emails, school records, EQAO results (including OSSLT results), and Individual Education Plans (IEPs); and other documents such as participants’/students’ literacy portfolios containing their work from the OSSLC and culminating tasks for the OSSLC. Fieldwork was completed during one school semester (January

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to June). Data were gathered within the OSSLC classroom setting, where the participants worked and where “shared patterns” could be studied (Creswell, 2008, p. 482).

**Ethical Considerations**

Creswell (2012) suggests that ethnographers should be “open and transparent about gathering data . . . study people and places with respect . . . [while] ensuring privacy” (p. 474). In addition, we worked to ensure that all research was conducted in accordance with the University’s Research Ethics Board guidelines since we worked with human participants in the study. The second ethical consideration was confidentiality (privacy) as the anonymity of participants was paramount and led to the use of pseudonyms. Another ethical consideration that concerned the researchers were the ages of the participants (under the age of 18) that required parent or guardian consent of their son or daughter to participate in the study. The last notable ethical consideration concerned the preexisting relationships between the student participant and researcher/educator that may exist as a result of the place of employment of the educator/researcher. These existing relationships were acknowledged and respected herein.

**Methodological Assumptions**

The first assumption was that all students experienced difficulty with literacy to varying degrees. While it was acknowledged that all participants failed the OSSLT twice, the levels of ability among the participants varied. The second assumption was that all participants had an awareness of their literacy journey. Students did not elaborate or share as much as possible since reflection upon literacy was still emerging prior to the interview. The third assumption was that all participants could articulate and communicate their thoughts in response to the questions. Oftentimes, responses were overly concise and elaborating probes were a necessity. The fourth assumption was that all participants felt safe, comfortable, and free of judgment, and were willing to be entirely candid, open, and honest. Given that the participants were teenagers, assuming that they would feel free of judgment when they are asked to talk about literacy—something they may already be insecure about—may have been a poor assumption. Because of this, participants may have felt the need to hold back information in order to preserve their cognitive safety (self-esteem).

**Limitations**

Firstly, as a result of convenience sampling, generalizability was limited as these views are representative of all OSSLT student test-takers and OSSLC participants provincially. Secondly, limitations inherently exist within the qualitative form of data collection in interviews. Authenticity could be questioned. The participants’ ability or desire to be less candid given the pressure of face-to-face conversation could be a factor in determining whether or not a participant was fully open and honest. Further, given that the participants characteristically have difficulty with communication, having them engage in an oral question and answer session may not have proved to garnered as much useful data as what might have been possible via another method of data collection. Another challenge posed was nervousness of the student participant. None of the participants had done any type of interview before and were nervous about the
format. Lastly, matching the level of the questions to the ability of the informants (Creswell, 2008) was paramount with this sample group.

Findings

Participants’ Definition and Understanding of Literacy

Early in the interview process, participants (Laura, Andrew, Scott, and Karlie) were asked to provide a definition of literacy. There was a significant amount of overlap in the participants’ responses, with all students generating a very conventional or traditional definition of literacy rather than a broader or more inclusive one. Interestingly enough, there seemed to be a divide between how the students defined literacy using words and how their actions demonstrated a different and broader definition of literacy.

The first participant interviewed, Laura, was an 18-year-old girl who had been actively involved in her school’s social outreach club, an extracurricular activity that focused on charity and service. She had a traditional view of literacy, with a focus on “writing, reading, understanding things” (Laura’s, personal interview, June 09, 2009). Laura’s definition is shared by the majority of this study’s participants.

The next student interviewed in this study was Andrew. Andrew described himself as a simple, average student whose goal is to be a mechanic. When asked how he defined literacy, he stated that literacy is “your grammar, your spelling, your reading, and your level of where you are with reading” (Andrew, personal interview, June 15, 2009). Andrew, too, viewed the concept of literacy in a very traditional light by providing what is a very conventional definition of reading (syntax and comprehension). He did not view poetry as a form of literacy, and, in his opinion, reading instructions at home “on how to do something” (Andrew, personal interview, June 15, 2009), is not really literacy either.

Karlie, an outgoing yet soft-spoken young lady with a prim and proper appearance, also shared this similar, narrow, or perhaps traditional, view: “I think literacy means the ability to read and write, like their levels of reading and writing, and understanding what you’re reading” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009).

Finally, Scott, at the time, Scott was a grade 12 student whose interests reflected his suburban setting and lifestyle. He enjoyed hunting and playing both school and intramural sports including football, hockey, baseball, archery, and golf. Upon graduation, Scott had decided to complete an apprenticeship in order to become a plumber. When asked what the term literacy meant to him, he simply and shortly replied, “writing, reading, [and] the meaning behind them” (Scott, personal interview, June 15, 2009).

Factors Impacting Literacy Engagement and Achievement

Standardized Test Failure

Laura described writing the OSSLT as “stressful . . . pressuring . . . especially the [written part]. [Writing the test] made me feel scared and nervous” (Laura, personal interview, June 10, 2009). Andrew’s reaction to the test proved that, for him, it was indeed an intimidating experience. He
stated that he “was really nervous and I blanked out... I felt really bored. I felt like I didn’t have a chance to pass it” (Andrew, personal interview, June 15, 2009). Karlie shared the same view, noting that “it was scary. I was really nervous cause like I know it’s really important and it made me really nervous that it could affect whether I graduate or not” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009). She went on to say that “the test made me hate [reading and writing]. I didn’t want to do it ever. I felt like, because I failed that I obviously suck at it. So I don’t want to do something that I’m not good at” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009). Failing the test had a negative impact on Karlie’s desire to engage with literacy practices on her own accord. Because of her OSSLT failure, she “felt ashamed. Every time I picked up a book or wrote something I felt disappointed just knowing I failed the literacy test. It was just a disappointment, and it reminded me of it” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009).

**Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course Completion**

When asked about how their reading and writing habits have changed since taking the OSSLC, the participants shared similar stories. Since her OSSLC enrollment, Laura stated that her reading and writing habits changed significantly:

> Since I’ve taken the literacy course, I’ve been reading a lot more and actually taking notes and writing little blubs down. . . . The test brought [my writing] down but the course really gave me a new view of it. Before I felt like I wanted to give up because I knew I couldn’t meet their [Ministry] standards… then the course gave me the chance to know where my limits are and understand how far I could go and how I could push myself. (Laura, personal interview, June 10, 2009)

Andrew contended that his experience in the OSSLC gave him more confidence to read and write which, in turn, improved his reading and writing skill set:

> I wasn’t scared to read or scared to write anymore. I actually improved on increasing my paragraphs. I used to have two sentences; now I have five or six. I have a lot more to talk about now. (Andrew, personal interview, June 15, 2009)

For Karlie, knowing that after two failed attempts at the OSSLT she could take the OSSLC, gave her a sense of relief. She went on to say:

> I see more of an importance in reading and writing, and that it’s really valuable . . . I actually enjoy reading and writing now and before I couldn’t stand it. The course made me love it 100% more. (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009)

Karlie then spoke about how the OSSLC set her up for success, due in large part to all of the practice, stating that, “I am prepared to handle my work on my own” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009). She went on to say this about the OSSLC experience

> Impacted all of my courses. It helped with everything. My average went up because of my ability to read and write better. It impacted my thoughts and learning things that are
new to me. I feel like I could pretty much do anything. (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009)

Scott also spoke of how the OSSL C improved his beliefs about reading and writing, and how his skill set improved as a result of his enrolment and engagement in the course:

They [his beliefs] changed a little bit [after the OSSL C] because I now understand what I’m reading and I can put down what I’m thinking on a piece of paper. What I see in my head—I can jot notes down. The course helped me and it will help me in my apprenticeship. (Scott, personal interview, June 15, 2009)

**Relationship Building**

When asked what his feelings were during the first week of the literacy course, Andrew highlighted the nervousness and insecurity echoed by the other participants; however, he also clearly identified the importance of relationship building on the part of the classroom teacher, and how important that was for stimulating an environment of trust and teamwork, camaraderie and support.

I was kind of feeling nervous and scared that the teacher would actually make me go up there and read something right away, or that she’d laugh at my writing, or actually one of the kids would laugh at me. But then I realized that we were all there because of that reason and the teacher was there to help us. And I feel like everybody helped each other and we all took over our fears together. We all accomplished our work together. We worked as a team. (Andrew, personal interview, June 15, 2009)

Karlie cited two things for a newfound confidence and skill set: having a caring teacher teach the OSSL C and the course itself. When asked why this helped her, she stated,

I found that because my teacher liked doing what she was doing, she was able to help me more. That combined with all the strategies we learned in the course—brainstorming work, how tos (sic), taking a big assignment and breaking it down, reflecting and thinking about what we need to do, what we need to work on, and what we’re good at—I took all of those things and began to write well. My teacher didn’t get frustrated when I asked her a question. I could ask her as many times as I needed to and if I didn’t get something she would just try to help me understand it no matter how much time it took. (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009)

Karlie credits this relationship and the fact that her teacher was both caring and compassionate while demonstrating an interest in improving her skills, and in turn her self-confidence.

**Valuable versus Unimportant Experiences/Tasks**

Laura admitted that in grade 11, her first year as a senior, she began reading for fun as a way of self-improving her own literacy. She also mentioned that she “used to always like writing poems. It was all I did” (Laura, personal interview, June 10, 2009). This is an experience, a writing

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experience that is joyful for Laura because “you can just put your feelings down” (Laura, personal interview, June 10, 2009). Laura is just one student from this study who prefers expressive versus prescriptive writing. Andrew is another; he frequently writes for leisurely and social purposes, choosing poetry as his preferred method of expression.

Andrew credited the OSSLC with showing him that reading could be fun. When asked about his reading practices, he stated that he “never read before or after the test because I didn’t like reading . . . Now I read outside of class and I actually find books interesting” (Andrew, personal interview, June 15, 2009). These activities, which observably make Andrew happy and jovial even in our conversation about them, demonstrate the positive and personally productive nature of what he views to be valuable literacy tasks. However, Andrew’s experiences with literacy in school have not all been positive. He points out that, upon failing the OSSLT, the services offered by his high school were counterproductive: “The second time [the school offered to help]. So then I missed other classes and I had to catch up in them so it wasn’t really worth going [to the tutorials]” (Andrew, personal interview, June 15, 2009). Scott, too, agreed that the services offered were superficial:

They got me a tutor and it didn’t help me very much. It wasn’t a very good experience. The tutor was [also] a student… but he didn’t show up. I only had two or three sessions. I was in grade 10. The tutor was in grade 12—a male—who received volunteer hours. (Scott, personal interview, June 15, 2009)

He reinforced the fact that the sessions “didn’t really help me” (Scott, personal interview, June 15, 2009) and, based on his facial expressions and body language, made it clear that these experiences were less than pleasurable.

For Karlie, the prescribed content of the test itself made the OSSLT an unimportant exercise. She stated, “I didn’t like how the topics were chosen for you. I like more of a variety of what I get to write about” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009). Like Andrew, Karlie is more stimulated by expressive writing tasks and “topics that I like” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009).

The freedom to read and write was another noteworthy point that was brought up by several participants, including Karlie. She made the distinction between force and freedom: “Here [at school] you’re forced to [read and write]. [Laughs.] And here it’s strict, like there’s a certain way to do things, like how to write and read. And at home, it’s your own way. You choose what you do” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009). It is this very element of force and control, embodied within standardized testing that generates seemingly unimportant experiences with literacy for young people. Given the opportunity to exercise more freedom with her literacy skills development, Karlie said she would “pick what I’d want to read and what I want to write about” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009).

When asked what type of writing Karlie engaged in after school, she said, “I write journals and short stories” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009). In Karlie’s words, she would write journals and short stories,

Because I can relate them to myself. If you’re writing an essay or a news article, it’s kind of pointless. There’s no reason really. It’s a deadly experience. [Laughs.] It’s not fun and it’s not enjoyable. It’s sometimes aggravating, especially when teachers say it has to be a
certain length and you can’t get it to be that length without repeating yourself. I hate that. (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009)

In this statement, another key point is raised: the inherent value in making a connection between skills taught, skills learned, and skills used. Students must feel invested in a task to take it seriously. There must be some sort of transferable skill and practical application, at least in Karlie’s view.

Literacy and Identity

Self-Esteem

The participants recalled how they felt after OSSLT results. Laura, a student who sets high standards for herself, admitted that she felt shocked:

I was really shocked like… I was kinda (sic) disappointed cause I thought I did better but I guess it wasn’t to “their standards”… I guess they were thinking that my standards were poor. (Laura, personal interview, June 10, 2009)

Karlie shared the same sentiment. When she found out she did not pass the test, she felt “sad, disappointed, angry. I felt stupid” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009). For Karlie, these feelings do not align with how she sees herself: “I see myself as being smart, out-going, and fun” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009). Her standardized test failure did not align with her perception of self. For Karlie, her self-esteem dropped as a result of the OSSLT, which caused her to view herself differently and increase her awareness of how others might view her. By the end of grade 10, Karlie revealed that she viewed herself and her abilities differently.

I felt a lower self-esteem and I didn’t feel like I could be good in any subject. I felt like reading and writing is a very big part of education, and that if I wasn’t successful in literacy I wasn’t going to be successful in any other course. (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009)

Interestingly enough, in her grade 12 year, Karlie did not tell her friends/peer group that she was taking the OSSLC. She spent the semester covering up the truth and claiming she was heading to a “regular” English class. When asked why she had this concealment, she stated, “cause I was embarrassed. I felt like they would think I was stupid, too” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009). Despite the fact that Karlie verbalized her confidence, there is a clear image of a girl who was left feeling insecure after her standardized test failure. For her, having her friends know “the truth” would only confirm what she was feeling inside. During the first week of the course, Karlie admitted that she,

felt stupid, and really shy. I didn’t want to raise my hand for anything. I didn’t really want to talk because I felt like if I did my teacher would notice my lack of ability right away, and I didn’t want to how her that I was incapable of doing anything. I was afraid that she and the students would judge me. I thought maybe a lot of kids said that “I only failed by one” and “I only failed because I couldn’t go cause I was sick and couldn’t

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write the test.” I felt like maybe students would say “she failed by a lot cause she can’t do this.” I thought that people might stereotype kinda. (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009)

When asked what this stereotypical OSSLC student is like, she replied: “Well, you think that they’d be like dumb or . . . just quiet, and not outgoing. Different. Weird. Not like everybody else” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009). She continued, “I was afraid of people thinking that I’m stupid. That’s the worst feeling, to have someone think that they’re better than you” (Karlie, personal interview, June 10, 2009).

Like Karlie, Laura feared judgment due to her OSSLC enrollment. During the first week of the course, Laura admitted,

I was actually really nervous. [laughs.] I was actually scared cause I always thought that everyone around me was going to be like “Oh, she’s in literacy. Look at her, she’s in literacy,” but everyone was really welcoming and it was fun and I learnt a lot and I was actually glad I took it and I didn’t wait till this year to write [the OSSLT] again. (Laura, personal interview, June 10, 2009)

By the end of the course, Laura was more optimistic and positive about her personal achievement. Personal, rather than provincial, standards became the focus.

The fact that I would always try to push myself to meet everyone in the class, always try to compete with them and be like “I could beat this,” “I could do that” and then I think the positive thing is knowing that I know where I stand and I don’t have to try and meet their expectations. I just have to do it for myself. (Laura, personal interview, June 10, 2009)

Unlike Laura and Karlie, Andrew was not surprised to receive word that he had not successfully completed the OSSLT: “I wasn’t shocked. I wasn’t shocked. I’m not a good writer or reader or speaker for that matter. I knew I was going to do bad on it” (Andrew, personal interview, June 15, 2009). It is clear by this response that Andrew defined “good” as passing the OSSLT. His definition of success was a narrow vision dictated by standardized testing. This is, in short, is how Andrew perceived himself in relation to, and in his relationship with, literacy. He credited the OSSLC with giving him more confidence to read and write, thereby improving his skill set and his self-esteem, which he says increased dramatically. Andrew stated: “I have a lot more confidence in myself now. I’ll actually volunteer [to read and write in front of the class]” (Andrew, personal interview, June 15, 2009). Andrew credited the course with improving his self-esteem and thinks that it would be beneficial for all students.

Self-Efficacy

For the purpose of this study, self-efficacy, although a concept related to self-esteem, referred to the belief in one’s ability (Bandura, 1977). All of the participants involved in this study found that the OSSLC greatly enhanced their self-efficacy; despite the fact that the OSSLT made them believe that their skills were substandard. While some participants, like Andrew, were not surprised to find out they were unsuccessful on the OSSLT, others, like Karlie, were devastated.

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to learn that their literacy performance on this standardized test did not align with how they viewed their literacy abilities. Each participant shared the same sentiment: that enrolment in and completion of the OSSLC enhanced their belief in their abilities.

Discussion and Recommendations

Teachers

Teachers need to be comfortable addressing matters of literacy in all subject areas with adequate expertise, training, and a confident grasp of the literacy needs of each learner (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009). An inclusive conception of literacy is needed within classrooms, along with some typically elementary-based literacy strategies (Kearns, 2011). Traditional elementary school strategies like elements of a balanced reading program (e.g., teacher-modeling and guided reading and writing) have proven to be effective with adolescent literacy learners in the secondary setting (Lewis & Wray, 2001; Van De Wal, 2010; Wilhelm, 2001). These strategies help to stress reading and writing as process, which is particularly important since “learning how to do things is especially important for at-risk students” (Wilhelm, 2001, p. 34).

Enhanced self-efficacy is the first step to literacy improvement for the struggling student (Margolis & McCabe, 2006). Through the foundation of trust, the teacher-leader can motivate and encourage students, and the students know that their best interests are in mind. The role of the teacher, then, becomes that of coach and cheerleader. Having a teacher who is enthusiastic and excited about the learning helped to encourage one student in particular to be more engaged in her own learning. Working with a role model can empower the student because it helps to establish community and bonds (Corkery, 2005).

Lastly, for the adolescent literacy learner, authenticity and personal relevance was paramount, as Wilhelm (2001) explained that these “readers need a personally relevant and socially significant purpose” (p. 34) in order for motivation to bloom. Thomas (2001) explained that “student reading is authentic when it involves reading for student understanding and reading for pleasure. Authentic writing includes writing to understand, and writing for self-expression, with a premium placed on student choice” (p. 65). However, “many at-risk students are particularly alienated by school until teachers value what they already know . . . and help them put those skills to work” (Wilhelm, 2001, p. 34).

Schools

Irvin et al. (2007) claimed that adolescent literacy development was neglected in secondary schools, stemming from a lack of understanding when it comes to the complex nature of literacy learning and a lack of training to support students’ literacy development, despite higher literacy demands than ever before. Beyond identifying adolescent literacy as a school-wide problem, regardless of a teacher’s subject specialty, secondary schools should take measures to target learners that require additional support with literacy upon entry into high school. Most often in past learning experiences students received support with literacy after a poor performance on an OSSLT pre-test, or in preparation to write the OSSLT a second time.

Another way to support teachers is to allow for both formal and informal leadership and collaboration (Ryan & Soehner, 2011). While formal leadership may take the form of a school-
wide literacy committee, informal leadership may be an interested teacher sharing success stories with staff members; offering support, strategies, or resources to peers; or modeling effective literacy instruction to an interested teacher or group (Ryan & Soehner, 2011). Whatever the approach, the promotion of literacy as a secondary school culture “topic of interest,” whether formally or informally, is a beneficial way to generate involvement and excitement surrounding the issue.

**School Boards**

The involvement of senior administration is essential to the success of individual schools in implementing literacy initiatives (Lewis & Wray, 2001). Because secondary school teachers are often not trained in literacy instruction, school boards should strive to offer programs or workshops to assist classroom teachers in becoming competent literacy teachers with a repertoire of strategies (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009). This type of teacher training must also include a consideration of the social, emotional, and psychological impacts of repeated failure or poor literacy skills, particularly for the adolescent learner, so that educators may be equipped to create a safe and positive classroom environment in which the adolescent literacy learner may feel most comfortable (Ryan & Soehner, 2011). School boards can enhance support for teacher training by allocating a position as school literacy coach.

**Conclusion**

While the majority of participants were adversely affected—academically, emotionally, socially, and psychologically—by their standardized test failure, all of the participants recognized an important purpose or function of the OSSLT. While initially the participants had reservations about the course, by the end of their experience in the OSSLT, all participants felt more confident in their abilities and appreciated the opportunity to engage in a unique process (ethnographic study), despite the fact that this occurred during their last year of high school. The ethnographic study provided a detailed day-to-day picture of events and captured the culture of the students as a group with shared values, language, and beliefs over time (Creswell, 2012).

In Ontario schools, there is a divide between measuring literacy achievement and providing appropriate and timely interventions for struggling learners. While each individual classroom teacher works with his or her students to meet expectations outlined in curriculum documents or the student’s IEP, we know that students may enter high school without having the prior knowledge or skills necessary for success on the OSSLT. Given this disconnect between what students may be expected to know in order to graduate elementary school and the skills students are expected to demonstrate on a high-stakes standardized test in order to graduate from high school, the current system is not setting students up for success. These students, then, view the OSSLT as punitive rather than productive, as a test they are forced to write even if they are not adequately prepared to do so. Beyond the hurt and embarrassment felt by unsuccessfully completing the test, these students are genuinely struggling with some aspects of traditional, school-based literacy and require appropriate interventions beyond simple tutorials that teach to the OSSLT.

We agree that early intervention, even a research-based intervention in grade 9, must occur. The participants of this study repeatedly stated that receiving appropriate support and assistance in the OSSLC and setting goals for personal success were significant aspects that lead

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to personal triumph. They highlighted the importance of a caring teacher who saw value in the work being done and acted as a cheerleader or coach. Valuable tasks were ones that provided choice, allowed them to feel invested, and were authentic given their interests, talents, and skills. As schools and teachers continue to move toward a student-centered approach, the student voice will be increasingly celebrated.

As more emphasis is put on student success at the secondary school level, it will become increasingly important to include the student experience, his or her perceptions and voice, in order to determine what will truly assist these learners. A vision for literacy at the secondary school level needs to take place independent of EQAO results and Ontario Ministry of Education visions for students in Ontario in order for the interest to be genuine and the results to be authentic and meaningful. Diligent, caring, and compassionate classroom teachers are the most effective tool for helping adolescent learners increase their engagement and achievement with respect to literacy. Administrators and school boards must provide the professional development necessary to support secondary teachers who may not come with a wealth of experience in teaching basic literacy skills.

If we can implement strategies to combat insecurities, build the self-esteem of our students, engage adolescents in literacy activities beyond the walls of the classroom, and celebrate the varying levels of success in our students, we will truly assist these learners in a holistic way that respects their abilities while encouraging positive, productive, and authentic growth.
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A Comparison of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Students on the Inter-Related Dimensions of Self-concept, Strengths and Achievement

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Abstract

Self-concept has been found to play a key role in academic and psychosocial outcomes for students. Appreciating the factors that have a bearing upon self-concept may be of particular importance for Aboriginal students, many of whom experience poorer outcomes than non-Aboriginal Canadians. In this study, we conducted a quantitative analysis of the relationships between multidimensional self-concept, perceived strengths, and academic achievement among a sample of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Theories of self-perception development proposed by Marsh, Harter and Eccles were drawn upon to both frame the study and interpret the results. Results indicated that perceived self-concept and strengths were largely similar across groups. However, students in the two groups drew on different strengths to comprise their general self-concept. Findings were explored within the context of existing research and theory and educational implications were presented.

*Keywords: Self-concept, Strengths Assessment, Aboriginal students, Academic achievement*

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Introduction

The development of a positive general self-concept is an important outcome for students in Canadian schools. Self-concept has been found to play a key role for students in academic achievement, both as a direct or reciprocal influence (Areepattamannil, & Freeman, 2008; De Fraine, Van Damme & Onghena, 2007; Guay, Marsh & Boivin, 2003;) and as an important factor in school engagement (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003; Singh, Chang, & Dika, 2008). Studies have also found that students with a positive self-concept, as one measure of psychosocial adjustment, have higher grades and lower levels of alcohol and drug use, depression, and anxiety (Craven & Marsh, 2008; Deihl, Vicary, & Dieke, 1997; Felner, Brand, & George, 1999; Marsh & Craven, 2006; Marsh, Hau & Kong, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997; Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope, & Dielman, 1997). More specifically, a positive academic self-concept influences academic behaviours such as persistence on academic tasks, motivation, academic choices, educational aspirations, and subsequent achievement (Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988; Marsh & O’Mara, 2008; Marsh & Yeung, 1997; Skaalvik & Rankin, 1995).

