



## **Ontario (Canada) Education Provincial Policy: Aboriginal Student Learning**

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### **Abstract**

Educational policy related to publicly funded schools in Ontario, Canada, is intended among other things to address the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student academic achievement. The Ontario Ministry of Education's (2007) *The Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* draws attention to the nuances of Aboriginal knowledge, Aboriginal student epistemologies, and learning preferences. The Framework also identifies the importance for publicly funded provincial schools and school boards to recognize these distinctions in both their policies and practices in order to prepare Aboriginal students as 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. According to Ball (2009), public schools in Canada have not proven that they are capable of successfully addressing the learning needs and community realities of Aboriginal students and families, as evidenced by their inferior levels of achievement in comparison to their non-Aboriginal peers. Hence, this study investigated the experiences of Aboriginal students in 3 public elementary schools across northern Ontario in light of the mandate of the policy Framework. The core categories grounded in the voices of 16 participants from different regions across northern Ontario are described as 2 phases of student discernment. The initial phase includes students' discernment of the influence of the various relationships they share with peers and teachers. The second phase is described as students' discernment of their social location as Aboriginal peoples in public schools. The core categories describe the most significant factors that distinguish high- and low-functioning public schools and contribute to students' sense of engagement in their education.

**Key Words:** Aboriginal education, policy, relationships

## Introduction

Educational policy related to publicly funded schools in Ontario, Canada, is intended among other things to address the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student academic achievement (Ball, 2009; Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). The focus on Aboriginal student achievement is pressing given that the Aboriginal population in Canada is growing almost six times faster than the non-Aboriginal population, and that the Aboriginal child and adolescent population is in excess of 6% of the total population of this demographic (Miller, Laye-Gindhu, Bennett, Liu, & Gold, 2011). Some projections estimate that Aboriginal elementary school students will represent more than 25% of the entire population in certain provinces and territories across Canada (Young et al., 2010). Moreover, although 50% of the Aboriginal population in Canada resided in urban dwellings 10 years ago, more Aboriginal children are projected to attend Canadian urban-centered schools over the next decade (Richards, Vining, & Weimer, 2010).

The 2007 Ontario policy document, *The Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (the Framework) draws attention to the nuances of Aboriginal knowledge, Aboriginal student epistemologies, and learning preferences. The Framework also identifies the importance for publicly funded provincial schools and school boards to recognize these distinctions in both their policies and practices in order to prepare Aboriginal students as 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. Given the projected increase of Aboriginal students in publicly funded schools, it makes sense that the Ontario educational policy Framework brings to light the uniqueness of Aboriginal student epistemologies, histories, and traditions and calls upon teachers, principals, and school board administrators to reflect these preferences accordingly. Battiste (2002), Cajete (2000), Hampton (1988), and others have identified Aboriginal knowledge as being distinct from more western-based understandings. Aboriginal knowledge, according to these scholars, represents an array of relationships that implicate profoundly upon language, place-based beliefs, and local culture. According to Ball (2009), public schools in Canada have not proven that they are capable of successfully addressing the learning needs and community realities of Aboriginal students and families, as evidenced by their inferior levels of achievement in comparison to their non-Aboriginal peers (see also Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

Ball's (2009) statement in some respects provides the impetus for the central question that this study addresses; specifically, what distinguishes successful publicly funded urban northern Ontario elementary schools (with significant enrolments of Aboriginal students) in terms of their response to the mandate 8 years into the 2007 policy Framework's implementation and, in turn, their capability to equip Aboriginal students as 21<sup>st</sup> century learners? However, rather than focusing on the empirical evidence that typically includes student grades and test scores, this investigation concentrates upon the voices of the Aboriginal students themselves—in what Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, and Teddy (2009) term “the sense-making and knowledge-generating processes of the culture the system marginalizes” (p. 735).

Consequently, the paper will first provide an overview of the Ontario policy Framework. Second, the literature review will serve as the conceptual underpinnings of the key notions that inform the investigation, including concepts related to curriculum, pedagogy, teachers, and schooling. The methodology section of the paper provides the relevant details regarding the student participants and data analysis. The paper subsequently presents the findings of the study that consist of two core categories that emerged in response to the central question. The categories are grounded in the voices of the student participants and described as two phases of student discernment in view of their educational experiences in provincial northern Ontario

schools. The initial phase includes students' discernment of the influence of the various relationships they share with peers and teachers. The second phase is described as students' discernment of their social location as Aboriginal peoples in public schools. The core categories describe the most significant factors that distinguish high- and low-functioning public schools and contribute to students' sense of engagement in their education.