Marsh and his colleagues (Green, Nelson, Martin, & Marsh, 2006; Guay, Marsh & Boivin, 2003; Marsh, Hau & Kong, 2002) have found support for the Reciprocal Effects Model, which stipulates that academic self-concept shares a “reciprocal and mutually reinforcing causal relationship with academic achievement, such that prior academic self-concept causes subsequent academic achievement and prior academic achievement causes subsequent academic self-concept” (Craven & Marsh, 2008, p. 110). Clearly, identifying and understanding the factors that are positively or negatively related to self-concept in the school context is important, particularly for those who struggle academically.

For Aboriginal students, appreciating the factors that have a bearing upon self-concept may be of particular importance. Aboriginal students experience poorer educational and psychosocial outcomes than non-Aboriginal Canadians (Kirmayer, Boothroyd, & Hodgins, 1998; Luffman & Sussman, 2007; Malchy, Enns, Young, & Cox, 1997; Richards, Vining, & Weimer, 2010) and are overrepresented as a group in Special Education programs in Canada, with the exception of those targeting gifted students, where they are underrepresented (McBride & McKee, 2001; Minister’s National Working Group on Education, 2002).

Despite these outcomes, research in the area of self-concept and relationships with key outcomes such as academic achievement has focused primarily on non-Aboriginal students. Thus our understanding of the interplay between these constructs, and by extension the foundations upon which academic and psychosocial interventions are based, may not reflect the experiences of Aboriginal students. In an effort to deepen our understanding of the perceptions of Aboriginal students, the current study provides a comparison with non-Aboriginal students in the areas of academic achievement, self-concept and student strengths. Non-Aboriginal students are included in the study not as a normative sample but as the group upon which most research has been focused and upon whom our knowledge in the area is primarily based. An examination of similarities and differences between the groups will shed light on whether or not our understanding of the relationships between important constructs such as self-concept and achievement is accurate for both groups of students. This understanding can then better inform

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1 Aboriginal Canadians are defined by the Canadian constitution as comprising First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples.
interventions aimed at improving academic outcomes in particular.

The literature exploring self-concept and the relationships between this construct and academic achievement will be reviewed, with a particular focus on research pertaining to Aboriginal students. However, before this synthesis is presented, a brief discussion of the literature surrounding the academic achievement of Aboriginal students is presented. It is hoped that this will provide necessary context within which our study is situated.

**Achievement among Aboriginal Students**

A small body of research and theory, in Canada as well as the United States and Australia has explored the oft-cited issues experienced by many Aboriginal students in mainstream educational settings. As has been mentioned, as a group, Aboriginal students experience less success in Canadian classrooms than their non-Aboriginal peers (e.g., Richards, Vining, & Weimer, 2010). Explanations for these difficulties include the mismatch between the formal, mainstream school environment (e.g., instructional and assessment approaches, explicit and implicit curricula) and the learning preferences and values of Aboriginal students and their families (Brady, 1996; Kanu, 2002; Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Snively & Williams, 2006; Toulouse, 2010). Other explanations include racism and prejudice, which result in lowered expectations of success for students (Battiste & McLean, 2005; Brown, Rodger, & Fraehlich, 2009; Richards et al., 2010; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000) and the intergenerational effects of residential schools, which may prevent the development of positive, collaborative relationships and shared goals between families and school staff (Battiste & McLean, 2005; Brown, et al., 2009; Goddard & Foster, 2002). Despite these challenges within the school system, and the links between self-concept and academic achievement, limited information is available about how Canadian Aboriginal students regard their own self-concept, and how this self-concept is linked to other constructs.

**Self-Concept Defined**

Self-concept can be broadly described as a person’s perceptions of his or her self. According to Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton (1976), “These perceptions are formed through his [or her] experience with his [or her] environment … and are influenced especially by environmental reinforcements and significant others” (p. 411). The model proposed by Shavelson and his colleagues (1976) and later revised with Marsh (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985) views self-concept as comprising multiple, distinct dimensions (e.g., verbal, math, school, physical abilities, etc.), as well as having a hierarchical order with general self-concept at the top and increasingly specific areas (e.g., physical abilities, peer relationships, reading, etc.) towards the base of the model. Each dimension within this model is also believed to reflect qualities of both competence (good at, learning things quickly) and affect (interested in, looking forward to). This multi-dimensional model has gained widespread acceptance among researchers and is the one adopted in this study.

One important aspect to highlight in the Marsh/Shavelson model (1985) is the developmental nature of self-concept. As children develop into adolescence, it is hypothesized that they discover their relative areas of strength and weakness and develop the skill to be able to appreciate the difference between these areas such that their self-concept overall declines as their self-concept becomes more differentiated and more highly related to external indicators of

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success. Research supports this decline across childhood until early adolescence, when a plateau has been observed, assumedly when “social comparison processes and cognitive abilities are adequately developed” (Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 1999, p. 570). Other theorists, including Harter (2012) and Eccles and colleagues (1993), have also documented the decline in self-concept explained as a move from an optimistic bias seen in young children to a more accurate self-perception resulting from increased cognitive abilities. Harter (2012) describes the increasing abstraction of self-concept, which shifts from concrete, behavioural descriptions in early childhood to more trait labels in middle childhood that rely in part on comparisons with peers (e.g., I’m smart), to more abstract, differentiated constructs in adolescence where social comparisons eventually take a lesser role.

A second, related aspect of this model of self-concept that is important for the current study is the influence of the environment, particularly significant others on the development of self-concept. This element exists in other models as well, such as those described by Harter (1998, 1999; Bouche & Harter, 2005) in her reflected appraisal theory, and Wigfield and Eccles’ (2000) expectancy-value theory where the role of perceived competence, basically internalized messages transmitted by teachers and parents, is a powerful one in terms of predicting and shaping the self-concept of children and adolescents. This finding has been reported even after controlling for grades (Madon et al., 2001). Given the various explanations for the academic difficulties experienced by many Aboriginal students in minority contexts, and the role that negative messages from family, school staff, and broader communities could play in these difficulties, Aboriginal students may certainly perceive their competence in less positive ways in a social context that historically has been discriminatory (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010).

Self-Concept of Aboriginal Students

Several studies were conducted in Canada around the 1980s that explored the racial self-identity of Aboriginal elementary-aged students using racially diverse pictures or dolls (Annis & Corenblum, 1986; Corenblum & Annis, 1993; George & Hoppe, 1979; Hunsberger, 1978). The findings from these studies implied a preference for the pictures or dolls that displayed Caucasian attributes among Aboriginal children and were considered to reflect a lower self-concept on the part of young Aboriginal students (Corenbaum & Annis, 1993). More recent studies based in Australia, however, have found no such relationship between in-group preference and measures of self-concept for children aged between 6 and 12 years (Pedersen & Walker, 2000; Pedersen, Walker, & Glass, 1999). Studies of American Indian youth in the United States have similarly failed to find a relationship between identification or enculturation and self-esteem (Jones & Galliher, 2007; Pittenger, 1999; Rumbaugh Whitesell, Mitchell, Spicer, &Voices of Indian Teens Project Team, 2009; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben, & La Framboise, 2001).

Several authors have put forth the hypothesis that Aboriginal students with a stronger sense of cultural identity as well as greater participation in cultural activities will report higher self-concept and/or academic achievement (e.g., Rumbaugh Whitesell et al., 2009). A student’s perception of being involved in cultural or spiritual activities may serve as a protective or resilience factor against difficulties arising from cultural conflict with the education system or the larger society (Vadas, 1995; Whitbeck et al., 2001; Zimmerman, Ramirez, Wahienko,
In terms of differences between the self-concept of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, mixed findings have been reported. In theory, given the areas of difficulty, particularly academic, which are experienced by many Aboriginal students, and the negative messaging described previously, their sense of self-competence may be assumed to be lower than their non-Aboriginal peers. A longitudinal study by Beiser, Sack, Manson, Redshirt, and Dion (1998) examined the psychosocial development of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal elementary-aged children in Canada and the United States. They found the developmental trajectories of Aboriginal students’ self-esteem, as divided into Instrumental Competence (reflecting a child’s feeling that he or she is dependable and able to accomplish tasks) and Social Competence (ability to make and keep friends), differed significantly from those of non-Aboriginal students. Self-rated levels of both Instrumental and Social Competence were said to be commensurate for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children at Grade 2. But by Grade 4, the non-Aboriginal children achieved higher scores than the Aboriginal students.

More recently, studies from the United States and Australia reveal that the self-concept or self-esteem of Aboriginal students may be higher (Bodkin-Andrews, Craven, & Marsh, 2005; Craven & Marsh, 2004; Purdie & McCrindle, 2004; Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe, & Gunstone, 2000) or lower than non-Aboriginal students (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2005; Craven et al., 2005; McInerney, 2001). Such dichotomous research clearly points to the need for multidimensional operationalization of self-concept. For example, in a survey of students attending 17 secondary schools in Western Australia, Aboriginal students reported significantly lower academic self-concept in the areas of math, school, verbal abilities, and peer relations than their non-Aboriginal peers. However, the opposite relationship was found for general and physical self-concept as well as self-concept regarding artistic ability with Aboriginal students reporting significantly higher scores than their non-Aboriginal peers. Similar results have been reported both in Australia (Purdie & McCrindle, 2004; Purdie et al., 2000) and the United States (Bodkin-Andrews., 2010). Aboriginal students may see themselves as less competent in academic areas such as math and reading but equally or even more competent in a general domain or those related to family, peers, art, or physical competence.

While indications are that a significant positive relationship exists for Aboriginal students between self-concept and academic achievement, as it does for non-Aboriginal students, further research in this area is required. The present study aims to fill this gap in part by examining the association between these variables for groups of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

**Self-Concept and Strengths**

One approach to further understanding the relationship between self-concept and school-related outcomes such as academic achievement is a strengths-based perspective. The strengths perspective is consistent with the growing move away from continually documenting deficits, such as the academic and mental health difficulties experienced by many Aboriginal students, to identifying and adopting proactive approaches grounded in positive psychology (Craven & Marsh, 2008; Frederickson, 2001). Both the strengths perspective and positive psychology are based on the understanding that all individuals, even individuals who might experience difficulties in life, have areas of capability or assets that can be built upon to achieve growth and development.
While numerous theories and models related to the strengths-based perspective exist, Rawana and Brownlee (2009) defined strengths as “a set of developed competencies and characteristics that is valued both by the individual and society and is embedded in culture” (p. 256). Rawana and Brownlee (2010) included in their measure of strengths domains focused on personal strengths in areas of the child’s life such as, school, home, community involvement, faith and culture, and goals and dreams. Identifying strengths in domains of life functioning is consistent with the above definition of self-concept as a phenomenon that is influenced by environmental reinforcements and significant others, which would occur within different social contexts. A potentially significant aspect of the relationship between strengths domains, self-concept and academic achievement is that the domains may reflect aspects of the child’s world that are accorded varied relevance across cultures in relation to the self-concept. Rotenberg and Cranwell (1989) provided support for this differential perception of oneself. They reported that Canadian Aboriginal children emphasized and valued different personal attributes in relation to self-concept, as well as a greater external orientation, as compared to non-Aboriginal children. There has also been the suggestion that for Aboriginal students, self-concept develops more often from students’ perceptions of their relationships with family and their perception of being a valuable member of their community as opposed to the individual perception of competence more typical of non-Aboriginal students (Dvorakova, 2003). Kanu (2002), in her study with a group of First Nations students in a Winnipeg high school found that students described how, for them, the self was constructed in terms of interdependence, communality, and social relatedness. Thus strengths perceived by Aboriginal students in particular areas including family or community life may contribute to their overall sense of self-concept, far more so that non-Aboriginal students who may rely upon strengths in areas related to school or individual functioning.

Research in the area of strengths-based assessment and interventions is growing. The identification of strengths that influence self-concept and academic achievement may lead to more effective interventions as well as a better theoretical understanding of the relationships between these constructs. Exploring whether there are differences in the construction of self-concept between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is a first step in developing this understanding. Accordingly, the current study explored the relationships between multidimensional self-concept, perceived strengths and academic achievement among a sample of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Northwestern Ontario. This study is particularly timely given the paucity of contemporary research focused on the self-concept of Aboriginal students, and the need to conduct research that allows for the identification and inclusion of student strengths in relation to achievement, rather than solely deficits.

Method

The current study consisted of a quantitative examination of self-concept, strengths, and achievement among a small sample of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Details regarding the participants, procedures, and measures are detailed next.

Participant characteristics

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Participants in the study were recruited from two elementary schools in Northwestern Ontario. Approximately 30% of students at each school self-identified as Aboriginal. Of the approximately 352 potential student participants at the two schools, parental consent and student assent was obtained for 103, resulting in a return rate of 29%. Equal numbers of students participated at the two schools ($n = 50$ at school 1 and $53$ at school 2) and no significant differences were found by Aboriginal status, gender, or grade. The average age of the student participants was 11.49 years of age ($SD = 1.67$) and equal numbers of male and female student took part. Information about Aboriginal status (Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal) was provided for 101 of the 103 students either through the Aboriginal Self-Identification process or by the student themselves on the demographic portion of one of the measures. Thirty-six students were identified as Aboriginal (36%) and 65 were identified as non-Aboriginal (64%); each group comprised equal numbers of male and female students as well as similar average ages (Aboriginal: 11.56 years, $SD = 1.42$; non-Aboriginal: 11.45 years, $SD = 1.27$).

**Sampling procedures**

The data for the present study were drawn from a larger study focusing on reducing bullying and violence in two elementary schools in northwestern Ontario. Because the anti-bullying intervention is not the focus of the present study, it will not be described here. The data was based on the initial survey data from the larger study. Students completed several measures related to their experiences with bullying, their behaviours, self-concept and their strengths in a number of domains. Students' report card grades were also collected as a measure of academic achievement.

Consent packages were sent home with all students in Grades 4 – 8. The consent packages invited parents to provide consent for their child or children to participate in the study. Students were included in the study if their parent/guardian had returned a signed consent form and if the student had also completed and signed an assent form. Participation was limited to students in Grades 4 – 8 because a number of the measures required the student to read and complete the form on their own, namely, they were what is described as self-report measures in the literature, and these measures required a Grade 4 reading level for accurate comprehension. Participation was also limited to students who were at least in Grade 4, given the developmental nature of self-concept described previously.

**Variables Measured**

Within this study, we concentrated on measuring three aspects of the student: self-concept, individual strengths, and academic achievement. Each of these topics are discussed below.

**Self-Concept.** The measure chosen to assess student self-concept was the Self-Description Questionnaire – I (SDQ-I; Marsh, 1988). The SDQ is a multidimensional measure of self-concept for children and adolescents. The use of the SDQ-I and II among Aboriginal children and adolescents has been the focus of extensive research and it has been shown high internal consistency and test-retest reliability as well as extensive validity evidence (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2005; Craven, Yeung, & Ali, 2008; Whitcomb & Merrell, 2013). In reviewing the SDQ-I, Byrne (1996) concluded that “in using the SDQ-I, researchers, clinicians,
counsellors, and others interested in the welfare of preadolescent children can feel confident in
the validity of interpretation based on responses to its multidimensionally sensitive items” (p.
117). Although the SDQ-I comprises 11 subscales in three domains (Academic, Non-Academic
and Global), only the peer and general factors were included in the present study.

The Peer Self-Concept scale of the SDQ-I (Marsh, 1988) measures “student perceptions
of how easily they make friends, their popularity, and whether others want them as a friend”
(Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 1998, p. 1051). The Peer Self-Concept scale consists of nine items,
which were rated by students on a five point scale ranging from 1 = false to 5 = true. Items
include (a) I have lots of friends, (b) I make friends easily, and (c) Most other kids like me.
Cronbach’s alpha was reported by Marsh (1990) as 0.85. In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha
was 0.88, with no significant differences between internal consistency for Aboriginal and non-
Aboriginal students.

The General Self-Concept scale of the SDQ-I is intended to measure “student self-
perceptions of themselves as effective, capable individuals who have self-confidence and self-
respect and are proud and satisfied with the way they are” (Marsh et al., 1998, p. 1051). Students
responded to 10 items on a five point scale ranging from 1 = false to 5 = true including (a)
Overall I am no good, (b) I can do things as well as most other people, and (c) A lot of things
about me are good. Marsh (1990) reported Cronbach’s alpha for the factor as 0.81. In the present
study, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.88, with no significant differences between internal consistency
for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Student strengths. Student strengths were assessed using the Strength Assessment
Inventory (SAI; Rawana & Brownlee, 2010), which is a measure that has seen increasing use
with children and youth across Ontario and beyond as an effective approach to documenting
perceived areas of competence (Anderson, Rawana, Brownlee, & Whitley, 2010; Brazeau,
Teatero, Rawana, Brownlee, & Blanchette, 2012; Rawana & Brownlee, 2009; Rawana, Latimer,
Whitley, & Probizanski, 2009; Welsh, 2003). The SAI differs from similar measures in that it
“provides a comprehensive assessment of strengths that are intrinsic to the individual as well as
strengths associated with an individual’s interaction with his or her environment” (Brazeau et al.,
2012, p. 384). Eight domains of the SAI were included: (a) School, (b) Peer Relationships, (c)
Leisure/Recreation, (d) Personality Functioning, (e) Home, (f) Community Involvement, (g)
Faith & Culture, and (h) Goals and Dreams. The SAI contains descriptions of characteristics or
behaviours (e.g., When I set goals, I try hard to reach them; I have a good sense of humour) that
indicate strength in a particular area of functioning. Students responded on a three-point scale
ranging from Not At All to Almost Always. Scores were calculated for each domain to indicate
areas of relative strength for children. The SAI has been found to have good internal consistency
and acceptable to good levels of test-retest reliability among samples that include Canadian
Aboriginal children, a claim that cannot be made for other measures (Anderson et al., 2010;
Brazeau et al., 2012; Welsh, 2003).

Academic Achievement. Academic achievement was assessed through student grades,
which were obtained from student report cards. Numerical grades were provided for students in
Grades 7 and 8, and letter grades for students in Grades 4, 5 and 6. Letter grades were
transformed into numerical grades to allow for quantitative analyses by choosing the midpoint of
each grade range. For example, a grade of B- represented a mark range of 70 to 72 (Ontario

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Ministry of Education, 1998), so a 71 was assigned for each B-. The academic average used in the present analyses was obtained by calculating the mean of the three strands of English Language Arts (i.e., reading, writing, oral/visual communication), one strand of Mathematics (i.e., number sense/numeration) and Science and Technology. These subjects/strands were chosen because they appeared in all reporting periods, for students in every elementary grade (4 through 8).

**Limitations of the Study**

Generalization of findings from this study is limited due to the small number of participants, particularly those who were Aboriginal. Also, the experiences of students in an urban setting in Northwestern Ontario may not extend to students in more rural or remote settings or in larger centres across Canada. As such, findings should be viewed as providing suggestions for potential areas for future research as well as identifying elements to explore when developing interventions for students struggling academically.

**Findings**

Descriptive analyses were first conducted in order to explore the self-concept, the eight domains of perceived strengths and academic achievement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Next, the contribution of Peer Self-Concept, perceived strengths, and academic achievement to General Self-Concept was assessed using a regression analysis.

Mean scores on all variables were not found to differ significantly across school, gender, or grade so we analysed the data as a single set. Of the 101 students who were eligible to participate in the study, complete data on the self-concept and strength variables was available for 96 (32 Aboriginal and 64 Non-Aboriginal) and academic achievement data was available for 81 (29 Aboriginal and 52 Non-Aboriginal). Missing data for the self-concept and strength data was largely due to student absence; a greater number of Aboriginal students were absent as compared to non-Aboriginal students. For academic achievement, data were generally missing due to incomplete student records because of recent moves, school changes, etc. We decided to deal with missing data for the regression using pairwise deletion of cases as a visual inspection of the data identified no particular pattern. For Aboriginal students, sample sizes ranged from 30 to 32 for self-concept and strength scores respectively; for non-Aboriginal students, sample sizes ranged from 62 to 64.

Average scores on all variables were calculated for both groups and a univariate analysis of variance was conducted with a Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons applied (.05/11 = .005). Effect sizes calculated using Cohen’s $d$ (1969) were small to moderate; results can be seen in Table 1 below. Students in both groups were generally similar in their self-concept and perceived strengths; significant differences were found for strengths at School, strengths in Personality Functioning, and strengths in Goals and Dreams, as well as academic achievement with non-Aboriginal students reporting higher scores in these areas.

In order to assess the influence of Peer Self-Concept, perceived strengths and academic achievement on General Self-Concept, two stepwise regression analyses were conducted; one for Aboriginal and one for non-Aboriginal students. The resulting models were significant and
explained approximately 63% of the variance in General Self-Concept for Aboriginal students and 61% for non-Aboriginal students. For Aboriginal students, the sole variable in the significant model, $F(1, 26) = 42.27, p < .001$, was strengths in Faith and Culture. For non-Aboriginal students, the two variables that comprised the significant model, $F(2, 49) = 36.93, p < .001$, were strengths in Personality Functioning and Peer Self-Concept.

Table 1

*Ratings of self-concept, strengths and academic achievement by group*

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aboriginal</th>
<th>Non-Aboriginal</th>
<th>F value</th>
<th>Effect size $(d)$</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<td>.69</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>.78</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>6.51</td>
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<td>3.72</td>
</tr>
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<td>14.78</td>
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<td>23.52</td>
<td>4.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goals and Dreams</td>
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<td>5.99</td>
<td>75.48</td>
<td>6.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .001$

**Discussion**

Descriptive Analyses

Our analyses revealed several interesting findings. First, the General Self-Concept of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students were not significantly different. Peer Self-Concept was also similar between groups. While small sample sizes limit the generalizability of these results, this finding is positive and indicates that on average, students in this sample, regardless of whether they were Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, felt a strong sense of self-worth and competence. It also aligns with the findings of other studies, largely conducted outside of Canada, where Aboriginal students were found to have similar or higher levels of general self-concept as compared to non-Aboriginal students (e.g., Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2005; Corenbaum & Anis, 1993; Craven & Marsh, 2004).

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In contradiction, however, while student reports of perceived strengths were also largely similar, Aboriginal students reported fewer strengths in the area of Personality Functioning. This domain focuses on a students’ sense of themselves as generally capable, positive, self-aware individuals. Items assessing this domain include: (a) I am happy about life, (b) I know my own strengths, (c) I can ask for help when I need it, (d) I can tell right from wrong, and (e) I can cope when something happens that makes me very sad. While the strengths measure is more behaviourally-based and less evaluative than the General Self-Concept measure, it is a similar and likely overlapping construct. Lower scores in this domain (Aboriginal students: $m = 42.01$ for; non-Aboriginal students: $m = 46.70$; $F(2, 7) = 10.44$, $p < .001$; $d = 0.35$) indicates that on average, Aboriginal students in the current sample believe that they have fewer skills in terms of self-awareness and ability to moderate their own thoughts, feelings, and actions. As little research has been done in this area, it is not possible to determine if this finding is consistent with other findings and might generalize to other Aboriginal students. However, as noted previously, it suggests that exploring the general self-evaluations of students through various measures and lenses may allow for a more complete understanding of student self-perceptions. It is also important to note that Aboriginal students may not place as much value on strengths in this area of functioning, as it is focused on individual competencies and at odds with a cultural emphasis on collective well-being (Dvorakova, 2003; Kanu, 2002).

Significant differences were seen in two other strengths domains: Strengths at School and strengths in Goals and Dreams, with Aboriginal students reporting lower scores in both. Academic achievement was also significantly lower for the Aboriginal group on average. As was described previously, the Strengths at School domain included items related to pro-social classroom skills and connectedness with school. Items include (a) I study for tests, (b) I can read at my grade level or higher, (c) I do my homework, and (d) I enjoy school. It is not surprising, therefore, that students who have been assessed by their teachers as performing relatively poorly academically, have a perception of themselves as possessing fewer strengths in relation to school. A study by Craven and her colleagues (2005) also reported that while general self-concept was similar, Aboriginal students reported lower competence in school. It is not possible to determine causation in this instance; as described by Wigfield and Eccles (2000) in their expectancy-value model, students who feel they do not have the skills to succeed in class and who feel less involved in their school may feel less motivated, exert less effort in academics, and ultimately perform more poorly academically. Thus poor academic self-concept may lead to academic difficulties. The reverse is also true of course, students who consistently struggle academically develop a poor sense of competence in relation to school; thus academic difficulties may lead to lower academic self-concept. This explanation is supported by findings emerging from work by Marsh and his colleagues (Guay, Marsh & Boivin, 2003; Marsh, 1990; Marsh, Hau & Kong, 2002) focused on the Reciprocal Effects Model, which hypothesizes the reciprocal and mutually reinforcing causal relationship of academic self-concept with academic achievement.

That Aboriginal students reported general self-concept that was similar to their peers, but significantly poorer self-perception in school functioning, speaks to the importance of using multidimensional models of self-concept and may also be explained within the previously described theories of Marsh and Shavelson (1985); Harter (2012; 1998), and Eccles (1984). All describe the key role of the environment, particularly the perceptions and judgements of significant others, on the development of self-concept. The group of Aboriginal students in the

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current study were assessed by their teachers as being less successful academically (using report card grades), relative to their non-Aboriginal peers. Thus students are likely receiving messages from their teachers and through peer comparisons about the difficulties they are experiencing and the areas of schooling where they need to improve. This feedback then becomes internalized by the students who begin to judge their school-based strengths in more negative ways.

Students’ relatively low self-rating of strengths at school is a cause for concern, particularly when viewed in tandem with a lower sense of competence in the Goals and Dreams domain. This domain reflects the level of aspiration students hold for themselves, as well as their perception of the skills they possess in self-regulating their learning, particularly planning and goal setting. Students who are poor at goal-setting and self-regulating their learning typically exhibit lower motivation and report lower self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 1990). They often feel unable to actually develop and implement strategies that would enable them to complete academic and non-academic tasks competently, and generally have significantly lower academic achievement as a result.

In the expectancy-value model of achievement-related choices developed by Eccles, Wigfield and others (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, 1992), students’ academic persistence and performance on tasks is influenced by their expectations of success and their valuing of the task which in turn influenced by their self-evaluation of competence, goals, and socialization factors such as stereotypes. It can be expected then, that students who are unsure of how to set goals, who see themself as less capable than their peers in terms of school success, and are less connected to school are more likely to do poorly academically and to make academic choices (e.g., whether or not to study, whether or not to attend a class, what courses to select) that are less likely to engender success.

**Regression Analyses**

With respect to the regression analyses, findings indicated that the variance in General Self-Concept was influenced differently depending on students’ Aboriginal identification. Students in the non-Aboriginal group drew on strengths in Personality Functioning to comprise their sense of self. This finding is expected given the complementary nature of the General Self-Concept and Personality Functioning constructs described previously. Students who are aware of and able to moderate their own thoughts, feelings, and actions, who report being happy, hopeful and confident, are likely those who have a positive sense of self-worth. Peer Self-Concept also made a significant contribution to General Self-Concept which is to be expected given previous research (Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 1998; Marsh & McDonald-Holmes, 1990); students with more positive perceptions of their peer relationships, who have greater facility in developing friendships and feel that they are liked by others, overall feel better about themselves.

For students in the Aboriginal group, the sole variable that contributed significantly to self-concept was strengths in Faith and Culture. What is interesting and unique about this strength domain is that it is not specific to any particular cultural group or practice. It assesses the beliefs, practices, and perspectives of students related to faith and culture. Items include (a) I pray or go to worship with others, (b) I feel I am part of a culture that is special, (c) I think it is important to honour my culture, and (d) I am proud of who I am and where my people came from. There were no differences between the levels of strength reported by students on this domain. In fact, mean scores were almost identical (Aboriginal group, \( M = 23.50, SD = 4.08; \)
non-Aboriginal group, $M = 23.63$, $SD = 4.53$). However, the students in the Aboriginal group drew more strongly on this area of their lives in the development of their sense of worth and competence as an individual than non-Aboriginal students did.

Although there is little existing research that aligns with the above finding, it may support the assertions of researchers and theorists who believe that students who identify with, place value on, and take part in practices related to any cultural group will hold a more positive view of themselves as a result. The fact that previous studies do not support this finding may relate to the type of measure employed. For example, two recent studies, Jones and Galliher (2007) and Rumbaugh Whitesell et al. (2009) used the Orthogonal Cultural Identification Scale (OCIS; Oetting & Beauvais, 1990-1991), which was developed to assess immersion and feelings of success in the American Indian culture. Students respond to six items on a four-point scale regarding their involvement in and knowledge of cultural values, traditions, and activities as well as their subjective capacity to be successful in the culture. Items include (a) Does your family live by or follow an American Indian way of life?, (b) Some families have special activities or traditions that take place every year at particular times. How many of these special activities did your family have when you were growing up that were based on American Indian culture?, and (c) Is your family a success in the American Indian culture? These types of questions rely heavily on the knowledge and identification of respondents with a particularly defined culture rather than in individuals who have a broader view of cultural belonging as is used in the present study.

Perhaps it is the perception of the student as belonging to a group that they value, rather than their identification with an Aboriginal culture specifically, that relates to self-concept in the present study. This point may be particularly the case for students who have been raised, or who are living in an urban setting away from their families’ First Nation reservation and who may not identify overtly with specific practices or terminology associated with First Nations cultures. Results of a few Canadian studies support this interpretation. For example, research conducted by Berry (1999) captured the perceptions of groups of Aboriginal adult and youth from various parts of Canada through a number of learning circles. Participants described the positive impact of a strong cultural identification on their sense of self and how this empowered them. However Belanger, Barron, McKay-Turnbull, and Mills (2003) interviewed groups of urban youth in Canada and found that approximately half equated Aboriginal culture with traditional pursuits (e.g., smudging, attending powwows) and half associated culture retention with becoming involved with programs focused on urban Aboriginal youth. Thus, participants perceived an association with Aboriginal culture in very different ways.

However participants in the present study viewed or defined their participation in Aboriginal culture, they placed great value on their strengths in the Faith and Culture domain and drew upon it in developing their relatively positive overall sense of self. This is an important finding as it allows insight into the construction of self-concept among a group of Aboriginal students, which has been largely missing from the research literature to date, and potentially informs school-based programs and interventions targeted at improving academic success for this group.

The absence of the influence of other variables, such as School Functioning or Peer Self-Concept, on General Self-Concept for the Aboriginal group is also notable. Recognizing that student self-concept may be developed in ways that are different than those of the mainstream, non-Aboriginal cultures; for example, that a students’ perception of their peer relationships or of
their efforts and achievements in schools do not significantly impact their self-concept shifts our understanding of how to intervene effectively for students who do struggle with poor self-worth. Given the academic difficulties experienced by many of the Aboriginal students in the study, this finding also aligns with research that demonstrates the tendency of students with high self-concept to discount areas of weakness. By not drawing heavily on School Functioning, but instead drawing on an area of relative strength which they value, students are better able to maintain a positive overall sense of self (Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998). While many explanations and hypotheses can be posited to explain the current findings within existing literature and theory, this is, of course, one study based on the self-perceptions of a relatively small group of students, in one particular geographic location. Further research is necessary to explore and confirm the current findings.

**Educational Implications**

It is important to recognize that, while discussed as a group in this paper, heterogeneity of experiences and self-perceptions exists among both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Nonetheless, the present findings allow for several threads of discussion regarding educational programming and interventions. First, both groups of students in the sample reported many areas of strength, which, if identified and valued by classroom or resource teachers, can provide direction in terms of developing programs that stem from areas of competence and wellbeing, rather than focusing primarily on academic areas where students may experience frustration and low self-perceptions (Latimer et al., 2009).

Given the lowered average academic achievement, as well as relative weaknesses in Strengths in School Functioning and Goals and Dreams reported by Aboriginal students, it is important that educators recognize the possibility that some Aboriginal students may experience difficulties in a school system that may not align with their traditional ways of learning and the measuring of competence and success (Battiste & McLean, 2005; Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Kanu, 2002; Toulouse, 2010). Given the intergenerational effects of the residential school system in Canada, many families may view collaboration with school staff and a focus on success in mainstream, off-reserve schools with suspicion or as a low priority (Battiste & McLean, 2005; Brown, Rodger, & Fraehlich, 2009; Goddard & Foster, 2002). These issues are exacerbated by fact that few teachers in off-reserve school settings are Aboriginal and consequently the availability of staff with in-depth understanding of Aboriginal cultures may be limited, also resulting in few school-based role models for Aboriginal students (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009; St. Denis, Bouvier, & Battiste, 1998). Providing authentic, culturally relevant opportunities for families to collaborate with teachers may allow for a shared understanding of the strengths and needs of individual students as well as the goals of the education system in general. As well, involving students, families, and Aboriginal staff members in developing culturally relevant approaches to delivering the provincial curricula may prove valuable for the learning of some Aboriginal students.

Research has also documented the racism and prejudice that exists in many schools and broader communities where Aboriginal students are viewed as less capable and lowered expectations of their success are held by their teachers and other members of the communities (Battiste & McLean, 2005; Brown et al., 2009; Richards et al., 2010; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). It is therefore important that school staff develop an awareness and understanding of these potential barriers by exploring the ways in which students are taught, the messages

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students receive within and beyond schools with respect to competence and worth, and the valuing of student interests and strengths. In doing so, school staff move beyond a potentially surface-level peppering of cultural icons or celebrations, or what Battiste and McLean (2005) refer to as the ‘add and stir’ model of education.

One finding not previously reported in other studies is that Aboriginal students draw on their strengths in Faith and Culture to develop and maintain their General Self-Concept. In turn, this finding indicates that emphasizing and valuing the strengths of students in this domain may be an avenue to improve self-concept, goal-setting, school engagement, and academic outcomes. It also suggests that a view of oneself as belonging to a group and being connected to shared practices and spiritual beliefs (a collective view) does have a strong influence on general self-concept (an individual view). Incorporating First Nations cultures into schools, including the teaching of traditional languages, practices, and values as well as focusing on the development of the whole child (spiritual, social, physical, and cognitive) with the collaboration of families and communities may demonstrate to students that their faiths and cultures are important. Interventions that are developed for Aboriginal students need to consider the primary role and valuing of the spiritual and cultural elements of their families and lives, as is the case for students of many cultural backgrounds. These interventions may serve to improve and maintain the self-concept of students from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. The need for this type of approach is supported by recent Canadian reports (Battiste, 2002; Canadian Council on Learning, 2009) and will hopefully continue to infuse and permeate classrooms across the country in the years to come.

This study, while modest in scope, adds to the growing body of research exploring the experiences and perceptions of Canadian Aboriginal students. The academic difficulties experienced by many Aboriginal students have been well-documented, and research that moves beyond this to understanding the relationships between achievement and other key factors such as self-concept, is necessary. Self-concept has long been identified as a key factor in the motivation and success of non-Aboriginal students and the current study demonstrates that, for one group of students, overall self-perceptions are similarly positive for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. This study makes a unique contribution by identifying the key influence of strengths in Faith and Culture to the self-concept of Aboriginal students and thus provides an avenue for future research and potentially more effective psychosocial and academic interventions.
References


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Shifting Perspectives and Practices: 
Teacher Candidates’ Experiences of an Aboriginal Infusion in Mainstream Teacher Education

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Abstract

This exploratory case study shares teacher candidates’ perspectives and experiences of an Aboriginal infusion at York University’s Faculty of Education field site in Barrie, Ontario. For this initiative, Aboriginal content and pedagogies were infused throughout placements and courses of the mainstream teacher education program. Teacher candidates shared that the Infusion prepared them to teach Aboriginal content in culturally respectful and meaningful ways by providing them with a foundation to build on and helping them to develop teaching practices inclusive of diverse ways of knowing and being in the world. These findings may be useful to other educators developing and implementing their own infusion initiatives.

Keywords: Aboriginal Infusion, mainstream teacher education, teacher candidate learning journeys

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Fill a large glass bowl with water. Let the water represent the standard curriculum in Canadian teacher education. Notice the clarity. Now throw in a few dried beans. They represent the inclusion of Aboriginal content within existing curriculum. They change the situation minimally. The water filling the bowl remains generally unaffected. While there is always hope that one of these beans will germinate and create more change, they have been dried for a long time. Now move to the “add a little and stir” approach and see what happens to the water with a few drops of red food colouring. Watch as the colour spreads in a pattern and then dissipates. Overall, a little tint perhaps, but barely visible to the naked eye. Now add enough red food colouring to infuse the entire body of water, the entire curriculum. See the red swirl and shimmer throughout the bowl. See that the bowl is now filled with red water. This is what we mean by infusion1. This is what happens to curriculum when you take seriously Indigenous Thought and its power to transform our teaching and learning practices.

Introduction

In 2008, the Aboriginal2 Infusion initiative (Infusion) was launched as part of the mainstream teacher education program at York University’s Faculty of Education field site in Barrie, Ontario (the Barrie Site). This initiative involved infusing Aboriginal content and pedagogies in each of the required education courses and placements through academic readings, films, assignments and assessments, field trips, guest speakers, and everyday teaching practices. The goal was not for teacher candidates to become “experts” on Aboriginal education, but rather to provide a space to engage in learning of Aboriginal perspectives and pedagogies and to develop respectful relationships with Aboriginal people in order to assist teacher candidates in responding to the specific needs and interests of Aboriginal students in their classrooms while facilitating meaningful learning for all students. This paper shares the findings of our exploratory case study3 that investigated teacher candidates’ perspectives and experiences of the Infusion. The findings will be used to support present and future development and implementation of the Infusion. We hope sharing what we have learned may assist other education programs across the faculty, province, and elsewhere to consider developing and implementing their own infusion initiatives in mainstream teacher education.

Why Infusion? Why Now?

We see our work building on previous efforts to address infusion. One work in particular that resonates with the Infusion goals is Gay’s (1997) “dual infusion strategy,” which she proposed over 15 years ago for addressing multiculturalism in teacher education. The dual infusion strategy involved weaving multicultural perspectives and pedagogies “throughout all the foundational cores and areas of concentration offered, as well as being a distinct and visible area of specialization” (Gay, 1997, p. 160). Building on her earlier work, Gay (2010) proposed a theory of “multidimensional culturally responsive teaching” which “encompasses curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, classroom management and performance assessments” (p. 33). While our infusion approach had an Aboriginal focus, at the core was the belief that understanding Canada’s
contemporary and historical relations with Aboriginal people is fundamental to creating respectful relations that may lead to enhanced well-being and academic success for all students.

At the Barrie Site, the process of formally developing the *Infusion* began in 2007-2008. After observing over a number of years that many teacher candidates had only a limited understanding of Aboriginal people and perspectives, a former site lead, along with local First Nation and Métis community members and educators identified a need for infusing Aboriginal content in the mainstream teacher education program. Concurrently, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) released the *First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* identifying Aboriginal education as a key priority and acknowledging the need “to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students” (p. 5). It recognized teachers’ lack of knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal cultures and pedagogies as an overriding issue that impacts student success. Dion (2007) has argued, “one way or another, teachers, like many Canadians, claim the position of ‘perfect stranger’ to Aboriginal people” (p. 330). This position is informed by what teachers do not know and refuse to know as well as by what they do know, which is often based on stereotypes and misunderstandings. Meaningful opportunities for developing understanding are needed for pre-service and in-service teachers.

While Aboriginal teacher education programs began in the late 1960s/early 1970s in Canada (Grant, 1995), a focus on Aboriginal education is relatively new to mainstream teacher education. In 2010, the Association of Canadian Deans of Education signed an *Accord on Indigenous Education*, which made explicit the importance for all educators to have opportunities to develop their understanding and to incorporate Aboriginal content and pedagogies in their teaching. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) also encouraged education faculties to better prepare teachers to teach Aboriginal perspectives. Within the Canadian context, offering a course (mandatory or elective) on Aboriginal education in mainstream teacher education has been one approach to developing teachers’ knowledge. At the Barrie Site, we have worked toward accomplishing this goal by infusing Aboriginal content and pedagogies in every course; offering a specific course on Aboriginal education (beginning in 2009-2010); and coordinating a 5-day Aboriginal education placement at educational sites across Canada (See Vetter & Blimkie, 2011 for discussion on specific *Infusion* objectives).

The Barrie Site team launched the *Infusion* in collaboration with the Faculty of Education at York University, Simcoe County school boards, and local Aboriginal educators and community members in the fall of 2008. Willingness of course directors and the site lead to engage with a new orientation to the program, support of a tenure-stream faculty member with experience in a variety of Aboriginal educational contexts, and selection of Aboriginal teaching assistants and contract faculty were integral to developing and implementing the *Infusion*. Moreover, the *Infusion* would not have been possible without the support of our Aboriginal partners, who continue to generously share their knowledge and experience and provide ongoing guidance. We are mindful that doing the *Infusion* in meaningful ways in mainstream teacher education is rooted in the difficult tasks for current and future educators –both faculty and teacher candidates– of creating and maintaining honest, respectful, and supportive relationships with Aboriginal people and communities based in knowledge of local protocols.
Case Study Research

Following an exploratory case study approach (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998), we investigated teacher candidates’ perceptions and experiences of the 2009-2010 Infusion, which had 48 teacher candidates (1 self-identified as Métis and 1 self-identified as First Nation). Creswell (2007) defines case study research as:

A qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports) and reports a case description and case-based themes. (p. 73)

Our case study took place over 10 months and used questionnaires, focus groups, course syllabi, student assignments, university and ministry policies, reflective research journals, and fieldnotes as sources of information.

We developed a questionnaire consisting of open- and close-ended questions with input from a school board statistician. All 48 teacher candidates in the Infusion were invited to complete the first anonymous questionnaire in September 2009 at the beginning of their program and the second anonymous questionnaire in May 2010 at the end of their program. Thirty teacher candidates completed the September Questionnaire (62.5% response rate) while 44 teacher candidates completed the May Questionnaire (91.7% response rate). To ensure there would be no influence on grading, the consent letters stated that completed questionnaires would be sealed in envelopes and locked in a filing cabinet until after graduation. After all grades were posted, two small focus groups were conducted with 10 teacher candidates in June 2010. Then the authors retrieved the questionnaires and transcribed the audio-taped focus groups. We approached the data holistically (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). By reading the data repeatedly, we identified themes and sorted the data into categories which were revised throughout analysis.

Learning Journeys: The Circle in Indigenous Thought

Through our work with Aboriginal partners, the concept of holism became central to developing the Infusion and understanding teacher candidates’ learning journeys. In Indigenous Thought, understanding that everything is interconnected is referred to as holism. This way of knowing the world is derived from “generations and generations of knowledge and practice on the land” (LaDuke, 1997, p. 24). As LaDuke (1997) explains, “Much in nature is cyclical: the movements of moons, the tides, the seasons, our bodies. Time itself, in most indigenous worldviews, is cyclical” (p. 25).

For Archibald (2008) “an Indigenous philosophical concept of holism refers to the interrelatedness between the intellectual, spiritual (metaphysical values and beliefs and the Creator), emotional, and physical (body and behavior/action) realms to form a whole healthy person” (p. 11). A circle is often used to illustrate the concept of holism with each interrelated realm (spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual) associated with one of the four cardinal directions (Archibald, 2008; Calliou, 1995). The circle teaches that these realms are fluid and ever-evolving and therefore cannot be strictly confined within linear boundaries (Graveline,
1998). While cultural differences exist within and between Aboriginal communities regarding the circle, a common goal is working toward balance and harmony so that no one realm is privileged over another (Archibald, 2008).

Just as the circle in Indigenous Thought teaches that learning is never-ending, as a conceptual framework it offers endless possibilities for understanding phenomena. Ahnisnabae artist Roy Thomas (c.2001) shares a cyclical view of journeying in his “Time and Life” art series, stating that where you are going always exists in relation to where you come from, where you have been, and where you are now. This holistic approach to journeying frames our analysis of teacher candidates’ *Infusion* learning journeys (see Figure 1).

![Diagram](image.png)

**Figure 1.** A conceptual framework for understanding teacher candidates’ perspectives and experiences of the *Infusion*.

We begin in the east by looking at where teacher candidates come from, in particular their initial reactions to the *Infusion*. We continue in the south by recounting where their journeys have taken them—their shifting understandings, relationships, and experiences. We carry on in the west by sharing where they locate themselves after completing the program, particularly in terms of their knowledge, teaching practices, and persisting concerns. We conclude for the time being in the north by reflecting on the implications of these findings and return to our vision as we consider where the *Infusion* is going in its next iteration.
Findings and Reflections

East – Where We Come From

At the Barrie Site, most teacher candidates had little or no background in Aboriginal studies before beginning the program. Since the Infusion was not advertised prior to admission, teacher candidates did not volunteer to be part of it. They learned about it for the first time during a spring orientation. In early meetings, several teacher candidates openly self-assessed as having very little or no knowledge of and no experiences with Aboriginal people. These comments are supported in teacher candidates’ ratings on the September 2009 questionnaire (see Table 1).

Table 1.

| Teacher Candidates’ \((N=30)\) Responses to the Statement “I have an understanding of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit.” |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Content Areas | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree | Strongly agree |
| History | 2 (6.7%) | 12 (40%) | 8 (26.7%) | 7 (23.3%) | 1 (3.3%) |
| Culture | 4 (13.3%) | 14 (46.7%) | 7 (23.3%) | 4 (13.3%) | 1 (3.3%) |
| Current issues | 1 (3.3%) | 8 (26.7%) | 7 (23.3%) | 13 (43.3%) | 1 (3.3%) |
| Community | 4 (13.3%) | 14 (46.7%) | 8 (26.7%) | 4 (13.3%) | 0 (0%) |

Other researchers (e.g., Battiste, 2010; Dion 2007, 2009; Tupper, 2011) have remarked that pre-service and in-service teachers’ understandings of Aboriginal people and perspectives in the Canadian context are limited. One content area where Barrie Site teacher candidates stated they had some understanding was current issues. It is important to note that these findings describe teacher candidates’ perceived understanding, and do not probe the sources or extent of their knowledge.

Many teacher candidates expressed interest in learning about Aboriginal people and perspectives in their program. Over 75% either agreed or strongly agreed that they were very interested in the Infusion. We acknowledge that once teacher candidates knew about the Infusion, a “yes” factor may have been at play in their responses (i.e., they may have felt they should be interested). In open-ended questions, some teacher candidates indicated a belief that the Infusion would develop their learning on a topic they deemed important for all Canadians to understand. One wrote:

Anything that helps me/people to learn about others and things we do not currently know or have experience first-hand is a bonus and helps us to see things from others’ perspectives. We are learning to be teachers and will have the influence to be able to

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bring Aboriginal content into classrooms to make future citizens more aware. (September 2009 Questionnaire, Participant 25)

A few anticipated that the *Infusion* would assist them in responding to the diverse needs of all students. Another stated, “The *Infusion* is an excellent opportunity to familiarize ourselves with our own history as well as get exposure to topics of diversity and how to approach them in a classroom” (September 2009 Questionnaire, Participant 17).

While many Barrie Site teacher candidates stated their interest in the *Infusion*, some shared their concern that other important topics would be omitted from their program as a result of the *Infusion*. One articulated a concern voiced by many stating, “It is important that not too much time is spent on the *Infusion*. Sometimes we feel we are not learning enough about teaching strategies and subjects that we need to teach in our classrooms every day” (September 2009 Questionnaire, Participant 5). Sharing another concern, one teacher candidate remarked, “I think that learning about inclusive classrooms should incorporate Aboriginal topics. Singling it out in a course excludes other cultures and children that may have needs as well” (September 2009 Questionnaire, Participant 7). Despite our statement that *Infusion* learnings, in keeping with the respectful approaches that characterize Indigenous Thought, will guide these future teachers to create classrooms accepting of all cultures and ways of knowing, some teacher candidates perceived that the *Infusion* solely supported the learning of Aboriginal students.

A few teacher candidates explicitly disapproved of the *Infusion* with 10% either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they were very interested in it. One argued:

> I think there are other focus areas that would help me more as a teacher – special education, diversity in general. Not saying Aboriginal topics are not important, but I think there are other focus areas that could help more students as a whole. (September 2009 Questionnaire, Participant 27)

In June focus group sessions, teacher candidates commented that at the beginning of the year they heard some of their cohort ask questions such as: “Why Aboriginal students above any other group?” “Why are you not bringing more multiculturalism into the program?” Recalling initial reactions, one teacher candidate shared:

> Let’s be honest. At the beginning of the year, the focus on Aboriginal integration into the classroom and the Aboriginal placement seemed to be met with a lot of negative responses and inappropriate comments. (June 2010 Focus Group 1, Participant 3)

For many of the teacher candidates, participating in the *Infusion* exposed them to stories about Canada that conflicted with what they had been taught (in school and other places) and what they strongly believed to be true. It also exposed them to ways of knowing and seeing the world that were new to them (even though Indigenous knowledge has existed since time immemorial) and at times challenged their understandings.

Speaking about the challenge of addressing similar resistance to that experienced by the Barrie Site, Battiste (2010) states:
The initial educational struggle for Indigenous educators, then, has been to sensitize the Eurocentric consciousness in general, and educators in particular, to the colonial and neo-colonial practices that continue to marginalize and racialize Indigenous students. This does not come easily to Eurocentric-educated White people, for it requires their unlearning as well – challenging their meritocracy and superiority myths to learn how their privileges were constructed and maintained in a racist society. (p. 17)

**South – Where We Have Been**

Indigenous educators (e.g., del Carmen Rodriguez de France, 2011; Dion, 2007, 2009; Graveline, 1998; Iseke-Barnes, 2008) who teach Aboriginal education to predominately non-Aboriginal pre-service and in-service teachers in the Canadian context have commented that they often encounter initial resistance. However, throughout their courses students’ perspectives shifted. Teacher candidates at the Barrie Site noticed similar shifting perspectives. One shared, “I think that some teacher candidates might have started out with narrow mindedness and negativity, but the experience of the yearlong Infusion, turned into something really positive for them” (June 2010 Focus Group 1, Participant 3).

Reflecting on their awareness and understanding, several teacher candidates commented that the Infusion, “helped me to better understand issues that I did not realize existed” (May 2010 Questionnaire, Participant 5). Many also began to question their prior knowledge and beliefs. One teacher candidate remarked:

> I remember feeling surprised and shocked that I didn’t know as much as I thought I did. I think part of it was because I’ve been educated in the area of whoever’s agenda it is…I guess you think that Canada is a free country. That everyone is so happy and we don’t really have any dirt, but there’s a ton of dirt here that we don’t talk about it. (June 2010 Focus Group 2, Participant 2)

Others shared that they became more aware of the perspectives from which information is presented. One stated “the Infusion opened my eyes to see whose voice is being heard” (May 2010 Questionnaire, Participant 42). Another observed that prior to the Infusion “many of us had only seen Aboriginal people from the history book point of view” (June 2010 Focus Group 2, Participant 2). Smith (1999) defines history as “the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others” (p. 34). It is not surprising that stories of Canada’s colonial past and present are kept hidden from students.

On the May 2010 questionnaire and during the June 2010 focus groups, many teacher candidates remarked that interacting with Aboriginal people and communities throughout the Infusion was very significant in shifting their perspectives and developing understanding. One shared, “A guest speaker’s story of residential schooling was when my thinking shifted. I had no idea about residential schools and the extent to which it went on and the impact on the generations” (June 2010 Focus Group 1, Participant 4). Echoing the sentiments of several others, one teacher candidate stated listening to and connecting with Aboriginal people “changed how I thought” (June 2010 Focus Group 1, Participant 4). Attending local Aboriginal
cultural/education events was another impactful learning experience. Almost everyone emphasized the significance of learning from and developing relationships with Aboriginal people and communities during their Aboriginal placements, which were described as rich, educational, and life-changing. One teacher candidate reflected, “I was very skeptical of the Aboriginal placement but it truly was an amazing experience that made me grow as a person” (May 2010 Questionnaire, Participant 25). A number of teacher candidates stated they would have liked to spend more time in local Aboriginal communities and recommended that happen in the future.

**West – Where We Are Now**

**Developing core knowledge and implications for teaching.** After completing the Infusion, teacher candidates were once again asked to rate their understanding (see Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4).

*Table 2. Teacher Candidates’ (N=44) Ratings of Their Understanding of First Nations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Areas</th>
<th>Limited</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Concrete</th>
<th>Extensive</th>
<th>Did not respond</th>
<th>Spoiled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Histories</td>
<td>3 (6.8%)</td>
<td>23 (52.3%)</td>
<td>15 (34.1%)</td>
<td>2 (4.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultures</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>23 (52.3%)</td>
<td>17 (38.6%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current issues</td>
<td>3 (6.8%)</td>
<td>18 (40.9%)</td>
<td>21 (47.7%)</td>
<td>2 (4.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities</td>
<td>2 (4.5%)</td>
<td>25 (56.8%)</td>
<td>15 (34.1%)</td>
<td>2 (4.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3. Teacher Candidates’ (N=44) Ratings of Their Understanding of Métis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Areas</th>
<th>Limited</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Concrete</th>
<th>Extensive</th>
<th>Did not respond</th>
<th>Spoiled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Histories</td>
<td>15 (34.1%)</td>
<td>18 (40.9%)</td>
<td>8 (18.2%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultures</td>
<td>10 (22.7%)</td>
<td>27 (61.4%)</td>
<td>5 (11.4%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current issues</td>
<td>16 (36.4%)</td>
<td>18 (40.9%)</td>
<td>8 (18.2%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities</td>
<td>15 (34.1%)</td>
<td>23 (52.3%)</td>
<td>4 (9.1%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

*Teacher Candidates’ (N=44) Ratings of Their Understanding of Inuit*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Area</th>
<th>Limited</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Concrete</th>
<th>Extensive</th>
<th>Did not respond</th>
<th>Spoiled</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Histories</td>
<td>16 (36.4%)</td>
<td>28 (45.5%)</td>
<td>6 (13.6%)</td>
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<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultures</td>
<td>17 (38.6%)</td>
<td>21 (47.7%)</td>
<td>4 (9.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current issues</td>
<td>17 (38.6%)</td>
<td>21 (47.7%)</td>
<td>3 (6.8%)</td>
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<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>2 (4.5%)</td>
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<td>Communities</td>
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<td>22 (50%)</td>
<td>4 (9.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the May 2010 questionnaire’s open-ended response section, a number of teacher candidates wrote that, while they had learned a considerable amount about Aboriginal people and perspectives, they recognized they still had a lot to learn (especially related to understanding Métis and Inuit perspectives). Several found that the *Infusion* focused mainly on First Nation content and pedagogies and recommended a more balanced focus. Teacher candidates reiterated that they did not consider themselves experts. These views appear to be reflected in their ratings on the May 2010 questionnaire, as very few rated their understanding as extensive. Rather, several commented that they had developed core knowledge that would assist them in their teaching. One teacher candidate said, “The *Infusion* prepared me to be a lifelong learner, who considers the needs of all the students in my classroom” (May 2010 Questionnaire, Participant 44).

Teacher candidates also rated their understanding of teaching Aboriginal content and students (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).
Teacher candidates’ ratings of their understanding of teaching in a classroom that includes Aboriginal students.

Figure 2.

Over 80% of respondents felt they had developed at least a basic understanding of teaching Aboriginal content and over 95% had developed at least a basic understanding of teaching a class that includes Aboriginal students. In the end of year research (i.e., questionnaires and focus groups), teacher candidates shared the following guiding principles for teaching Aboriginal content in culturally respectful and meaningful ways:

Figure 3. Teacher candidates’ ratings of their understanding of Aboriginal content.

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Teach in context. In contrast to the common teaching practice of focusing solely on Aboriginal history or teaching current issues without context, teacher candidates spoke about always making connections between current issues and past events.

Create space for alternate perspectives. Teacher candidates made a conscious effort to create spaces for perspectives that are often overlooked, ignored, or hidden.

Use resources responsibly. Teacher candidates valued using teaching materials and resources developed by or at least in consultation with Aboriginal people. Many emphasized that “Aboriginal students should not be used as the ‘go to’ expert” (May 2010 Questionnaire, Participant 33) and teachers should not assume that all Aboriginal students are experts on their cultures and histories.

Recognize diversity of histories and teachings. Teacher candidates spoke about learning not to generalize the experiences and teachings of one Aboriginal community, as diversity exists within and between Aboriginal peoples and communities. They stressed the importance of “being sensitive to student histories and experiences and ensuring that you do not sound like the expert on another person’s life” (May 2010 Questionnaire, Participant 5).

Understand that “not knowing” is an opportunity for learning. This awareness places what some might see as a heavy responsibility on teachers for learning or, more appropriately, finding creative ways to learn with students, an issue that we will revisit in the discussion of challenges to infusing Aboriginal content. Too often, teachers do not want to admit “not knowing” to their students and may as Dion (2007) has pointed out, move to the position of “perfect stranger” as justification for avoiding Aboriginal content and pedagogies in their classes.

Move from inclusion to infusion. Understanding that Aboriginal content should not been seen as an “add-on” to the curriculum, several indicated that they did try to move beyond including to infusing. One teacher candidate shared:

For procedural writing [Language Arts], I had the students watch a First Nations clip on the computer about games and had them write the procedure. I tried to pull Aboriginal content into different pieces, to pull little bits and pieces where I could. I could have done a procedural piece about tying shoelaces but I thought First Nations games would be more interesting. (June 2010 Focus Group 1, Participant 5)

Other examples of moving from including to infusing were modeling classroom rules around the Seven Grandfather Teachings and using the Medicine Wheel to design assessments.

In reviewing our data, the need to make explicit the distinction between inclusion and infusion has become apparent. While the teacher candidates in the above examples clearly understand what it means to infuse Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum, our May 2010 questionnaire was not refined enough to distinguish between those who infused Aboriginal content and pedagogies regularly and those who dropped a few “beans” into the mix. In response to our questions, over 75% of teacher candidates indicated they had incorporated Aboriginal content at least one or two times throughout their teaching placement and over 40% had incorporated it three or more times. Considering that teacher candidates must often fit their...
teaching into their associate teachers’ agendas, these results show strong commitment to infusion.

In a related study, Kanu (2011) investigated integration of Aboriginal content by English and/or social studies high school teachers in Winnipeg, Manitoba. For these teachers, identified by colleagues as integrating Aboriginal content, Kanu (2011) concluded that integration was perceived as “occasionally adding Aboriginal perspectives, where convenient, to a curriculum that remained largely Eurocentric” (p. 173). Studying integration of Aboriginal content in science education Aikenhead and Huntley (1999) found teachers did not integrate it, but rather added a “token” amount to the existing curriculum. Clearly these interventions do not reflect our notion of infusion, as our intention in the Infusion is that teachers will move beyond the “add and stir” mix to actual transformation of practices and content in their everyday work.

**Encountering challenges.** Challenges to infusing Aboriginal content into the daily practice of the Barrie Site teacher candidates were evident in the responses of almost all participants. However, a small minority (n=10), did not include Aboriginal content in their teaching placements, citing lack of time, knowledge, cultural authority, and other teaching priorities as impeding factors. One shared, “At this point, I would not be sure how to approach the Infusion in my teaching. I don’t feel comfortable about my knowledge surrounding it” (May 2010 Questionnaire, Participant 39). Another stated, “I have limited time to include Aboriginal content. There are other topics to cover and keep covered” (May 2010 Questionnaire, Participant 22).

Some teacher candidates claimed that they would have liked to learn more practical strategies, a “step-by-step” guide, for infusing Aboriginal content in their teaching across multiple subject areas. While this attitude runs counter to the creativity needed to do a thorough job of infusing Indigenous Thought into the curriculum, it is also a recurring theme for many teacher candidates who see technical advice (e.g., lesson plans, classroom management) as the main factors necessary for their success as teachers. A number conveyed their concerns about making mistakes and unintentionally causing harm as they included Aboriginal content. This uncertainty is voiced in one teacher candidate’s statement:

I worry about whether I am going to get it right and not be offensive. Because I don’t think any of us would do something deliberately to be offensive, but there’s a certain sensitivity and I don’t know very much still. What if I get it wrong? (June 2010 Focus Group 1, Participant 1)

Making and admitting mistakes are important aspects of being good teachers. For the most part, the effort to include Aboriginal perspectives is an important—although never sufficient—step to infusion. Some teacher candidates shared that they were apprehensive about doing infusion in their classrooms because as non-Aboriginal people they felt they lacked credibility and authority to teach Aboriginal content.

As we reflect on these teacher candidates’ perceived lack of knowledge and accompanying concern about not having “the right” to teach Aboriginal perspectives because they are not Aboriginal, we find ourselves concurring with several other scholars’ observations. Kanu (2011), reflecting on her study mentioned above, states:

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An important question arising from these data, however, is whether the dominant-culture teachers’ lack of knowledge was simply a passive lack of information or, in part, an active resistance to the difficult knowledge of cultural differences arising routinely in educational encounters between white, middle-class, Euro-Canadian teachers and their ethnic minority culture students such as Aboriginal students. (p. 177)

Tupper (2011) has also discussed University of Saskatchewan student teachers’ concerns about their lack of knowledge of how to implement treaty education, which is mandatory for all students in all grades and subjects in Saskatchewan. Tupper (2011) acknowledges that students “are always grappling with the question of how [to teach]” (p. 47). In response to the statement that no one had taught them how to teach treaty education, Tupper (2011) argues:

Students’ claims of not knowing how to implement treaty education, or the fear of making a mistake, suggests that ignorance is used as an epistemological position to protect their settler identities and to divest themselves of the responsibility to meaningfully engage with treaties and the treaty relationship. (p. 47-48)

Another challenge that contributed to Barrie Site teacher candidates’ hesitation to share their Infusion learnings was their fear of other people’s reactions. One teacher candidate explained:

I find that with that information I’m very cautious of when I bring it up and how I say it … There’s a lot of people I know, even though they may be open to educating people, they have very strong beliefs. Sometimes I bring it up and it’s received well and sometimes it gets to a point that I might be having an argument with someone I’m close to. (June 2010 Focus Group 2, Participant 3)

Teachers participating in Kanu’s (2011) study also shared that they felt professionally vulnerable and isolated for including Aboriginal content in their courses. Despite the challenge, for some Barrie Site teacher candidates these reactions highlighted the need for education on Aboriginal perspectives. Teacher candidates remarked:

The Infusion is essential for building Canadian community. It adds a current and essential component to teacher education and creates a knowledge base and awareness in new teachers. This is where large amounts of change begin. (May 2010 Questionnaire, Participant 24)

The Infusion is great to have for educators, but you wish that everybody in Canada could have that kind of education, because I definitely didn’t get it in high school. Maybe if we received this education at a younger age, we’d be more open to what’s going on rather than having stereotypes about Aboriginal people. (June 2010 Focus Group 2, Participant 3)

Despite this very thoughtful feedback, at the end of the Infusion, some resistance persisted. A few teacher candidates insisted on repeating questions that began the year. One
teacher candidate said, “The Infusion has been somewhat frustrating because I was not sure why we were having it when there are so many different ethnicities within some classrooms” (May 2010 Questionnaire, Participant 18). With regard to the mandatory Aboriginal education course, one teacher candidate commented:

Not denouncing the importance of the issue, but you would have to incorporate Aboriginal with other backgrounds and call it a cultural diversity course. Then it would have enough strength to be a mandatory course. But now you lose one course somewhere else and is that one not important? How much is too much time? (June 2010 Focus Group 2, Participant 3)

In response to concerns that the program did not focus an adequate amount of time on multiculturalism, one teacher candidate recommended:

My own personal opinion is that maybe you should bring multiculturalism in a little bit more – do a tie in with the Infusion. Mention at the beginning that we will be doing an assignment tying one into the other. To bring it together may settle up those defiant people who say, ‘Why are we so focused on just Aboriginal?’ (June 2010 Focus Group 1, Participant 2)\(^5\)

All of these challenges and concerns merit serious consideration, as clearly they hinder the infusion efforts of some teacher candidates. However, after completing the program, only a couple of teacher candidates expressed their absolute disagreement with the Infusion. Shifts in thinking and practice take time. The impact of the Infusion on teacher candidates’ pedagogy may take many months or years, and some may never move to understanding its importance.

**Ripple effects of the Infusion.** In the previous section, we have seen some teacher candidates expressing concerns that the Infusion did not focus adequately on multiculturalism. At the same time, a significant finding of this research is that teacher candidates’ Infusion learnings, in particular the focus on respect for all our relations in Indigenous Thought, helped them develop inclusive classrooms. A ripple effect of the Infusion is that a number remarked that it helped them develop teaching practices that were respectful of and responsive to Aboriginal students and those from other diverse cultures. We quote extensively from one teacher candidate who exemplifies one of the major outcomes for which we strive. Reflecting on the ways the Infusion learnings assisted in her teaching, she shared:

The course directors kept saying what’s good for Aboriginal students is good for all and we kept hearing it through the course but you couldn’t really make the connection. And then, near the end of the program, I was teaching traditions and cultures in Grade 2. We had a girl in our class who is from India and her mother came into the class to speak about India. It was wonderful to have some inside information about the Indian culture. I continued the learning/teaching on India over the next two social studies periods. The last class I introduced Mehndi (designs drawn on the hands and feet) and Rangolis (floor painting to welcome). When teaching and designing this lesson what I learned about Aboriginal cultures came to me. Teaching about another culture, I took extra effort to

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teach the culture with respect. I did not claim to know all the answers and I also did not draw upon my Indian student as an expert. She did volunteer a lot of information and corrected my pronunciation, which was welcomed. I did talk to the students about how various cultural traditions overlap with other cultures and the traditional values are sometimes lost...What I learned from the Infusion was good for everyone. I learned to be more culturally aware, sensitive, inquisitive, and respectful. (June 2010 Focus Group 2, Participant 5)

Additional comments from others support this deepening understanding of the implications of the Infusion and seemingly contradict the minority who felt multiculturalism needed a more explicit focus. One teacher candidate remarked, “The Infusion not only brought awareness to Aboriginal people, but I can apply that understanding to other groups of people as well. I can take so much of the Infusion into multiculturalism” (June 2010 Focus Group 1, Participant 2). Several teachers also commented that the Infusion deepened their understanding of inclusive classroom environments and helped them develop a greater appreciation for differentiated instruction as important to supporting learning of all students.

**North – Where We Are Going**

The Infusion at the Barrie Site of York University’s Faculty of Education continues into the 2014-2015 academic year even in times of tightening budgets and shifting priorities in post-secondary education. It is now part of the official publicity for the site. Personnel changes; teacher candidates come and go; but our commitment to infusing Aboriginal perspectives and pedagogies persists.

If the teacher candidates have taught us anything from their contributions to this exploratory case study, it is that what we are doing is an important step but not enough to counter the enduring attitudes instilled in Canadian citizens through our schooling. Canada’s origins lie within Aboriginal nations and their lands and as treaty people, we live inescapably in relation to one another. Understanding Canada’s contemporary and historical relations with Aboriginal people is fundamental to developing respectful relations which we believe will contribute to enhancing well-being and academic success for all students. It is our hope that this one program at the Barrie Site will eventually be seen as a pilot project that influences the entire Faculty of Education in all its programming.

We see the shifting landscape across Canada, which is increasingly dedicated to ensuring Indigenous Thought is part of every Faculty of Education. Sometimes the commitment takes the form of a required course, sometimes, more than that. We hope that our Faculty and others will honour the intent of the Accord on Indigenous Education (2010) – that it will be more than a document. At the same time, we know that education accords and policy documents can only go so far. The teachers in each classroom and the administrators and trustees in each school and school board are entrusted with seeing policy move to practices.

In terms of future research, a longitudinal study with the teacher candidates as they move into teaching positions in their own classrooms would give a much better assessment of the ongoing impact of the Infusion. Keeping with our understanding of infusion, we also need to refine and perhaps further develop our questions in order to assess the distinctions between teacher candidates who are incorporating a little Aboriginal content into existing curriculum and those
who are actually coming to a deeper understanding of and an ability to act on infusing throughout the curriculum.

As we carry on with our Infusion work at the Barrie Site and throughout the entire Faculty of Education, we will continue to rely on the guidance and support of Aboriginal administrators, teachers, parents, and community members and we will continue to adjust our curriculum based on teacher candidates’ feedback. We will continue the journey so that each teacher candidate can arrive at and move on from the place where they can say:

My ah-hah moment is getting the big picture of the Infusion and being able to implement it. What was taught to us from the beginning, that what is good for Aboriginal students is good for all students, makes sense. (June 2010 Focus Group 2, Participant 5)

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References


Notes

1. Though we acknowledge from a scientific viewpoint, the water, bean, and food colouring metaphor may technically describe a diffusion process, we maintain that this metaphor most aptly illustrates for us what we are striving to do in developing and implementing the Aboriginal Infusion initiative in the mainstream teacher education program at York University’s Faculty of Education field site in Barrie, Ontario.

2. Indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nations, Native, Indian, Inuit, and Métis are all terms used to recognize the first peoples of the lands now called Canada. Because of the continuing, highly charged political context affecting Indigenous peoples, these terms are constantly shifting. This paper will use each of the terms in keeping with the origins of the references drawn upon.

3. Our research project was primarily funded by a York University Faculty of Education research grant with a small contribution from Haig-Brown Research & Consulting.

4. While we cannot draw any strong conclusions from these numbers, it appears that there was more commitment to expressing thoughts following their experience of the Infusion than there was at the beginning of the program.

5. This student’s comment led us to consider a specific assignment that asks students to show how Aboriginal approaches inform working with students from a range of cultures.

6. Differentiated instruction “provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 1).
Exploring the Inner and Outer Cultural Landscapes of Counseling Candidates towards Diverse Students and Families through Self-Reflection

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**Abstract**

This article presents an interpersonal methodology designed to increase the cultural awareness of counselor candidates. This methodology was implemented through a sequence of activities, which was part of a multicultural course in the counseling credential program in a university located in Southern California. The goal was to enrich future counselor practices by promoting self-reflection processes of personal cultural beliefs. The responses of counselor candidates, gathered through two surveys, suggest that understanding their identities will ease the process of creating bridges between them and the cultural richness of students and their parents.

**Keywords:** interpersonal methodology; cultural awareness; counseling practices; self-reflection

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**Introduction**

Counselor candidates must be trained in a way that allows them to not only recognize the effect their attitudes toward racial and ethnic diversity have on students’ educational trajectories, but also allows them to understand diverse populations from their own cultural standpoints (Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant 2007). The guiding premise, detailed in this study, reflects an interpersonal awareness framework, which encourages school counseling candidates to engage in a personal introspective journey. Schools have a wide range of diversity: race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, religion, etc.; by using this interpersonal awareness framework, counselor candidates can be led to a more coherent understanding of cultural differences. In this article, we explain how this methodology prepared candidates to engage in work with diverse populations through an increased awareness. Further, an inner personal journey of cultural awareness of how their cultural experiences have shaped their outer cultural perceptions of other groups is explored.

Understanding the trajectories of diverse groups in the United States is a high priority for prospective school counselors; cultural awareness can move school counselors to a more objective and centered position where they can guide students of diverse backgrounds with a strong sense of cultural responsibility.

**A View of School Counseling**

School counseling in the United States began to take place in the early 1900s in the form of vocational guidance. Guidance pioneers, such as Jesse B. Davis, David S. Hill, Anna Y. Reed, and Eli W. Weaver, developed guidance programs based on different premises, such as job preparedness, character development, and good citizenship (Rockwell & Rothney, 1961). In fact, the transition into a more industrialized nation led educators at the time to prepare students with the knowledge and skills to meet the employment demands of this era; hence, the emergence of vocational guidance in schools. During the 1920s and 1930s, at the onset of guidance counseling, these services were provided by teachers who were appointed to function as vocational counselors while maintaining their teaching responsibilities (Gysbers, 2004). In the 1960s, the numbers of school counselors in schools increased and it was noted that these positions required specialized skills. The particular training school counselors received emphasized the importance of building healthy working relationships that would allow students to increase their decision-making and autonomy. The counseling profession is now framed by the counseling standards of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and its National Model. School counseling programs in k-12 settings following the ASCA National Model aim to ensure equity and access for all students. This is the same case for Professional School Counseling training programs which based their instruction and capacity building on the academic, personal/social and career domains, as well as other core themes such as leadership, advocacy, collaboration, social agency and systemic change.

The challenge that the Industrial Revolution had on vocational guidance counselors in the early years of school based counseling is similar to the cultural transformation of schools in the k-12 educational system. It calls for current school counselor preparation programs to provide candidates with the training to develop effective cross-cultural practices to meet the rising needs of multicultural communities represented in schools (Cheung & Leung, 2008). Effective cross-cultural practices reflect the ability for a school counselor to (a) “know and be able establish relationships with individuals in all cultural groups” (Westbrook & Sedlaceck, 1991, p. 21), (b) be
able to “conceptualize clients’ concerns from their perspective or worldview” (Ibrahim, 1991, p. 14), and (c) “provide proactive programming that is culturally sensitive” (Stephens & Lindsey, 2011, p. 45). In fact, the literature (Elizalde-Utnick, 2010; Malott, 2010; Portal, Suck, & Hinkle, 2010) describes effective multicultural practices as appropriate counseling interventions formulated within the context of students’ and families’ cultural needs. Essentially, a school counselor must possess awareness, skills, and knowledge to work with underrepresented populations.

What does this suggest? Considering the current cultural challenges facing students, faculty, staff, and administrations in schools, school counselor preparation programs must look at enriching traditional practices to help candidates develop comprehensive multicultural counseling services (Lee, 2007; Pedersen & Carey, 2002; Sue & Sue, 2008; Ponterotto, Suzuki, &Alexander, 2009). The dichotomy between traditional training, which assumes that counselors are prepared to work with students and parents of any background regardless of race, ethnicity or culture, and the reality of current practices of “equal applicability”, is being questioned by a multicultural wave of communities looking for a collectivistic social connection (Hunter & Sawyer, 2006). It is clear that diverse populations hold divergent cultural views that differ from those practiced by mainstream society. Importantly, cultural worldviews become the roadmap that diverse populations follow in order to establish short- and long-term goals; this is the way they make sense of their relationship with the world. According to Katz (1985), worldviews are a result of a person’s sociocultural upbringing. Moreover, Koltko-Rivera (2004) states, “a worldview (or ‘world view’) is set of assumptions about physical and social reality that may have powerful effects on cognition and behavior” (p. 3). In other words, worldviews encompass personal attitudes, values, opinions, and perceptions; these powerfully impact cognitive processes, decision-making, and behaviors. Because of the changing diverse demographics in our schools it is important for school counseling candidates to identify the impact their cultural beliefs will have on the way they work and communicate with students; thus the need for multicultural training in the process of transforming attitudes of candidates to include awareness of and appreciation for diversity (Steele, 2008).

Culture, Race, and Language: Multidimensional Counseling

A sequence of activities was designed to help candidates unpack their socio-cultural perceptions of other groups led candidates to break their personal cultural codifications. These codifications can take place in the form of learned views, assumptions, and opinions adopted in ones upbringing or acquired from unsuccessful experiences with diverse groups. This scaffold process allowed them to discover and question individual reactions and perceptions that shape their educational views (Lindsey, Robbins, & Terrell, 2003).

Traditional training in the counseling profession is a product of European American culture, led by European theorists such as Freud, Jung, Adler, and Perls, as well as Americans of European descent such as Rogers, Skinner, and Ellis (Lee, 1999). Consequently, the orientation of traditional counselors mirrors a culturally universal etic perspective where the practices of good counseling are considered to fit all cultures. This concept excludes the culturally specific emic. Emic as defined by Sue and Sue (2003) refers to a “cultural context of existing beliefs, values, rules, and practices” (p. 7). This perspective considers the significant role lifestyles, cultural values, and worldviews play in working with multicultural students. Fusick and Charkow Bordeau (2004) “underscore the importance of not being ‘color-blind’, as this attitude denies the real impact of the history of racism upon relationships today” (p. 76). They emphasize that adopting a color blindness stand limits the
appreciation of students’ cultural undertakings. The literature (Arredondo, 2010; Ober, Granello, & Henfield, 2009; Portman, 2009; Smith & Ng, 2009) reveals that each counseling candidate must be able to look inward in order to understand herself/himself as a cultural being. As counseling students become aware of their cultural essence with its tapestry of experiences and beliefs, they can more effectively and empathically help diverse students rewrite their educational and aspirational narratives.

The building blocks of school counseling preparation programs rest in the nurturing of candidates’ inner and outer awareness. Providing training, in this case, in a multicultural course or by way of other cross-cultural activities, can assist candidates in acquiring valuable personal cultural knowledge that can be applied when they work with diverse students (Dickson, Jepsen, & Barbee, 2008). Studies have focused minimally (Dahir, 2009; Felker & Brown, 1970; Kelli, 2009; Worthington, Soth-Moreno, & Moreno, 2007) on the attitudes of counselor candidates in school preparation programs and the impact of such attitudes on their ability to address the needs of diverse pupils. For instance, research (Sue et al., 1992; Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue et al., 1998; Sue, 2001; Sue & Sue, 2003) shows a change in the initial multicultural counseling competency components from belief/attitude knowledge skills to awareness-knowledge skills. Minami (2009) indicates that there are no researchers that have elaborated on the disappearance of the initial attitudinal component. Therefore, it is important to consider candidates’ attitudes as a valuable component in the counseling of diverse students and families as it may interfere in the evaluative process of candidates’ guidance approach.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in this article was grounded in Pedersen’s conceptual framework for developing cultural and cross-cultural competence. Pedersen (1994) developed a developmental model that promotes three competencies of multicultural competence for practitioners in the field of education which include awareness, knowledge, and skills. According to Pedersen, the mastery of these domains leads educators to host a more grounded approach to working with diverse groups. Most importantly, each competency builds on the previous work accomplished in each domain. The awareness competency requires the acknowledgment of one’s own biases as well as the awareness of sociopolitical issues that youngsters from different cultural backgrounds encounter. The knowledge competency involves the acquisition of factual information about different cultural groups. Lastly, the skills competency becomes a process of integrating the information acquired in both the awareness and knowledge competencies in an effort to positively affect culturally different populations. When educational institutions and their corresponding staffs and learners are culturally competent, the cultural assets students and families bring to the school are validated and they serve as a resource for educators, the students, and their families. The students’ funds of knowledge that are oftentimes filtered through biased lenses are valued.

**Research Design**

**Course Model**

The course model described in this study analyzes best practices with counselor candidates. It examines diversity in school settings from a culturally universal perspective to a culturally specific framework that recognizes the presence of culture-specific assets when working with diverse youth.

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Furthermore, the impact of the idea of “good counseling is good counseling” is explored (Sue & Sue, 2003). The premise of “good counseling” follows traditional practices where Western concepts of behavior are considered common and evenly applicable to all cultures. A culture-specific framework follows an asset-based focus that uses the strengths of diverse students to provide services that meet their unique aspirational trajectories. The authors posit that it is important for current and prospective counselors to consider the funds of knowledge diverse students’ and families’ posses, as this will enhance their level of understanding and guidance approach.

The diversity class, where the model was piloted, is taught in a graduate level school counselor preparation program which seeks to prepare multicultural competent counselors who are able to embrace the unique qualities of diverse students and parents (Fowers & Davidov, 2006). A core component of the curriculum is the concept of self-examination. It is important in the development of multicultural competent counselors as they serve as catalysts to students and families through appearance, language, and other factors that accentuate differences. The purpose of developing an interpersonal model in a diversity course is to prepare prospective counselor practitioners who understand that schools have the ability to cultivate either a culture of multiculturalism that values acceptance and appreciates the cultural assets of their respective communities or a culture and environment that breeds cultural and social inequities. Gibson, Gandara, and Koyama (2004) explain that “young people’s sense of themselves as students is often formed and confirmed by the spaces they occupy on a school campus, and these spaces may promote or impede their educational progress” (p. 9). School counselors have been identified as key stakeholders in the academic, personal/social, and career trajectories of all students. They are valuable in this transformation stage of students as they are trained in rapport building, understanding differences, conflict resolution, and goal setting, among other things.

**Data Collection**

To evaluate the usefulness of the class as well as the effectiveness of the model, we collected qualitative data in a multi-step process: weekly reading reflections, class discussions, assignments, and a questionnaire to elicit candidates’ points of insight relevant to the study (Winsdale & Wonk, 2007). All data components were part of the course routine, except for the survey. Thirty-six counseling candidates enrolled in their second year in the school counseling preparation program participated in the study. The ages of these students ranged from 25 to 60 years old. The majority of these candidates were female (88.5%), 11.5% were male, and the demographics of the candidates mirrored those of the Southern California Region. They responded to pre and post surveys, which were respectively administered at the beginning and the end of the semester. To measure the inner and outer attitude shift in candidates, two additional questions were added to the post survey questions. The first set of questions in the pre survey allowed participants to look at themselves and the circumstances of their cultural life stories in relationship to working with diverse student groups. The post survey included two additional questions to evaluate the growth of the candidates’ cultural awareness.

**Data Analysis**

Responses were analyzed to ascertain the following: (a) candidates’ initial views on multiculturalism as well as their understanding of their impact as practitioners; (b) learning and unlearning processes on multiculturalism; and, (c) cultural consciousness developed by candidates to enrich their counseling practices. The analysis of the responses involved a process where the
faculty quantified the participants’ responses, looking for significant patterns and themes, which marked the trainees’ attitude shifts as they develop into skilled counselors.

The common themes identified by the researchers from the data are highlighted in each of the following sections: Understanding the 'I' to Counsel, Contextualizing the 'I' within Society, and Developing Effective Inclusive Counseling Practices. Although all 36 participant counselor candidates experienced positive personal growth as a result of the sequence of activities in the course, there were patterns and themes that emerged at significant levels in three areas. The themes identified under each of the categories include valuing one’s cultural heritage, valuing one’s cultural assets, and the integration of culturally germane information into the counseling process.

Understanding the 'I' to counsel. Berger and Kaye (2009) explain that having the capacity to counsel others begins by gaining deep understanding of one’s self, one’s community, and society as a whole. Of 36 participants, 14 (approximately 40%) specifically wrote about a deepening awareness of and appreciation for the unique cultural heritage that they brought to the counseling process.

Contextualizing the 'I' within society. Neville and Mobley (2001) explain how the social environment influences human behavior in a setting where multicultural counseling practices take place. Following the conceptualization of the self, 13 of the 36 participants (approximately 36%) wrote about the impact their cultural assets had in their working relationships with diverse student populations.

Developing effective inclusive counseling practices. The culminating process in the course sought to encourage candidates to engage in unpacking one more indispensable layer in the counseling process: a dimension in the therapeutic course of action which seeks to develop effective comprehensive counseling practices by looking at the internal and external sociocultural assets of students and parents (Corey, 2009). The most common theme emerged in 30 of the 36 (approximately 80%) of the students' narratives, as they wrote clearly of a more nuanced understanding of the relevance of their cultural roles and the interplay between their roles and the cultures of the students, parents, and communities they will service.

Specific excerpts illustrating the above themes and patterns are included in the body of the article.

Managing Diversity from Inside Out

Counseling in the 21st century requires a multidimensional set of skills. As Topping and McManus (2002) have asserted, “schools exist within their cultures and times. To act as if we teach [counsel] in a vacuum, unaffected by the rest of society, is shortsighted” (p. 7). Listening carefully to these words, counselors who are committed to the implementation of effective practices must: (a) observe students’ and families’ cultural, linguistic and social attitudes; (b) contextualize and reflect on these attitudes; (c) assess students with tools that take into account the linguistic and cultural richness students bring to school; and finally (d) analyze the data gathered in the first three stages in order to create effective intervention programs.

To achieve this competence, the focus of the diversity course is on the candidates and an ongoing examination of their attitudes, feelings and thoughts. Identifying their “cultural biases” is the bridge leading to an “inner” and “outer” evaluation of cultural principles that will guide their counseling. Cultural biases are described as a process of intentionally or unintentionally ignoring existing differences between cultures, and imposing one’s culture based on the values of one
culture to other cultures (Ridley, 2005). There are two salient types of bias: ethnocentrism is illustrated by one’s perception that his/her cultural group is superior, and eurocentrism emphasizes a universal view of human behavior (Ridley, 2005). Biases can take place via transference and countertransference as these two processes remain present in professionals who may have unresolved issues or conflicts, and unresolved issues may be easily displaced and acted out to the detriment of students (Hays, 2008). An important factor of the course is to process as a group the personal views of candidates in a safe environment (Corey, 1995). These conditions allow candidates to practice core-counseling skills such as genuineness, acceptance, and empathy, which also reinforce the establishment of a welcoming and inviting group process (Geroski & Kraus, 2010). Previous core counseling skill courses in the program scaffold a pedagogical framework that facilitated a culture of trust and safety amongst faculty and candidates that enabled candidates to take risks and be vulnerable as they deepened the exploration of their inner selves.

Candidates engaged in weekly cross-cultural activities designed to reinforce the growth of intercultural awareness (Fernandez-Enguita, 2001). One of the activities is the creation of a “Who Am I?” poem describing one’s cultural heritage. Each poem is shared in class to illustrate the candidates’ cultural uniqueness (Lopez & Snyder, 2009). Some examples of phrases in the poems include, “I am a father”, “I am a woman”, “I am tortillas”, “I am music”, “I am work in progress”, “I am two worlds”, and “I am an immigrant”. The Silent Steps We Take is another exercise that challenges candidates’ reactions to living and learning in a diverse socio-cultural environment where the level of sensitivity and acceptance of others differs from their own. Each of the carefully scaffold activities defines the foundation of the course, allowing candidates to reflect upon their own cultural experiences and how these may impact their roles as school counselors.

Multiculturalism transcends personal experience, influencing the candidates’ work with students. Therefore, there were three projects that were designed to expose candidates to a deeper level of personal reflection. The first project that candidates complete is a cultural genogram. This assignment leads candidates to gain awareness of intergenerational issues, how these have impacted their lives, and how they can impact their working relationships with students. The genograms also raise each candidate’s personal understanding of his or her own family’s legacy (Small, 2002).

The second project is to visit the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. This task is intended to help candidates explore how they first became conscious of prejudice and discrimination and the feelings associated with it. The goal is to raise their personal understanding of how everyone experiences prejudice and discrimination, and that it manifests in a variety of ways. Both of these exercises are accompanied by a reflective group discussion and respective presentations so that candidates have the opportunity to deepen and share personal insights from their experiences in each of the activities.

The last project consists of completing 30 hours of fieldwork in a k-12 school site working with culturally diverse students. The purpose of this task is for candidates to select a diverse population with whom they either are interacting presently, or with whom they hope to engage with in the future. The rationale is to encourage candidates to work on moving from a culturally unaware “I”, through a “you” relationship, and finally to a more profound “we” interaction, where the candidates gain respect for, knowledge of, and skills in working with diverse populations.

Aside from the weekly activities and projects, candidates complete weekly reflections exploring personal feelings and reactions resulting from class discussions, activities, and reading assignments. The class discussions are meta-cognitive analyses of the required readings and how the theory explained in these readings are connected to their daily practices (i.e., field work hours,
video analysis, cultural explorations) (Griffith & Ruan, 2005).

**Understanding the 'I' to Counsel**

Berger and Kaye (2009) explain that having the capacity to counsel others begins by gaining a deep understanding of one’s self, one’s community, and society as a whole. They identify the value in recognizing and evaluating that these three factors help counselors to better understand the perspectives of their students, the students’ parents, and the school culture. Counseling that begins with a deconstruction of personal biases ensures that the services provided to parents and students constitute as a learning experience for both counselor and counselee. Learning together, the counselor moves with his/her students from functional practices defined as a mere “transactional exchange” of services to practices that result in a two-fold transformation. First, students and families gain knowledge to successfully navigate the academic system. Secondly, counselors increase their effectiveness because their work is constantly researching for data that contextualizes their actions (Valsiner, 2000).

At the onset of fall semester, graduate students engaged in a cultural exploration to understand their own socio-cultural trajectories. The class exercises and activities guided candidates to evaluate their cultural views and how these may impact their work with students and parents. The intent of these exercises and activities was to create awareness and transformation without the preconceptions and judgments. The findings report that through class activities, candidates were able to embrace their own culture, moving from an undefined sense of culture to a more culture specific description. For example, Rafaela (a pseudonym), one of the candidates, when explaining the role her culture plays in understanding others, defined herself as “non-American”. As the course progressed, she redefined her cultural identity by claiming the richness of her Portuguese background, classifying herself as Portuguese American. The interpersonal nature of the projects and course structure allowed Rafaela to process the cultural worth of her background and its implications in her individual growth as well as her future work with students and parents. Her experience will allow her to empower students to value their cultural roots. Research (Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2007) indicates that adolescence is a critical period where students seek to establish a sense of identity and are vulnerable to the judgment of others. This may be true for ethnic-minority students who often face the adverse reactions of others if they opt to identify with their cultural group.

Valuing one’s culture becomes important in the process of discovering one’s identity. Thus, having significant others (e.g., counselors, teachers, peers, parents, etc.) can provide students with a support system to affirm their cultural capital (Pedersen & Carey, 2002). The remarks of another candidate, Ronaldo, illustrates this premise as he initially wrote in his responses, “my culture has given me a rich background to be proud of. I have also gained respect for other cultures because I understand that we are different living in a common place” (Ronaldo, personal communication, September 9, 2009). The second time he answered the same question, he stated, “I accept my culture which allows me to respect other cultures. I love to be different and learn of other cultures” (Ronaldo, personal communication, December 20, 2009). Rodriguez (2009) concurs with the candidate’s discovery holding one’s culture in high esteem can impact the academic, personal/social, and career aspirations of students in the schooling process.

Lee (2007) shares that both candidates and students belong to rich cultural groups that

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influence their perceptions, beliefs, feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and goals. She contends that counselors must be aware of these factors and how they shape students’ worldviews and possible selves because awareness of one’s culture is equally as important as knowing about students’ backgrounds. Vacc (2003) states that cultures are not the sole property of diverse groups, for counselors with a clear understanding of students’ cultural conditions will easily appreciate their journeys. For this reason, the statements of the following three candidates support the significance of embodying one’s cultural heritage. At the beginning of the semester, one student, Marta, explained how her cultural background—Mexican American—taught her to be open-minded and respect other cultures. In our view, the reflections conducted through the semester allowed her to dig deeper into that belief. The weekly reflections consisted of personal reactions, feelings triggered for the candidates, personal perceptions, and questions candidates have about their individual process of exploration. Thus, this process documented Marta’s interpersonal growth from an open-minded student to a student who now recognizes her role within society. Also, her response in the post survey indicated that her culture has taught her to work collectively with society.

A second candidate, Beatrice, acknowledged that there were multiple cultural characteristics, which identified her as unique. For instance, she initially defined herself as Mexican and later she mentioned White as part of her background. Lastly, Jordan defined himself at the beginning of the semester through the perceptions of others, saying, “I think people perceive me as coming from a sense of superiority” (Jordan, personal communication, September 9, 2009). Yet, at the end of the semester he wrote, “I am seen as having White privilege”. He moved from defining himself through others to defining himself from within, a significant shift. Beatrice and Jordan expanded their internal definition of self as they were challenged in the course to look at the cultural roles they played in schools’ socio-cultural environments and how it may between peers, students, and parents.

Each counselor has a unique life experience within his or her sociocultural environment; this becomes a blueprint for his/her interaction with others. More importantly, counselors’ worldviews may differ from those of their students. However, counselor candidates must develop an ability to view their students’ experiences as an array of endless possibilities to assist them in their development. In order to do this successfully, counselors must first understand their own self, embracing their cultural individuality (Ivey, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 1997). Andrea’s and Daisy’s comments portray the meaning of recognizing one’s cultural frame of reference in order to achieve a clear definition of self. When answering what culture(s) defines her, Andrea wrote, “Where I was born because I was raised in that culture and I inherited the majority of my values”. Later in the semester she wrote, “Hispanic, because I was born in Colombia, but more specifically Colombian defines me”. When reflecting about herself at the beginning of the semester, Daisy pictured her Latin culture, saying, “I speak Spanish, I have brown skin and I love Latin food” (Daisy, personal communication, September 9, 2009). At the end of the semester, these traits were better understood when she highlighted the importance of being from Costa Rica. Thus, locating her culture beyond her customs helped her to have a deeper understanding of her own persona.

**Contextualizing the 'I' within Society**

Counseling is an educational practice configured within a social environment. Neville & Mobley (2001) explain how social environment influences human behaviour in a setting where multicultural counseling practices take place. Therefore, counseling candidates participating in this course, after
having analyze their own “self” and how this is related to the personal selves of others, participated in assignments to locate and contextualize those two—their “I” and the “I” of students and families. The goal of these activities was to foment the concept that the “I” is always in a symbiotic relationship with the “we” (Perru, 2006).

The onset of the course began with candidates looking to understand their role as individuals in counseling others. Following the conceptualization of the self, students transitioned into understanding the impact their unique cultural membership may have in their working associations with diverse students (Hays & Erford, 2010). The comments articulated by candidates in this section highlight an awareness of enriching the cultural assets of their personas, an ability to embrace others’ experiences, an understanding of negative classifications of other groups based on individuals’ upbringing, a willingness to explore beyond first impressions, and an understanding of how cultures affect others.

Acknowledging the value of one’s cultural makeup is significant in the formation of candidates and students possible selves (Author, 2007). The thoughts of Carmen reinforce this conclusion. When describing her personal evolution, Carmen’s cultural affiliation was initially undefined; she did not identify herself with one specific culture. After the semester, however, Carmen was able to underline two significant characteristics of her cultural make up, White and Hispanic. We believe the activities implemented during the semester helped her find a place within the societal interlace. Most importantly, we feel it is important for candidates to understand their personal cultural definition as it may differ from that of students and parents. Without this understanding, the incongruence may lead to a parallel counseling relationship as opposed to a reciprocal cultural dance (Sue & Sue, 2003).

Counselors must be able to recognize students’ cultural backgrounds in order to establish positive working associations (Ridley, 2005). The realizations of one of the candidates, Eva, support Ridley’s comments as her responses describe an increase in her ability to embrace others’ experiences by applying her empathic skills. Empathy allows counselors to see students’ worlds through their own eyes, it is considered the most important ingredient in establishing a working relationship.

Socialization influences the manner in which views are expressed. Communication between counselors and students must follow a framework of genuineness, openness, and honesty. Therefore, to accurately interact with students, counselor candidates need to evaluate how they unintentionally communicate their personal views to students and others as well as the impact of these views on them (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2009). The following candidate’s account demonstrates the importance of counselors recognizing and honoring individual perceptions in order to create stable working relationships with students. Sofia’s words illustrate her reflections of the negative connotations her culture imposed upon others. She wrote, “I live in a diverse neighborhood … I always have … my neighbors are my friends. I try to find out more about their culture so that I can be more mindful of how I act”. We find this is essential to be aware of as again it may interfere in the general scope of the counseling relationship. Further, Sofia learned to value her cultural background and use it as vehicle to being more understanding towards others. Unless counselors are able to examine their personal agendas and take a meticulous look at themselves they are likely to inhibit students’ cultural experiences (Sue, 2001).

Developing Effective, Inclusive Counseling Practices

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The culminating process in the course sought to encourage candidates to engage in unpacking one more indispensable layer in the counseling process: a dimension in the therapeutic course of action which seeks to develop effective comprehensive counseling practices by looking at the internal and external sociocultural assets of students and parents (Corey, 2009). Today, guidance services have transcended from the traditional universal training to a specific cross-cultural approach considering the multiple norms and expectations of diverse pupils in schools (Carter, 2005). Developing appropriate interventions, effective pedagogical counseling practices and educational roadmaps require counselor candidates to use students’ strengths, and also understand the relevance of their cultural roles. The following accounts portray the importance of incorporating culturally germane information into the counseling process between counselors and students and how having cultural advocates helps students gain the awareness to funnel their educational selves and prospects within a societal context.

Being an advocate for students is one of the many roles school counseling candidates will play in the educational culture. In answering the survey question, “how do you see your role as a school practitioner?” at the beginning of the semester, Perla wrote “a positive influence that can or will try to help other people however I can”. Later in the semester, Perla wrote, “to be an advocate for students and be someone they feel safe and comfortable to talk with”. Through the journey of self-exploration she expanded her advocacy skills, which will assist her in supporting her prospective students.

Deconstructing the weight that sociocultural factors have in the educational aspirations of students is valuable as it may help counselors set culturally relevant goals for students. Soledad, one of the candidates, shared, “it is important to avoid generalizations based on ethnic background. Go beyond personal biases” (Soledad, personal communication, December 20, 2009). This is essential in working with diverse groups of students as counselors’ personal views may prevent them from engaging in educationally lucrative working relationships with their counselees (Banks & Banks, 2010). Analyzing the multiple roads traveled by students serves counselors as a means to develop effective interventions to help students achieve their dreams.

In the beginning of the semester, another candidate, Candela, wrote that, “taking the time to read, write and listen to cultures is one way to learn more about students.” At the end of the term, she reflected that she “experienced and lived other cultures by finding the commonalities between [her] past and [her] students’ cultural backgrounds” (Candela, personal communication, December 20, 2009). At the beginning of the semester, Coral defined herself as “an African American who cannot be hidden” (Coral, personal communication, September 9, 2009) because of her color. Later in the semester, she was able to expand her own view; when explaining the meaning of African American, she wrote “We came here as slaves … we have no idea where we came from but it is assumed we came from Africa”. Coral’s description of color at the beginning of the semester turned into a geographical analysis of her identity, which will help her when analyzing the journey her students and their ancestors experienced when coming to this country.

The interpersonal nature of the deconstructive dialogue utilized in the course led Soledad, Candela, and Coral to unpack the sociocultural funds individuals possess. Carefully observing, contextualizing and reflecting, assessing, and analyzing the views of candidates in the course achieved this process of unpacking. Candidates actively participated in conversations, which led to a deepened appreciation of the linguistic and cultural richness students bring to school.

Facilitating the practice whereby students learn to define their cultural footprints is a process much needed in guidance services. Rita at first explained the need for all students to “be
part of something bigger called society” (Rita, personal communication, September 9, 2009). She also said “this sometimes might be uncomfortable” (Rita, personal communication, September 9, 2009). However, towards the end of the semester she said, “in order to be part of this broader context it is important for the students to realize their place in society”, and added that she would “facilitate the process of students understanding their trajectories” (Rita, personal communication, December 20, 2009). One of the goals of counseling students is to connect with them at just such a genuine level. Developing effective and inclusive counseling practices like Rita’s allows all participants in the counseling process to appreciate, honor, and develop their own cultural gifts.

Discussion

At the dawn of the 21st century, counseling is facing socio-cultural challenges that will affect the future of countless students all over the world. Populations, cultures, and languages once homogeneous have now become heterogeneous due to the constant movement of humans across geographical borders. Thus, transformative counselors looking for effective ways to meet the needs of culturally diverse students enrolled in compulsory educational settings must embrace the students’ cultural richness and utilize the latter as an asset to create effective practices. As analyzed in this project, gaining personal cultural awareness of one’s attitudes through self-reflection can positively impact candidates’ working relationships with parents and students. The awareness developed by candidates is a product of a three step learning process. First, counselors analyze their own self and correlate this with the selves of students and parents. Secondly, they contextualize both selves within society, realizing that thoughts, ideas, and actions occur in different social settings that validate or refuse to validate them. Finally, counselors apply what they learned in the first two steps to create effective practices that will have a positive impact on the schooling of students. These three steps develop awareness that counselors, students, and parents will carry beyond the educational settings. Thus, counseling becomes the platform to construct possible selves that will transform not only the participants but also their social environments (i.e., family, school, community, society).

The outcomes of this project showed that effective school counseling goes beyond transmitting ideas to students and parents about how to successfully carry on through the K-12 journey. When counselors and counselees exchange thoughts through their dialogues, personal experiences, and individual backgrounds, culture, and language are on the table. Perhaps these factors are filtered, on the counselor side, to provide a professional, objective support to students and parents. And maybe, counselees avoid sharing their views about the society that surrounds them because they perceive the counselor as the “other.” If this is the case, counseling lacks the much needed humanistic component of this educational relationship that was created to unify and enhance efforts between the parties participating in the learning process. Effective counseling should develop the idea of “we” composed by the cultural, linguistic uniqueness and richness of counselors and counselees.

The study described here was developed under the assumption that in order to create the aforesaid “we”, counselors must first build a personal awareness of their own views to better understand the circumstances that affect the behavior, emotions, and relationships of their counselees. Through the semester, counselor candidates “dove” into their inner selves to deconstruct and construct their cultural identities. By doing that, they “rescued” aspects that were
forgotten but that are key to achieving the counseling standards set by the American School Counselor Association for student academic, career, and personal/social development. These standards outline the knowledge, attitudes, and skills students should obtain as a result of engaging in effective learning relationships in schools by way of comprehensive guidance programs and an inclusive and positive school ethos.

The lessons learned in the implementation of this model can help counselor educators in counseling programs enhance their current teaching practices by incorporating varied experiential activities that will allow candidates the opportunity to walk through an introspective process. It is through this introspection that they can examine their cultural predispositions and how these may impact their counselor practices.
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Today’s University Students and Their Need to Connect

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**Abstract**

Higher education is rapidly changing and university instructors are presented with new types of students for whom technology is a significant influence. They perceive technology as a way of life and express a need to feel connected at all times. With increasingly diverse university classroom, technology integration is both a challenge and an opportunity. Supportive communication is important in the promotion of relationships and essential in a university classroom. A convenience sample of 390 students was surveyed to investigate the perceived influences of technology on relationships, including preferences, usage and time with technologies. Results indicated that technology makes communication easier, allows students to stay in touch with more people, and have relationships that would otherwise not be possible. Implications of this study suggest positive influences of technology on academic work, performance and maintenance of relationships. However, disadvantages with using technology such as increased stress, addictive feelings toward technologies, and increased misunderstandings in relationships and conflict also exist.

**Key Words:** Technology, communication, university students, relationships, higher education

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Introduction

Many believe that we are in the midst of one of the most dramatic technological revolutions in history (Harris, Wilson, & Ferguson, 2010). As a result, education needs to evolve to meet the demands of a global society (Reinking & Bridwell-Bowles, 1991). University instructors need to cultivate a variety of literacies within students to provide them with a competitive, economic edge. It is important for colleges and universities to understand the communication culture of technology use among university students, and it is critical to demonstrating the effects of communication upon organizational actions, control, coordination, survival, and also ideas, norms, values, behaviors, and goals (Gizir, 2007). Colleges and universities act as a cultural bridge to those new communication literacies, empowering individuals and groups traditionally excluded from education, thereby reconstructing the classroom to make it responsive to the challenges of an ever-changing society.

Many students entering higher education come from Generation X and Y (Wood, 2006). Today’s university students have been referred to as both the Millennial and the Net Generation. Research (Howe & Straus, 2000) on this generation suggests they are achievement oriented, more pressured to achieve academically, more confident in their abilities, accepting of diversity, and report feeling close and trusting of their parents. They are referred to as the Net Generation because they are technology savvy. They have grown up using computers and technology is at the core of their existence (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2006). Their social networks have been established through use of technology and the internet. It is important for them to feel connected and use activities such as IM (Instant messages), text messages, on-line video games, music downloads, myspace and facebook as ways to reinforce social interaction (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2006). Quan-Haase (2007) found the internet is integrated into university students’ communication habits with family and friends both nearby and far away.

The technology savvy adolescents of today seem to have created a dependency on feeling connected (Crittenden, 2002) in both social and academic settings. They multitask, performing tasks at the same time (email, IM, video games, etc) and have created an expectation for speed and immediacy of response or information (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2006). These adolescents prefer learning by doing and are more comfortable with image-rich environments rather than with text (Tapscott, 2002). The internet and technology has promoted and reinforced social interactions and created an environment of sharing and openness (Lenhart, Rainie & Lewis, 2001). There is an emphasis on immediacy for access to friends, services and information among this generation (Prensky, 2001).

Life in a university setting has multiple configurations socially and cognitively (Gizir, 2007). Adolescents’ academic communities and social networks are both physical and virtual interactions. On-line conversations may be as personal and meaningful to them as face-to-face (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2006). However, Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin (2005) found teens to report spending more time in the physical presence of their friends than interacting with them through technology. In addition, as students transition to universities the internet helps them maintain relationships with family and friends (Quan-Haase, 2007). Quan-Haase (2007) also found that students preferred interactive, synchronous forms of online communication, such as IM, over less immediate forms such as email.

From an ecological perspective, technology is part of the chronosystem due to its influence on the current generation. Technology has become part of the way we interact in our microsystems of family, friends and school by expanding on-line access and instant communication. The internet and technology is being used more and more to build social capital (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman & Rainie, 2006). Adolescents today have reported that the...
internet plays a major role in their relationships with family and friends and enhances their social life (Lenhart, et al., 2001; Quan-Haase, 2008; 2007). According to Lenhart, et al., (2001), about half of teens in their study believe that the internet improves their relationships with friends, but 64% of them also reported it took away from the time they spent with their families. In their study, the phone was most often the way they contacted their friends (71%), while 17% said instant messenger (IM) is most often used and 8% use emails. Quan-Haase (2008, 2007) found that students reported more social contact with friends than relatives, but IM was the most frequently used mode of communication with both friends and relatives. The internet can also allow students to limit their interactions. Lenhart et al. (2001) found that over half of teens in their study reported blocking messages or refusing to respond to someone with whom they don’t want to communicate.

Technology has created a mixed reaction to relationships. Adolescents are able to feel more connected and have a wider array of social interactions through the use of the internet and cell phones. However, does this create an emotional dependence in these relationships? For example, university students reported communicating with their parents more than they thought they would, but this frequent contact may be keeping them from working things out on their own (Student Affairs Leader, 2006). Trice (2002) examined university students’ emails to parents in context of parenting style. Attachment theorists believe that attachment style influences a person’s ability to cope in stressful situations (Bowlby, 1973, 1980). Attachment theory would suggest that the purpose of the contact is more significant than the frequency of it. For example, university students with secure attachments would seek parental advice about their independent decisions rather than advice seeking as the purpose (Trice, 2002). University students who reported positive relationships with their parents were more likely to communicate with them by phone, while those who reported more anxious attachment and conflict with parents used social-networking sites (Gentzler, Oberhauser, Westerman, & Nadorff, 2011). It seems that online communication, such as IM, is used to help students receive emotional support from family and friends (Quan-Haase, 2007). These online methods, however, were typically used to maintain relationships that had already been established.

Communication patterns between individuals help maintain and promote liking and satisfaction. Supportive communication is important in the promotion of relationships and can be essential in a university classroom. Although on-line communication can establish a sense of connectedness and immediacy, it is not without challenges. Researchers have found that online communication is sometimes an intrusion that creates tardiness and sleep issues among students (Massimini & Peterson, 2009). Communicating on-line through email or instant message may reduce social cues, such as voice tone and facial expression that helps the receiver understand the context of the message (Friedman, 2005). There may be a greater risk of miscommunication or conflict in on-line discussions. Communication can be especially difficult for those university students for whom English is a Second Language (ESL).

Within the university setting, fields of study have varying organizational characteristics, such as ethics, modes of interaction, norms, and values. It was therefore important to develop an initial investigation of the influences of technology as perceived by university students in the north eastern part of the United States. This is particularly relevant as we see the current generation of college and university students being significant users of technology. Technology is introduced into our schools at the elementary and high school levels, and cell phone and internet use have become major vehicles of communication. It is important to find out how technology is perceived by students so that we can make recommendations regarding its use in classrooms and campuses. The purpose of this study was to explore the overall influence of technology on human ecology, including the frequency

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and maintenance of communication with friends and family, as well as the perception these technologies have on forming and maintaining relationships. Included in this survey were preference of technology usage, frequency of usage and time spent with technologies, such as cell phones, emails, instant messages and text messages. Participants’ responses were not limited to any particular setting or place.

Methods

A convenience sample of 390 university students was collected over two semesters (Fall, 2008 and Spring, 2009) in introductory Family Studies courses in a northeast public university in the United States with a total student population of 5400 undergraduate students. It was believed that an on-line survey would be the most effective means of collecting data. The researchers did not find a complete survey instrument that was appropriate for use in this study. Therefore, an online survey was developed based on items used in several other research projects. An online survey was determined to be the best approach to reach as many students as possible who would complete the survey within a timely manner. An online survey approach was also used as the researchers determined it was most consistent with survey questions about technology use.

There were 44 males (11%) and 345 females (89%) in the sample. The sample was predominately traditional aged university students. They ranged in age from 18-29 years old. They were distributed across classes with 29% freshman, 30% sophomores, 28% juniors, and 14% seniors. They also varied in majors with child and family studies, food and nutrition, fashion, family and consumer science education, psychology, communication studies and a mixture of majors such as biology, music industry, or undeclared.

Survey items were developed for the instrument used in this study to understand the types, usage, and impact of communicative technologies have on college students’ relationships. All survey items were generally related to the usage of current and available technology devices for college students. Survey items were selected from a variety of instruments measuring technology use. These instruments include survey tools from The Princeton Survey, Research Associates International for The Pew, Internet and American Life Project. In some cases, wording of the items was slightly adjusted for the age of participants and/or use of technology. Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project was leading the field in focusing on adolescents’ use of technology and social media. With a generation of youth and adolescents integrating technology into their life, how would they use this technology on college campuses and to form and maintain relationships?

A reliability measure was obtained using internal consistency for the survey instrument after data collection. Total standardized Cronbach’s alpha for the post-test survey was computed among all the survey items as .714 for total survey. Since the survey contained multiple concepts related to technology use and no items were scaled on the survey, alpha coefficients for reliability were not run (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). To increase content validity, expert appraisal of the survey instrument was sought. A three-member panel of experts in education and technology examined the face and content validity of the final version of the survey instrument. Their comments were incorporated into the discussion section of this paper. No additional pilot testing of the instrument was completed.

Results

Both descriptive and inferential analyses were used to investigate the survey results and to provide evidence for better understanding of the types, usage, and impact of communicative
technologies have on college students’ relationships. Both frequency and percentage of the
descriptive analyses were reported regarding the usage, time, and access to technologies; and
technology’s impacts on relationships and communication. In addition, both one-way
ANOVA and correlation coefficient were used to find out whether or not there were
significant differences between different variables and technology.

Descriptive Analyses

Participants were asked about their perceived preference of usage, frequency of usage and
time spent with technologies such as cell phones, emails, instant messages and text messages.
Most of their time was spent with cell phone and instant messaging. Most (93%) reported
going online or using email several times a day (3 or more times). They were also asked
about what technologies they use most to communicate with friends and family. For
communication with friends, only 8% used land-line phones, while 95% report using cell
phones to text their friends, 84% used cell phones to talk, 23% email, 76% IM.
Communication with parents differed slightly in that 93% reported using cell phones to talk
with parents, while only 41% used cell phones to text their parents, 21% used land-line
phones to talk with parents, 42% emailed parents and 13% used IM.

Relationship

Students were asked if the internet improved their relationship with friends, 23% reported a
lot, 45% some, 18% only a little and 8% not at all. When asked if the internet improved their
relationship with family, 11% reported a lot, 24% reported some, while 25% reported only a
little and 33% reported not at all. They were also asked if the internet improves relationships
with their boyfriend and girlfriend, 10% reported a lot, 27% some, 17% only a little, 31% not
at all, while 15% were unsure. When asked if they used internet to make new friends, 37%
reported they did and 62% reported they did not. They were also asked if more of their time
was spent communicating face-to-face or through technology. Fifty-three percent reported
through face-to-face and 47% through technology, but 80% reported preferring face-to-face
communication, while 19% preferred using technology to communicate.

Communication

Students were asked if computers, cell phones and/or email changed the way they
communicated and 72% reported yes, while 15% reported no, and 13% were unsure. When
asked if overall communication devices made their life easier or more complicated, 66%
reported they made life easier, while 3% more difficult and 30% reported they made it both
complicated and easier. Ninety-one students reported that cell phones made them more
available to other and 70% reported feeling stressed if their electronic devices were not
available. They were asked to respond to a list of statements about the effect of technology on
their relationships and whether they considered it to be true for them (see Table 1). The
majority of the students reported technology to make communicating easier (84%), that it
allowed them to stay in touch with more people (92%), that they had more relationships than
would otherwise (36%), that it allowed them to feel more connected (72%). They also
reported that it was easy to misunderstand what others mean (70%), that it became addictive
(62%), that it caused too many distractions (40%) and that when technology was not available
they feel more stressed (51%).

Lack of Access
One question was of particular interest to researchers in the study. Participants were asked, “If you were unable to use technology for a day; what impact do you think this would have on your life?” Of the 391 participants, less than ten percent (.0895) chose to respond to this prompt. A qualitative analysis was undertaken of participants’ comments. In this analysis, participants attributed a higher number of negative influences to the lack of technology for a day than they did positive influences. The negative influences were distributed among feelings and relationships. Of interest was the little impact, positive or negative, on academic school work. Some participants anticipated problems, but were not specific as to difficulties.

**Table 1: Qualitative Analysis of Comments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive Influences</th>
<th>Negative Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feelings</strong></td>
<td>Feel free (22%) Relieved.</td>
<td>Bored (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Weird (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Upset (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stress (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I hate having to rely on technology for everyday life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships</strong></td>
<td>Fastest and easiest way to communicate.</td>
<td>It would make things slightly more difficult; but I would not say it causes conflict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology keeps myself and a long distant boyfriend connected.</td>
<td>Long-distance relationships are always difficult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Less connections with people (22%).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A couple days to a week or longer would negatively impact my relationships.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I need my cell phone while on campus in case of an emergency with my children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Its a little (sp) harder to communicate with people not in town.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impact on School</strong></td>
<td>More productive (22%)</td>
<td>It will cause problems with my school work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td>Little or no impact (22%)</td>
<td>Liek im (sp) missing something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It would be nice for my cell phone to stop ringing for a day.</td>
<td>Cause some problems. (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Find something more productive to do with my time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Gender**

Gender differences were investigated; however, these are cautiously interpreted since the majority of the sample was females. Both male and female students reported preferring face-to-face interactions to technology (89% compared with 11% and 79% and 20% respectively). Males reported more of their communications being face-to-face compared to using technology (68% vs 31%), while female students reported 51% of their communications being face-to-face and 49% through technology. Their responses regarding the effect of technology on their relationships were similar (see Table 2), with more females reporting feeling stressed when technology not available (52% compared with 39%) and reporting technology causes too many distractions (42% compared with 23%).
### Table 2: Impact of Technology on Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Respondents</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicating is easier</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is more conflict in my relationships on-line</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too easy to misunderstand what others meant</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay in touch with more people</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have more relationships than would have otherwise</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More misinformation about others</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel more stressed when technology not available</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel more isolated</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel more connected</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel lonely even though connected on-line</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becomes addictive</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology causes too many distractions</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Inferential Analyses

One-way ANOVA by whether or not the college students felt more productive caused by technology was analysed. There were significant differences between whether or not the participates felt more productive caused by technology regarding (1) using instant messaging to talk with friends (F = 2.602, p = .036); (2) how many people they sent instant message to (F = 4.610, p = .001); (3) watching TV shows or news programs via iPod (F = 2.689, p = .031); and (4) using cell phone when sending and receiving e-mails (F = 2.584, p = .037).

Significant differences were found regarding the statement of “I believe I am more productive because of my electronic devices” with instant messaging friends when not in person (r = .111*, p = .029); how often they used instant messaging to talk to people (r =
Results of this study indicated that technology, especially cell phones, e-mails, and internet, played an important role in the participants’ daily life, such as communication and relationship development/maintenance. Interestingly, even though most participants reported preferring face-to-face communication, only half of them spent most time communicating face-to-face. Most participants claimed that technologies changed the way they communicated, made communication and life easier, made them more available to others, and more connected to others. However, most participants reported that they felt stressed without their electronic devices; technology made it easy to misunderstand what others mean, and caused too many distractions.

Significant differences were found regarding the statement of “I like cell phone and other mobile devices make my life easier or more complicated” with using cell phone (r = .125*, p = .014) or email (r = -.121*, p = .017) to talk with friends when not in person. In addition, significant differences were found regarding the statement of “I like cell phone and other mobile devices allow me to be more available to others” (r = .259**, p = .000); preferred way to communicate (r = -.117*, p = .022); communicating was easier (r = .150**, p = .003); too easy to misunderstand what others meant (r = -.186**, p = .000); too easy to misunderstand what others meant (r = -.158**, p = .002); and technology causes too many distractions (r = -.176*, p = .000).

Summary of the Results

The results of this study indicated that technology, especially cell phones, e-mails, and internet, played an important role in the participants’ daily life, such as communication and relationship development/maintenance. Interestingly, even though most participants reported preferring face-to-face communication, only half of them spent most time communicating face-to-face. Most participants claimed that technologies changed the way they communicated, made communication and life easier, made them more available to others, and more connected to others. However, most participants reported that they felt stressed without their electronic devices; technology made it easy to misunderstand what others mean, and caused too many distractions.

The more often the participants used IM to talk with friends, the more people they sent IM, the more often they watched TV via iPod, or the more often they used cell phone when sending and receiving e-mails, more productive they felt caused by technology. In addition, more productive the participants felt caused by technology, the stronger they felt technologies allowed them to be more available to others, made communication easier, stayed in touch with more people, felt more connected; yet too easy to misunderstand what others meant, felt lonely even though connected online, and caused too many distractions.

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The more often the participants used technology to talk with friends/parents, more time they spent using technology, or the stronger they believed that technologies changed the way they communicated, the stronger they felt technology helped communication. In addition, the stronger they felt technology helped communication, the stronger they felt technologies made their life easier, allowed them to be more available to others, made communication easier; yet too easy to misunderstand what others meant, and caused too many distractions.

Discussion

Higher education today is rapidly changing and university instructors are being presented with new types of students. Technology has become a significant influence in the lives of adolescents and young adults. It is a means of communication that has become a lifestyle for the Millennial and Net generations. This study was an attempt to provide university instructors with a better understanding of the role of technology in the lives of university students and their need to connect with families and friends. Therefore, undertaking a cultural analysis of technology use within a university setting requires careful analysis of understanding the role of technology in the lives of students on campus (Gizir, 2007). The purpose of this study was to explore the overall influence of technology on human ecology, including the frequency and maintenance of communication with friends and family, as well as the perception these technologies have on forming and maintaining those relationships.

Relationships with Family and Friends

Consistent with other research, university students in this study believe that technology devices help improve and maintain their relationships with both family and friends (Lenhart, et al., 2001; Quan-Haase, 2007; Gentzler, et al., 2011). Students reported talking more to their parents on cell phones, while more frequently texting friends with cell phones. This finding did differ with Quan-Haase (2007) who found students preferred IM over cell phone use. However, this is most likely due to cost of cell phone use in Canada versus the United States. The majority of students reported preferring face-to-face communication, but then they reported almost equal amounts of time were spent communicating face-to-face and through technology.

For today’s students, the use of technology plays a major role in their relationships with family and friends, but is also time consuming (Lenhart, et al., 2001; Quan-Haase, 2007; Massimini & Peterson, 2009), can create a sense of dependency or addiction of feeling connected (Crittenden, 2002; Campbell, Cumming & Hughes, 2006), and can increase perceived stress in students’ lives. There are advantages and disadvantages to technology based communication.

This study was consist with others in that technology makes communication easier and allows students to stay in touch with more people and have relationships that otherwise may not have been possible. However, it is easy to misunderstand what others mean through this type of interaction and more potential miscommunication and conflict. Today’s university students value their parents’ opinion, report feeling close to their parents and seeking their approval, and don’t mind their parents handling things for them (Howe & Straus, 2000; Horne, 2006). As a result, this may create a dependency on their parents to solve their problems, have parents over-involved in their education, and create deficiencies in their interpersonal communication skills.

Relationships with Faculty and Classroom Interactions

Russo, Fallon, Zhang & Acevedo

University Students Need to Connect

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Faculty are faced with classrooms of Millennial and Net generation students that are focused academically on achievement and grades. These students perceive technology as a way of life and express a need to feel connected at all times, they view learning as a game-playing trial and error process rather than a linear process, they are used to multitasking, and they have a zero tolerance for delays (Horne, 2006). In the classroom, they expect 24/7 service, have an expectation of self-service on-line, an expectation for fast service and desire an experiential, interactive, authentic learning with on-line connections and community (Horne, 2006). Students also believe that technology can cause distractions and become addictive. An indicator of this is the significant amount of time spent in a day using these technologies.

Students report issues related to on-line technologies and cell phone use result in class tardiness and loss of sleep (Massimini & Peterson, 2009). As a result of many students feeling addicted to the use of technology, they may also experience stress when it is not available for them to use. Additionally, anxiety may increase when those around them are not responding within the immediacy they expect. This perceived stress related to interactive technologies, was found in this study and by Massimini and Peterson (2009). It may be that students use these technologies to seek out support from family and friends, but they also become an intrusion in everyday life and increase a student’s perceived stress and anxiety.

As university instructors consider the use of technology in the classroom, it is important they consider the role culture plays. Teachers contribute enormously to a positive social climate (Kaya, Ozay, & Sezek, 2008). The rich diversity of students may impact university instructors’ assumptions that all students bring the same skill sets to university classrooms, particularly in terms of reading or language ability. The challenge is to understand all students’ communication patterns and find effective teaching methods. Technology allows students to operate around the clock from any location, whereas university calendars and faculty and class schedules are fixed; technology emphasizes group and shared work products, whereas universities emphasized individual work products; and technology allows for multitasking, individualized and interactive learning with content and modes of learning that were concrete and active, whereas faculty emphasized sequential tasking. Understanding these differences is the first step in changing patterns of communication among faculty and university students.

**Study Limitations**

Limitations to this study include a sample of convenience, which was heavily dominated by female participants. The majority of the participants were taking an introductory course in Family Studies, which may have influenced ideas or perceptions of relationship issues. This study was an exploratory beginning to looking at the influence of technology on relationships conducted in the northeastern part of the United States. Issues of culture and regionality may influence perceptions, particularly in communication. Further study needs to be done regarding the impact of technology on communication patterns, possibly qualitative data such as in-depth interviews or focus groups that will allow for a deeper discovery of student perceptions and communication patterns. Technology will continue to be a significant influence in the lives of individuals and families, and in university classrooms.

**Conclusion**

Institutions and faculty contribute enormously to a positive learning climate in the university classroom. We need to continue to use effective technologies within the university classroom.
in order to reach all students. We also need to work to educate university students on how to use these forms of communication as effective means of human and interpersonal interactions. Many universities utilize centers of teaching and learning to assist faculty members to be effective in online and hybrid courses. Such professional development by the institution for faculty members can help develop effective communication techniques among faculty members and their students.

Technology should be used with the needs of the learners in mind and with the goal of improving student learning as the focus. There are advantages and disadvantages to communicating with technology, but with almost half of university students reporting that most of their interactions are not face-to-face we need to better understand the implications for interpersonal relationship development and student-faculty interactions.
References


Autism Spectrum Disorder in Popular Media: Storied Reflections of Societal Views

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Abstract

This article explores how storied representations of characters with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are typified in a world that is increasingly influenced by popular media. Twenty commercially published children’s picture books, popular novels, mainstream television programs, and popular movies from 2006-2012 were selected using purposive, maximum variation sampling and analyzed through Krippendorff’s six-step approach to social content analysis. From this 20-unit sample, results show that television characters with ASD tend to be portrayed as intellectually stimulating geniuses who make us aspire to be like them; movies tend to show those with ASD as heroes, conquering seemingly impossible odds; novels tend to present ASD in a complex, authentic context of family and community, rife with everyday problems; picture books appear to be moving towards a clinical presentation of ASD. Common cross-categorical themes portray scientific, clinical, and/or savant-like traits that tend to glamourize challenges inherent to ASD.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, popular media, perceptions, societal views

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**Introduction**

With today’s ease of access to mass media through its relatively low cost, wide availability, and intense propagation in our homes, schools, and communities, information about socially constructed topics such as society, culture, and human nature is often transmitted through such venues. However, its inherent intent to convey information and influence its consumers on a wide scale is not without concerns, including potentially widespread biases, which must be navigated with careful attention and great care. One area where many such everyday consumers of mass media garner information is that related to the area of diversity, exceptionality, and disability: that which is perceived as “different” from a perceived societal norm. The area of what is colloquially referenced simply as *autism* but is more formally known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is no stranger to media-bound references in the past and at present. From decades ago *Rain Man* references to today’s multiplicity of characterizations found in television shows, movie productions, novels, and a range of children’s picture books, portrayals of ASD are implicitly and explicitly found in mass media.

Journalist Furlong is one who recently noticed the rising prevalence characters with Asperger’s Disorder—a former subtype of ASD—on television shows and wondered is this a “new, popular character quirk, or is it a sign of society's efforts to embrace and personify a disorder that has become more and more prevalent?” (Furlong, 2013, para. 1). Draaisma (2009) described many media-based portrayals of ASD as misrepresentative, even apt to do harm; however, the public appears to prefer these stereotypical, fictional examples. Similarly, Kanner and Asperger, pioneers in the field of ASD (Lyons & Fitzgerald, 2007), communicated an “essence of autism” (p. 1475). Though case examples to further clinical understanding, they explained the “‘Zusammenklang’ or Gestalt of the child—his voice, face, body, language, intonation, gestures, gaze, expression and diction” (p. 1475). Perhaps popular media is doing the same for the everyday viewer in a stereotypical manner. Draaisma (2009) reflected that:

> There is a strange discrepancy between the research that their directors, script writers and actor put in when they make a film featuring autistic persons and the actual characters they come up with … they all want an absolutely sincere and truthful rendition of autism; what they come up with is an autistic character with freak-like savant skills, unlike anything resembling a normal autistic person. (p. 1478)

Much as Dyches, Prater, and Leininger (2009) emphasized, each book that has characters with disabilities should be evaluated by “the values [they promote] as expressed in the portrayal of the character with disabilities” (p. 305), the purpose of this paper is to systematically explore how storied representations of characters with Autism Spectrum Disorder (or characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder) are typified in a world that is becoming increasingly influenced by popular media.

With the intervention of media, how children with Autism Spectrum Disorder are perceived in the school setting begins long before they physically enter classrooms. School community members often have firm, preconceived perceptions about students with Autism Spectrum Disorder emerging from the “socially storied representations” they have virtually or socially experienced. Much of this cyclical “knowledge,” perhaps more aptly described as perspective, is rooted in popular media (Sarrett, 2011).
Within a medical model or a clinical approach to exceptionality, qualified professionals utilize the weighty Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) to categorize individual problems leading to a diagnosis. In this context, ASD is now presented as an umbrella term, which used to be three separate diagnoses (Boutot & Smith Myles, 2010). This is one of many modifications in its elastic terminology since Leo Kanner’s first published case studies of Autism Spectrum Disorder or what was then known as autism in Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact (1943). The diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder means that clinicians have assessed problems with social communication, repetitive, restricted behaviours, and sensory issues as present and significant (American Psychological Association, 2013; Moran, 2013). With more detail, this means that a diagnostic team sees:

… deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and deficits in developing maintaining and understanding relationships. In addition, they must show at least two types of repetitive patterns of behavior including stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, insistence on sameness or inflexible adherence to routines, highly restricted, fixated interests or hyper reactivity to sensory input, or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment. (Autism Speaks, 2013, para.5).

Here, the representation, reality, and “mediated frames” in which Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is presented to the general public are considered. In so doing, how each form of media has non-neutral and embedded particularities that affect our perceptions of reality and identification with those who have ASD are presented. Within the framework of social content analysis, a storied method of analyzing text, media, and the social-emotional components essential for mean-making across a particular subject, the following literature review extends these relational themes.

**Literature Review**

Each type of media is inherently structured with its own framework for mean-making. Movies, for example, are linked to affective memories of entertainment, and not necessarily serious reflection. Novels allow for reflection, pause, and re-reading, and may often evoke memories of schooling and study. Television is often linked to memories of family and the home, as being “invited” in to our social classrooms after recess, or shared before bedtime as harbingers of love, security, and sleep. Each past encounter with media affects engagement and perception of information presented as content.

North America has become a multi-modal learning society in an age where social divisions are becoming non-existent (Postman, 1995). When McLuhan (1964) considered that we become what we behold, and as we shape our tools and our tools shape us, he could not have foreseen how much this insight would currently apply. In a culture saturated with media, there is more to “behold” than ever before; however, more than mere beholding is at stake. As we find ourselves living within a visually saturated society, Postman (1995) reminds us to be fully aware of media in order to prevent the folly of merely thinking with our eyes. Visual re-presentation in movies and television has become a truth unto itself: Young (2012) acknowledges that this burgeoning effect “has more impact on a mass audience regarding disabilities than research” (p.
4). Visual media tends to educate through stereotyping, providing a limited perception of the whole and commercial success, in many ways, outpaces authenticity (Draaisma, 2009).

Characters portrayed across venues of media that appeal to the eye and emotion (e.g., movies), and to the mind and reflection (e.g., literature) differ in significant ways; ways that society at large should be aware of in order to critique their representations. Even while considering other factors (e.g., audience size, budget), which affect foundational media decision-making, tangential to these “outsider” perceptions, the lone, authentic voice of “insider” reality is seldom considered in critique. In the area of cross-media analysis, these differences become more apparent. Wahl, again, explains this succinctly:

The reach of scientific and professional communities … are no match for the oft inaccurate and demeaning stereotypes the public encounters in films, novels, plays, newspapers and magazines. These portrayals, more than any other, shape and determine public perception of human difference. (as cited in Sarrett, 2001, p. 142)

Cross-media reflection and cultural positioning, in contrast, consider not only what the media are “selling” in their characterizations, but what is unsaid. For example, Smith’s (2005; 2006) recent work from a social ethnographic perspective suggests that the voices from “within” an experience provide a lens that differs from an objective one, drawing attention to the ways in which life and work cannot be separated. In other words, the experience in the everyday life in a particular context provides a different lens of mean-making that does not separate what the person does or thinks from the rest of that person’s daily life. For example, a book is chosen by an individual, who makes connections from that book to a character or life experience. The reader is cognizant that the life portrayed in the text are worthy of reflection, howbeit different in experience. But the reader may make text-to-life connections, as well, which flow from how characters and events have been pictured in the mind of the reader. Individual reflection and pace is essential. Television and movies, for example, beckon to a shared “view” of an experience as spectator(s). The characters in our midst within the context of our own household represent virtual albeit visual voices and experiences with an emotional effect. The viewer is drawn into the movie, but not in ways that necessarily allow the same type of reflection. Movies tend to be scored on “appeal” of an audience, not on the reflection they may cause after the movie ends. Entertainment and social enjoyment is essential. As Smith has stated, our lens needs to shift because our viewing context has moved from considering our own reflective voices as part of storytelling and mean-making to experiencing virtually embodied voices that give little time for reflection during the viewing experience.

It is important to note that though literary-based portrayals of disability are starting to become more accessible (Curwood, 2013) there is a minimal social content analysis research from a multimedia perspective involving recent, storied representations of characters with disability (Prater, 2003). In a wider examination of related topical literature, Dolos, Moses and Wolberg (2012) used content analysis to engage the topic of deafness as disability, noting that illustrations in children’s picture books do not represent deaf characters from a cultural perspective, but rather from a clinical perspective, as having a disability that should be fixed. In a similar study of on disability, Hodkinson (2012) examined how disability was portrayed in electronic media using proto-text analysis and concluded that media contained a limited picture of disability, one contextualized again within a medical deficit model. Hodkinson (2012) concluded that inclusive education must confront inaccuracies of exclusion inherent in mediated
resources for primary aged children. The above studies would suggest that care needs to be given to the portrayal and selection of disabilities in literature, echoing Prater’s (2003) conclusions.

Furthermore, Poling and Hupp (2008) conducted a content analysis to examine death in children’s picture books across biological, sociological, and emotional components. They recommend using picture books in bibliotherapy for bereaved children, concluding that picture books provide a venue for engaging bereavement in the emotional domain. Similar work by Belcher (2008) considered suffering, trauma, and social perspectives in picture books historically as providing an emotional, cultural, and worldview platform for introducing students to various topics of concern, pinpointing how change in perception occurs “over time”. Belcher and Maich (2010) have supported the conclusions of Poling and Hupp (2008) on the significance of story for children “as a tool for empathy, information, and problem-solving” (para. 5). Dedeoglu, Ulusoy, and Lamme (2011) also carried out a content analysis involving the interplay between text and illustrations connected with poverty in children’s literature, noting that “children’s visions of themselves, the world and their place in the world have been greatly impacted by literature” (p.37). This impact, once again, was of a socio-emotional nature. Socio-emotional aspects of care and self-awareness in mediated depictions of characters with ASD are minimal, and are not geared to assisting children in finding their place in the world; but rather situate them most frequently in a family or school environment where an environment is provided for them.

With a wide lens on disability, Dyches, Prater and Heath (2010) used trend analysis—a subtype of content analysis—to examine how Newbery Award winning books portrayed disability from 1975 to 2009. Similarly, Dyches, Prater, and Jenson (2006) examined the presence of prominent characters with disabilities in the 276 Caldecott Medal-winning books between 1938 and 2005, and found 11, which is low in accordance with the percentage of children with ASD predicted in the schooling population at the time. Specific to ASD, Belcher and Maich (2010) examined 23 texts across eight criteria in a content analysis of ASD in children’s picture books. From these criteria, the books were analysed as to their social impact and educational thrust. They concluded that few books allowed the students represented in the stories to find themselves in the larger fabric of life outside of home or school, and therefore, did not provide readers with non-stereotypical skills for social inclusion. In some cases, it appeared that the picture books functioned as self-therapy for parents/authors. Maich and Belcher (2012) consider steps for the “intentional” use of story as part of a process of peer awareness in inclusive classrooms via storied representations of characters with ASD.

Bond (2013) explored physical disability in children’s television programming, engaging how media’s portrayal of physical disability may affect the attitudes of children toward those who have disabilities. When present (though infrequent), characters were older—usually white males—attractive, not central to the plot or program, usually in a wheelchair or using a cane, and were accepted the same way as characters depicted without disabilities. Bond thinks such programming could be effectively used by policymakers toward inclusivity for those with disability; however, it may be a good example of an unrealistic portrayal of what television wants viewers to believe; perhaps, that disability is “no big deal anyway”.

Throughout these examples of published content analyses, the storied representations provided share two commonalities: (a) they impacted the affective domain of readers and viewers, and (b) they heralded to adult perceptions of story and what story is desired to achieve “on behalf of children”. The storied representations of those with ASD in picture books and novels have perhaps shifted in audience and intent, currently being surpassed by storied
representations in movies and television, as well as in information gleaned via Google (Carr 2008, 2010). But have movies and television produced the same kind of story?

Young’s (2012) work examined mediated storied representations of characters with ASD in light of what they repeatedly “suggest” reality to be. Young (2012) concluded that since movies serve to reflect reality, misrepresentations can have a major impact on the behaviours and attitudes of audiences towards those with disabilities. Recent publications by Carr (2010) and Turkle (2011) also recognized the positive and negative aspects of media and technology on perception and acquisition of social skills. Notably absent from this conversation, however, is investigation into the growing emergence in popular press revealing a “pecking order” regarding what popular press considers someone on the ASD spectrum to “be.” For example, such representations may appear to focus on what might be referred as the “higher functioning,” perceived by some as a “metaphoric construct of ‘mental retardation’” (Gilling, 2012, p. 35) or as synonymous with Asperger’s Disorder or simply “Asperger’s” (Griffin, Griffin, Fitch, Albera, & Gingras, 2006), which is statistically rare (Gilling, 2012). Questions also arise regarding the absence of reality portrayed, how it is perceived, and how it is explained by movie-makers, producers, and authors of literature across various ages and stages of life. In qualitatively investigating the social content of how storied representations unfold over time, this study adds to the awareness of social and current representation of disability, through an exploration of how storied representations of characters with ASD are typified in a world that is becoming increasingly influenced by popular media.

In summary, each type of media linking to perceptions of ASD comes framed with its own frame for mean-making. Socio-emotional identification and mean-making are not the same, and differ in accordance with the media experience; experience that does not always assist those with ASD in finding their place in life. However, this does not obscure the fact that mediated representations of those with ASD do have an effect; an effect we may currently be ignoring, yet need to understand.

Methodology

Social Content Analysis

All media involves narrative or story of some type. Social content analysis provides a means of examining such literary or storied narratives, including: “literary metaphors, symbols, themes, figures of expression, styles, genre differences and intended audiences” (Krippendorff, 1989, p. 406). The benefits of social content analysis are its consideration of text, media, and society as a means of promoting thoughtful exposure to social phenomena, ideas, attitudes, and worldviews to consumers of research such as those in academic and/or educational domains, and increasingly, the general public. Krippendorff (1989) notes that “analyses of the demographic, socioeconomic, ethnic and professional characteristics of the population of characters yielded considerable biases when compared with corresponding audience characteristics” (p. 404). This interesting interface between storied representations and reality is significant, placing content analysis as integral to social research on a broad scale. Consequently, Krippendorff’s (1989) steps to social content analysis frame this qualitative exploration.

(1) Design. The design phase is where context, source, and analytic constructs are defined from which later inferences can be drawn and analysis can be accomplished (Krippendorff, 1989). In this case, the context is popular media (e.g., novels and picture books),
the sources encompass common transmission of mass media (e.g., theatres and television); and, the analytic construct is the sociologically-based storied reflections of societal views (i.e., portrayal of characters with ASD).

(2) Unitizing. Unitizing defines and identifies units of analysis for sampling (Krippendorff, 1989). In the case of this study, sampling units were defined as commercially-published children’s picture books, popular novels, mainstream television, and popular movies, and recording units focused on social constructs (e.g., values transmitted).

(3) Sampling. This study utilized samples providing representation across four categories of media providing balance and organization to related symbolic phenomena (i.e., theme) under investigation. Twenty of the above noted sampling units—five units each—were derived from a seven year span of time (2006-2012) including either characters with ASD and/or characters with characteristics of ASD, an appropriate size for a qualitative perspective (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Samples were purposively chosen “based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study’s questions” (Teddlie & Yu, 2007, p. 77) which “for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 77) utilizing expert judgment with the goal of comparability. More specifically, maximum variation sampling was utilized, for “comparisons or contrasts” (Teddlie & Yu, 2007, p. 81) in social portrayal, from an informal sampling frame (e.g., library listings).

(4) Coding. Each sampling unit was coded according to emergent themes within each of these literary sociologically-based literary constructs: what is given value; its audience focus; the social setting; any central issues; how characters are re/presented; and any labels used. These categories frame key points of focus for cultural understanding, allowing the effect and representation between different media to be seen from a broader perspective. This is important to this study as it examines storied representations across media, and follows the broad scope from Maich and Belcher (2010).

(5) Drawing Inferences. Krippendorff (1989) emphasises this phase as the most important step. Attention is paid across all media, examining how storied representations of ASD are typified, indicating what the source attends to, values, and embodies in attitudes and perceptions. Inferences cannot be separated from validation. Here, Young’s (2012) methodology of viewing a movie artifact more than five times informed the methodology integrated across visual media. For example, instead of viewing only one episode of a television series, reflective analysis encompassed viewing across a variety of episodes in order to get a larger picture of ASD portrayal. In the case of movies, which are a contained artifact bound in time for one viewing, multiple viewings were implemented in part or whole.

(6) Validation. Validation may emerge from what cannot be seen directly in content analysis (Krippendorff, 1989). Validation here flowed from the pursuit of examining how storied representations ASD are typified, what may be assumed or stereotyped, and how this relates to reality.

Using these steps of social content analysis, varied media types are shown to contain themes that illuminate understanding of and contrast with the reality and portrayal of ASD central to this study. Emergent themes within and across boundaries of media typology include: exposed versus implied ASD (e.g. characteristics, diagnoses), clinical depictions of ASD versus disability as eccentricity (e.g., everyday families), and stereotypical portrayals (e.g., high functioning, highly skilled “superheroes”).
Results and Discussion

Exploration of this topic made it clear that society is captivated by culture; especially, how culture is portrayed through media. Many binary opposites appear in an exploration like this, such as love of media, dislike of deception, love of character, and dislike of inaccuracy of portrayal. In this project, five examples (2006-2012) for each of four storied representations depicted in four types of media (i.e., picture books, novels, television, and movies) were analyzed. Simultaneously being mindful that no story can encompass all of lived experience, these selections were made to “indicate what experiences we give more meaning to” (Gilling, 2012, p. 37). In examining how storied representations of characters with ASD are typified, emerging themes are noted within each media type.

Television

The Globe and Mail reported that, “it’s clear that some of the challenges faced by the autistic population have captured the imagination of TV writers, who are increasingly penning eccentric characters whose quirks would seem to align with typical characteristics of ASD” (Patch, 2012, para. 5). Recent television shows exemplify this comment, such as Criminal Minds, Bones, The Big Bang Theory, Grey’s Anatomy, and Parenthood which all feature characters with ASD or traits of ASD that propagate such views. Each of these shows has been produced for more than three years, indicating a faithful following and viewing stability. This is representative of cultural change. In the 1950s, viewers encountered characters—who in the majority of ways—were just like their audiences: post WWII and family-oriented (Belcher, 2010). Current storied representations, however, favor a view of humanity not necessarily “just like us”, but rather exceptional and worthy of awe in ways unfamiliar to us.

In these five examples, some such featured characters are “exposed” outright (Criminal Minds, Grey’s Anatomy, Parenthood), and some are assumed, incognito (Bones, The Big Bang Theory), fitting a virtual representation of how others believe a person with ASD “should” be viewed. In Criminal Minds, for example, the portrayal of Dr. Spencer Reid—a talented profiler who spends his time assisting in the capture of violent and/or serial killers—is forthright about the portrayal of ASD traits. His special status is recognized; however, this recognition may provide both correct and incorrect messages. On their Wikipedia site, a common go-to internet site for popular media, it is stated quite appropriately that “as is characteristic of people with Asperger’s, Reid is socially awkward” (Wikipedia, 2012b, para. 9; Stichter et al., 2010). In contrast, it also specifies that:

Gubler stated in an interview in the show's second season "[Reid]'s an eccentric genius, with hints of schizophrenia and minor autism, Asperger's Syndrome. Reid is 24, 25 years old with three Ph.D.s and one can not [sic] usually achieve that without some form of autism." (para. 9)

In this statement, a number of incorrect assumptions are shared. First, there is a disregard for the differential diagnosis of Schizophrenia and Asperger's Disorder. In other words, if a diagnosis of Asperger’s Disorder is made, then the criteria for Schizophrenia cannot be met (Centre for Disease Control & Prevention, 2009). Second, there is no “minor” ASD exists. Third and most nonsensically, is the claim that scholarly achievement is necessarily and absolutely
heralded by the presence of an ASD. Draaisma (2009) would label this creating a fuzziness or normalization around ASD or a “in a sense we are all autistic’ stereotype” (p. 1478). In Bones, based on a mystery series, Dr. Temperance Brennan (forensic anthropologist), also has a scientific bent. Similar to Reid, she has multiple doctorates and is socially awkward, often misinterpreting social cues and conversations; she also has emotional issues, social issues, and a literal nature (IMDb, 2012b). Her character is representative of someone with Asperger’s, according to the criteria of Snedden (2010) and Young (2012), although this “diagnosis” has never been confirmed outright. A similarity based on character portrayal can be made regarding the character Dr. Sheldon Cooper, on The Big Bang Theory, portrayed as a verbally articulate theoretical physicist who exhibits comically-portrayed difficulties with socially successful interactions (Wikipedia, 2012a). Lastly, Grey’s Anatomy, a serial around the professional careers of medical professionals briefly included a new character, Dr. Mary McDonnell (2012), a cardiac surgeon with self-confessed Asperger’s.

Here, we have five storied representations of highly schooled characters: very well educated individuals who have excelled academically and have reached levels of admiration from their colleagues or classmates. All four adult characters are experts in their fields of science—but it could be questioned that they are presented as being perhaps much more “superior” due to their “dis”abilities than “normal.” Perceptions of “special skills” alongside ASD have existed since the recognition of Asperger’s Disorder in 1943 (Vital, Ronal, Wallace, & Happé, 2009), and are also termed “islets of ability,” “savant skills,” (p. 1093) or “splinter skills” (p. 1095). However, although such unique skills do exist in individuals with ASD, this occurs less than 10 percent of the time and is hypothesized to be related to the cognitive style ASD (e.g., restricted interests, focus on detail) (Vital et al., 2009). In the realm of televised characters, this appears more as a one-to-one ratio, unless, of course, the viewer chooses to humorously see all well-educated people as being “ab-normative” in character.

All five of these televised characters display eccentric behaviours and exhibit social awkwardness; however, the viewer is more likely to see them as brilliant experts—as gifted—especially when portrayed as a child, like Max in Parenthood. These five these characters are portrayed as lovingly eccentric rather than clinically diagnosed, even when a diagnosis is evident (Winegardner, 2010). All five are viewed as inspirational and exceptional, without the reality of exceptionally challenging behaviours, except when presented in a comical manner. In other words, the discomfort of meltdowns, tantrums, or significant socially embarrassing behaviours are rarely viewed. One single example contrary to this representation occurred in Grey’s Anatomy when a sensory situation occurred, necessitating tight hugging of surgeon Mary McDonnell as a calming technique. This is a rare occurrence and not necessarily viewed as a positive turn by ASD advocates or those living with ASD publishing reactions in the blogosphere (Soraya, 2009). All five televised characters here are portrayed as intellectually stimulating geniuses who make us aspire to be like them; to be “special,” perhaps, rather than averagely abled. As affirmed in the Globe and Mail, television is currently favoring programs and featuring eccentric characters whose so-named “quirks” are similar to characteristics in those with ASD.

Movies

The task and pace of viewing in itself stimulates the viewer emotionally and visually—as entertainment—but not necessarily for the purpose of critique (Carr, 2010; Turkle, 2011). Movies, whether made for the home TV or big screen, tend to impact the affective and cognitive
appetites of the viewer. Framed purposefully as one-time experiences without an ongoing familiarity in which viewers become acclimatised to character portrayal, movies represent “storied forms,” often of a biography or a novel, that portray more exaggeration than reality for the cause of entertainment. As cautioned by Carr (2010) and Turkle (2011) above, receiving the visual story provides no time to critique, discuss, reflect, or engage conversation about what may or may not be realistic or important (i.e., in the life of a person with ASD).

Temple Grandin (2010), a made for TV biographical movie depicting the life of Dr. Temple Grandin, an animal behaviourist and university professor, is a stellar example (IMDb, 2012a) of the popularity of ASD in media. Following its Primetime Emmy award—amongst many others—for its roots as a made-for-television movie, Grandin became widely known as inspirational and larger than life, leading to her being seen as one of the 100 most inspirational people (TIME Magazine, 2010). Not only does this suggest to viewers that hard work pays off professionally, but that it really pays off for exceptional people with ASD—perhaps even with celebrity and fame. However, the following movie examples are non-biographical in focus, are prominent, at minimum, award-nominated, and reference ASD. Unlike the life-like portrayal of Grandin’s professional success and personal fame, the following examples tend to exaggerate these less-than-likely life outcomes.

In Salmon Fishing in the Yemen (2011) Alfred Jones is the British Government’s expert in salmon fisheries and has Asperger’s Disorder. Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2011) features a nine-year-old child hero, affected by the trauma of 9/11, who exhibits some traits of ASD (e.g., inventiveness, social awkwardness, sensory issues, repetitive behaviours). Dear John (2010) portrays the father of the protagonist as having recognizable characteristics of Asperger’s Disorder and a firm disconnect with conventional emotional expression, contextualized by his son coping with the trauma of war. Finally, My Name is Khan (2010) features a Muslim man with Asperger’s Disorder who undertakes a journey to speak to the president. The plot is rife with multiple political controversies and success in the face of life-altering challenge on a large scale (e.g., environmental disaster). In all five of these movie-based examples, characters represented are high functioning and able to cope in life situations without extreme non-functional distress. All five are ASD “heroes” who conquer seemingly impossible odds in larger-than-life situations which occur in circumstances remote to typical everyday life (e.g., extreme danger); thus, viewers may be led to believe that those with ASD have heroic abilities in times of crisis, or intuitively solve problems that the average person may not. Carr (2010) and Turkle (2011) have good cause to consider the impact of emotional and visual entertainment to exaggerate perspective without critique.

Novels

Movies, television, novels, and picture books deal with story in markedly different ways. Belcher and Maich (2010) suggested that books written by authors based upon the personal experience of family members may do so as part of a therapeutic healing process. It is of interest to note that most of the following authors have a personal connection to ASD. Leisurely reading involved in the engaging a novel is more personal and less visually bombarding than that of television or movies. Books are—for the most part—carefully selected by readers. Unlike television or movies, author and reader set the purpose, pace, time fame, and critique. While engaging in a book, there is time to pause, reflect, re-read, infer, and form opinions and affections toward characters in a story. There is also opportunity for engaging in conversation as the story unfolds.
A review of current novels focusing on main characters with ASD reveals commonality and difference between storied representations. *Mockingbird* (Erskine, 2011), for example, is a juvenile novel rife with tragedy and extreme life situations. The key character, a girl with Asperger’s Disorder, loses her mother to cancer, then her older confidante and defender, her brother, to a school shooting. Although it portrays the traits of ASD in a compelling way, this book still has the “superhero feeling” which movies thematically propagated.

*House Rules* (Picoult, 2010), on the other hand, depicts a modern-day family which includes Jacob Hunt, a teenage boy with Asperger’s. In this portrayal, the character is not a superhero, nor adept at social cues. He displays a focus on one area: forensic analysis, albeit untrained. Similar to the above movies, Jacob is portrayed clever and scientific; but perhaps, more realistically portrayed as a character that grapples with dilemmas (e.g., legal matters) as a result of his difficult societal fit. Picoult narrates the effect of ASD on the family and community.

Cynthia Lord (2008) who has a son with ASD tells the story of a girl, Catherine, who has a brother (David) with ASD. In Lord’s fictional account entitled *Rules*, Catherine is torn between her love for her brother and resentment of his special needs. In many ways, this book is more about Catherine than about David, and coming to grips with healing and love.

*Keeping Keller* (Winegar, 2008), set in the 1950s, frames a realistic view of a five-year-old child with ASD in an age when it was not socially recognized or accepted; when institutionalization was the preferred norm. Once again, social skills—or the absence of social skills—is at the heart of the book, providing a believable but conscience-probing story. Both Picoult (2010) and Winegar (2008) focus on overt behaviours as being significant and directive in the lives of those with ASD and their family members.

Lastly, *Anything But Typical* (Baskin, 2010), presents a fictional portrayal of a boy in grade six who has ASD and loves to write, but is not “neurotypical” in his ability to converse socially. He meets another aspiring writer online whom he thinks of as his girlfriend, but becomes anxious when he discovers they may actually meet face-to-face, and his ASD reality will then become known. The family situation is well contoured, showing the complexity of understanding and being understood as a dynamic in such situations. These novels focus on the peculiarities, rules, and traits evident in the everyday life of a person with ASD, relating this to family outcomes.

Graham Findley attributes the current popularity to know and understand ASD to the vaccine debate (Findlay, 2004) as well as the publication of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Haddon, 2003). *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is a murder mystery novel about a boy thought to have ASD. Interestingly, it is reported that the author, “is now thoroughly irritated that the word Asperger’s appeared on subsequent editions of the novel, because now everyone imagines that he is an expert and he keeps getting phone calls asking him to appear at lectures” (Allfree, 2010, para. 4). Belcher and Maich would support the view that as we read writing of those with personal ties to ASD, the pictures painted in our minds tends to follow a particular trend. Books represent ASD in a complex context of family and community, rife with everyday problems complicated by issues endemic to ASD, thus engaging empathy for readers and healing expression for authors.
**Picture Books**

Although there are not a vast number of picture books written for children on this topic, notable changes have been made in the last few years. In these later selections of picture books (2010-2012), less emphasis is put on family and the inner life of the child, and more is put on the societal acceptance and clinical observations of children with ASD (Maich & Belcher, 2012). Scientific criteria and prognosis for behavioural change can become main features. Picture books in particular have consequences when used in school settings. Storied representations in picture books, when used by teachers or parents, infer an authority or reality as they instruct children in educational settings. This gives the story more weight to the viewing audience than reading independently for interest from library shelves. As educational interest in ASD increases, so is the use of such storied representations in classrooms. An overview of picture books published from 2010 to 2012 provides a current cultural depiction of commonalities and differences in the storied representations of characters with ASD.

In *ASD and Me: Learning about High Functioning ASD* (DeMars, 2011), focus is on the clinical and behavioural aspects of ASD. We could say that child has become “thing-ified” to a diagnosis of clinical analysis that fits the label of his social life. *Russell’s World: A Story for Kids about Autism* (Amenta, 2011), is written in conjunction with the American Psychological. This book furthers a clinical view by giving professional and clinical advice regarding children with ASD. *My Friend with Autism* (Bishop & Bishop, 2011), is a reproduction of an earlier story re-marketed to include an activity book. This book serves as an introduction to being a friend to someone with ASD, providing information for teachers and parents. Half of the book is a reprint of the original story; half contains coloring pictures on a CD. It includes a glossary for parents and other clinical information. *A is for "All Aboard!"* (Kluth & Kluth, 2010), written for friends living with ASD, is an alphabet book about trains that can be used by children with a special interest about trains, containing pertinent vocabulary. Even though the book appears to be written with this end in mind, it uses the popular idea of ASD as a theme appealing to the current reader market, and does not really address the child beyond the intent for the book. All four of these titles have a clinical focus on ASD.

Lastly, *David’s World: A Picture Book about Living with Autism* (Mueller, 2012), provides the story of a family living with autism from the point of view of an older sibling. This book focuses on family rather than clinical analysis, like many of the novels represented here. It is touching and realistic, and seems to see beyond the perspective of the other texts in ways that note reality, predominately because it is written by a sibling about a sibling. However, this book is the only one of the five that takes this approach.

This medium is of importance because picture books often provide the first window to early learners where differences are made known socially through story. Overall, children’s picture books are still being written mostly in this domain by parents of children with ASD, but appear to be moving away from being an agent of healing and coping to a clinical analysis of how to support challenging aspects of ASD.

**Across Media Types**

Across television, movies, novels, and picture books some similarities are evident. All media focuses on science in some way in the lives of characters represented. Even children’s picture books include some non-fictional, clinical elements (e.g., including clinical diagnoses, glossaries for parents, etc., as well as specific messages about the environment (e.g., the benefits of
knowledgeable teachers). Often, the characters exhibit savant-like traits, although in reality these are rare. So how do myth and reality connect to life in storied representations?

As society advances, changes occur. Technology is now the purveyor of the future, especially prominent in our younger, upcoming generations: the school, community and neighbourhood peers of our students with ASD. A stereotypical portrayal of persons with ASD from movies, television and novels is emerging that appears to glamorize eccentricity and devalue the ordinarily abled. Eccentricity is in and everyday ordinariness is out. Similarly, Draaisma (2009) noticed that “there are hardly any autistic characters not having savant skills” (p. 1477) and that only two presentations of ASD seem to exist either “diminished capacity or superhuman capacity, but nothing in between” (p. 1477). In many ways, persons portrayed appear to have savant characteristics or splinter skills, seen as being not only different, but heroic and in many ways more special than those in the families that support them. Although this may produce more tolerance for people of any special need including children with ASD, it may also have a negative outcome. For example, when the general public, including our school-aged children, is less realistically informed, naive judgments may occur, which in reality may be challenging on a daily basis. As Graham Findlay (2004) reflects:

Highbrow media has now begun to create the ‘super parent’ who can handle a career, family life, and a child with autism with deft aplomb. Promoting this as the norm is wandering into dangerous territory. My son’s reality—and his impact on his family—is naturally far more complicated. (p. 22)

Where are these media examples which fully disclose the negative behaviours that may arise during the challenging early years of puberty? How can children and their parents be prepared for these challenges which will likely occur at school, as well as the home and community? Movie and television dramatizations show viewers what producers want us to see, not the “reality of what we do not see”: “it is not cuddly; it is tough, challenging, stressful, and often humorous” (Findlay, 2004, p. 22).

Conclusions: Are We Becoming the Stories We Tell?

From this 20-unit sample bounded by context and time, results show that: television characters with ASD tend to be portrayed as intellectually stimulating geniuses who make us aspire to be like them; movies tend to show those with ASD as heroes, conquering seemingly impossible odds; novels tend to present ASD in a complex, authentic context of family and community, rife with everyday problems; and picture books tend to “explain” ASD with a clinical perspective. Generally, television, movies, and novels affect us outside of educational-focused settings. They entertain and have ASD as an area of interest. However, picture books appear to be moving towards a clinical presentation of ASD, and this is significant because they form part of teaching and learning away from parental or civic input when used in the classroom. Classroom, community, and/or home-based sharing of storied representations may perpetuate incorrect, stereotypical, and unrealistic notions of attributes and attitudes of characters reflecting ASD, including a glamourized or mythical view; therefore, a cautious inclusion paired with careful intentionality is suggested in their use.

Storied representations of characters with ASD colour our views between fact and fiction in the real world, similar to what Sarrett (2011) sees as the depiction of dual realities that push
and pull between persisting fundamental assumptions of ASD in a “scientific reality” (p. 143) and the emergence of positively portrayed “autistic autobiographies” (p. 142). It is important that we attend not only to the perceptions, invented or real, that are presented to us as entertainment and perhaps given a unwitting status of “truth,” but learn to attend to the essential insider knowledge that should be the dominant voice of understanding in the classroom, school, and society: the children, parents, and families that should be the main contributors of our current and future understandings (Billington, McNally, & McNally, 2000; Gilling, 2012; Sarrett, 2011). In learning from various media, we can extend or absorb valid, false, or exaggerated perspectives about realities and misrepresentation of ASD; therefore, careful choice-making and in-depth critique is essential to utilize the engaging and instructional features of mass media to develop an authentic understanding.
References


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Appendix

Table 1. Current Examples of Popular Media-Based Depictions of Characters with ASD or with ASD-like Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Television* &amp; Characters</th>
<th>Movies*</th>
<th>Novels*</th>
<th>Picture Books*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Big Bang Theory</strong></td>
<td>Dr. Sheldon Cooper</td>
<td><strong>Dear John</strong></td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bones</strong></td>
<td>Dr. Temperance Brennan</td>
<td><strong>Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close</strong></td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Criminal Minds</strong></td>
<td>Dr. Spencer Reid</td>
<td><strong>My Name is Khan</strong></td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grey’s Anatomy</td>
<td>Dr. Mary McDonnell</td>
<td><strong>Salmon Fishing in the Yemen</strong></td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenthood</td>
<td>Max</td>
<td><strong>Temple Grandin</strong></td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Alphabetized by title
^Alphabetized by author
J. Brant

Decolonizing Education

BOOK REVIEW

Title: Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit
Author: Marie Battiste
Publisher: Purich Publishing Limited, Saskatoon, SK
Year of Publication: 2013
Reviewed by: Jennifer Brant, PhD Student

As an emerging Indigenous scholar completing a mainstream doctoral program, I was immediately drawn to the work of Marie Battiste. Her work inspires my commitment to approach my degree as a decolonizing journey that nourishes my own learning spirit. Battiste (1998) captures the paradox of mainstream education as it is experienced by Aboriginal students. As she pointed out while Aboriginal students are looking to liberate themselves and their communities through education, they are faced with a strenuous curriculum that does not “mirror” them. As a result, students experience a “fragmented existence” (p. 24). This has indeed been my experience. Her recent book, Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit expresses the tensions Indigenous learners face in all levels of mainstream education. These are the very tensions I personally experienced throughout the entirety of my educational experience as I have attempted to secure my own space and sense of place as a student and now aspiring professor.

Battiste crafts her book by sharing her educational narrative and perspectives as a Mi’kmaq student and educator. The inspiration for Battiste’s research towards decolonizing education has been refined through her years of work as an educator, administrator and Indigenous scholar. Moved by her graduate students, she recalls a comment made by Cree scholar Willie Ermine: “This course should be called Decolonizing Education, not Decolonizing Aboriginal Education. The whole system needs to be changed!” (p. 13). In response, she expresses her commitment to addressing the immediate need for systemic change. As she articulates, her “research and discursive arrow” is aimed “not at teachers or their methods, but largely at the federal and provincial systems and the policy choices and the inequities coming from them” (p. 14). Indeed the grand scale systemic change that her work advocates must funnel through such a top down approach. It is an approach, however, that concerns all within the educational milieu:

For every educator, our responsibility is making a commitment to both unlearn and learn—to unlearn racism and superiority in all its manifestations, while examining our own social constructions in our judgements and learn new ways of knowing, valuing others, accepting diversity, and making equity and inclusion foundations for all learners. (p. 166)

In this spirit, she threads expressions of sentiment in which all educators are connected. Noting that “education is the belief in possibilities” and “every school is either a site of reproduction or a site of change” Battiste captures the essence of the transformative role of education within Canadian society. Such statements prompt me to reflect on my own teaching philosophy. I hope
that the hearts of all readers will also be touched and they too will reflect on the influence of their own teaching practices.

As Rita Bouvier writes in the foreword:

![Image of a book with the text J. Brant Decolonizing Education 117]

The book represents a formal shift of thinking and writing from a modernistic, expository prose of grand western narratives to a more storytelling manner as a way of uncovering—revealing—a nuanced and balanced perspective of a colonized history and, through it, unmasking the faulty logics of knowing grounded in objectivity and Eurocentric theorizing that have undermined Indigenous peoples’ knowledge systems. (p. 11)

Battiste’s “storytelling manner” provides a textured analysis and discussion of the multilayered and multipronged components embodied within the discourse on Indigenous education and the need to decolonize the education system in its entirety. Woven throughout the book are the varied issues that, pieced together in a sequential and systematic order, facilitate a deeper understanding of the work that needs to be done as we move towards an expressed vision of decolonizing education. This vision positions “decolonization as a process that belongs to everyone” (p. 9). It is a must-read for all administrators and educators, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, especially those who are involved in educational policy. As Battiste so eloquently articulates “the decolonization of education is not just about changing a system for Indigenous peoples, but for everyone. We all benefit by it” (p. 22).

This book is timely as it serves as a foundation for understanding the historical policies of Aboriginal education and offers insights for an informed critique of the recently proposed First Nations Education Act. Her balanced approach to presenting a vision of decolonizing education is also evident in the clarity she brings to the issues confronted by the Idle No More movement. Embedded within the movement is the need for Indigenous identity to hold rightful space within Canadian society. It is this sense of identity that has been repressed historically through assimilationist education policy, and is currently repressed in less subtle ways through cognitive imperialism whereby “Eurocentric knowledge operates as if it is a depoliticized process of intellectual refinement” (p. 105).

Chapters 2 and 3 set the historical, colonial and political context for understanding educational policy from an Indigenous vantage point. Chapter 2 describes the legacy of forced assimilation through education prompting readers to:

Imagine the consequence of a powerful ideology that positions one group as superior and gives away First Nations peoples’ lands and resources and invites churches and other administrative agents to inhabit their homeland, while negating their very existence and finally removing them from the Canadian landscape to lands no one wants. Imagine how uncertain a person whose success is only achieved by a complete makeover of themselves, by their need to English and the polished rules and habits that go with that identity. They are thrust into a society that does not want them to show too much success or too much Indian identity, losing their connections to their land, family, and community when they have to move away as there is no work in their homeland. Assimilation. (p. 23).

Most Indigenous readers do not have to imagine this, as Battiste’s description captures our realities along with the experiences of our parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. It is
a reality that we know intimately. It did not end when the last residential school closed in 1996, as Battiste reminds us, but remains a reality that we are continually faced with as the cognitive imperialism, that Battiste defines, permeates and dominates the entire education system. As a mother of two boys in elementary school, it is a reality that I struggle with every day as they come home and literally learn how to read and write in English right in front of me. Their daily assigned homework includes interactive e-books on Raz-Kids, an online learning system. With my youngest in Grade 1 and just learning how to read, I feel a deep rooted sense of helplessness as an emerging voice inside of me asks why they are not learning how to read and write in Kanien’kéha (the Mohawk language). The answer, documented throughout Battiste’s book, is found in the understanding of the ways in which our languages were repressed and forbidden. Regaining these languages is part of Battiste’s call for trans-systemic reconciliation including the reclamation of identity, ways of knowing and being, and the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems within and throughout all levels of the education system. This call is refined in Chapter 4, “Creating the Indigenous Renaissance.” In this chapter Battiste grounds the Indigenous renaissance in education within the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and draws attention to the work that is being done globally to advance Indigenous knowledge systems within the academy. For other Indigenous readers who have not yet come to terms with their colonial past, the above statement can plant seeds encouraging them to work through layers of colonial debris. In this way, new growth will bring about decolonizing understandings of their own families, communities, and educational experiences.

For non-Indigenous readers, the call to imagine “the experience of Aboriginal peoples in Canada” (p. 23) serves as a point of creating ethical space for decolonization as described in Chapter 5. The need to confront and eliminate racism is expressed in Chapter 6, where Battiste acknowledges the difficulty associated with talking about race and racism as it challenges the grand narrative of Canada as a fair and just society. She writes, “Whiteness and privilege are less evident to those who swim in the sea of whiteness and dominance. Confronting racism, then, is confronting racial superiority and its legacy, not only in history but also in contemporary experience” (p. 125). Chapter 7 identifies the need to eliminate the cognitive imperialism of Eurocentrism, which Battiste advises is based on racism. She describes cognitive imperialism as “a form of manipulation used in Eurocentric educational systems” that is “built on damaging assumptions and imperialist knowledge” (p. 161). Coming full circle, Battiste provides clarity and context to the assimilatory nature of the Canadian education system, while also offering practical recommendations for constitutional reconciliation and possibilities for educational transformation in the final two chapters.

Battiste identifies the multiple layers of challenges inherent in decolonizing education. She also presents an informed critique, noting the harmful impacts of cognitive imperialism. By offering viable path towards constitutional reconciliation, and transformation, her work not only provides a deeper lens of the need for change but offers a significant push and inspiration toward action. As the title suggests, action towards decolonizing education is about nourishing the learning spirit. For Indigenous learners, this is about embedding their worldviews within all facets of education including the humanities and the sciences. By suggesting that “Canadian educational institutions should view Elders, [and] knowledge keepers... as educational treasures” (p. 185), Battiste offers valuable contributions for the integration of Indigenous knowledge and spirituality. Overall, Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit is deeply rich, insightful and provocative and offers a valuable and timely contribution to the advancement of educational
reform. It is a book that must be widely read for, as Battiste asserts, “It is a subject that every citizen of Canada should know, because every citizen in Canada is connected to it” (p. 23).

**References**