### **Contextual Overview**

The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) policy Framework draws attention to the historic and socio-cultural realities of Aboriginal students that often have adverse effects on their achievement levels and educational experiences (Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000). The Framework alludes to the achievement gap that positions Aboriginal students in lower standing than their non-Aboriginal peers, and self-declares the OME's commitment to provide top-notch education for all students across the province. The Framework is a strategic policy that calls upon teachers, principals, school board administrators, and local communities to improve Aboriginal students' experiences and achievement in public schools. The Framework represents

“A holistic and integrated approach to improving Aboriginal student outcomes. The overriding issues affecting Aboriginal student achievement are a lack of awareness among teachers of the particular learning styles of Aboriginal students, and a lack of understanding within schools and school boards of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultures, histories, and perspectives” (OME, 2007:6).

The Framework targets specific strategies for the various stakeholders involved in public education to more adequately respond to the unique learning and cultural needs of Aboriginal students through programs and services that complement a broader engagement of Aboriginal parental and community involvement in public schools. School and board administrators, according to the Framework, are commissioned to professionally develop teachers' knowledge of Aboriginal students' learning styles and advance teachers' skills towards implementing more culturally respectful pedagogical practices that better position Aboriginal students to succeed in public school classrooms. In turn, teachers are required to implement practices that resonate with the socio-cultural and epistemic realities of Aboriginal students. The intent of the Framework is to raise educators' awareness of the diverse needs of Aboriginal students, improve their academic achievement in order to close the aforementioned gap, and enhance the formal schooling experiences of Aboriginal learners.

The Framework is a central policy to this study since its principles served as the foundation for the semi-structured questions posed to the Aboriginal student participants. The questions focused upon the strategies outlined in the Framework and essentially informed the dialogue between participants during each of the research conversations.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Curriculum and Pedagogy**

Postcolonial notions of Canadian public school curriculum and pedagogy have not favoured Aboriginal students and have not been reflective of their epistemological practices (Battiste, 2002; Cajete, 2008; Frideres & Gadacz, 2005). The more western-based provincial curriculums have generally not been aligned to Aboriginal knowledges, while classroom pedagogy has in many instances ignored Aboriginal students' learning styles (Duggan, 2003; Piquemal, 2005).

There is also a wave of literature that underscores the need for educators at all levels of K to 12 schools to have better understandings of Aboriginal students' epistemic needs (Aldous, Barnes, & Clark, 2008; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004). As Hampton (1993) explains, "Traditionally Indian forms of education can be characterized as oral histories, teaching stories, ceremonies, apprenticeships, learning games, formal instruction, tutoring, and tag-along teaching...all of the traditional Native methods took place within cultural settings that were characterized by subsistence economies, in-context learning, personal and kinship relationships between teachers and students" (as cited in Waller et al., 2002, p. 268). Mainstream teachers and learning practices that rely on memorization, the regurgitation of facts, individual competition among students, and test-driven assessments are not necessarily culturally appropriate practices for Aboriginal learners (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Holmberg, 2010). The repercussions of such misaligned practices have resulted in negative public school experiences for Aboriginal students. Aboriginal epistemologies tend to reflect a holistic view of teaching and learning whereby the individual student benefits from a balanced education that nurtures intellectual, physical, social/emotional, and spiritual characteristics (Pearce, Crowe, Letendre, Letendre, & Baydala, 2005).

There remains, therefore, a glaring disconnect between Aboriginal students' epistemic realities and socio-cultural traditions and public school educational practices related to teaching and learning (Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir, & Muir, 2010). Multifaceted, unique, and complex Aboriginal worldviews have typically not been represented in Canadian provincial schools. Aikenhead and Michell (2011) have observed that Aboriginal children who learn best by demonstration, repetition, and practice, as well as those who prefer to assume active roles in their learning, do not benefit from the rote learning and standardized assessments that often drive pedagogy and evaluation in publicly funded provincial schools, such as those in Ontario. Aboriginal student epistemologies, including holistic models of educational practice that are centred on visual, oral, and group activities, have essentially not been a meaningful part of public school curriculum and teachers' pedagogy (Pearce et al., 2005) and in the process have ignored teaching and learning practices that contribute to the strong development of Aboriginal learners (Archibald, 2008). Strengthening Aboriginal learners in culturally appropriate and sensitive ways in public schools "is critical to the well-being of Aboriginal people" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009, p. 5).

### **Educators**

Public school teachers must be aware of Aboriginal students' epistemologies and learning preferences in order to meaningfully incorporate such traditions in their practice. Teachers, according to Aikenhead and Michell (2011), must have a genuine understanding of learner-centred instruction and be able to adopt their classroom practices to further Aboriginal student achievement in the same manner as non-Aboriginal learning. Such an understanding entails that quality educators are willing to interrogate their own personal biases and assumptions about Aboriginal students, communities, and traditions. Quality educators also possess effective communication skills that allow them to dialogue with Aboriginal students, parents, and members of the community in a meaningful way. The ability to be a contributing member of a team includes participating in networks across Aboriginal communities.

In the Canadian context, the western-based curriculum and standardized practices that measure student achievement are generally implemented by mainstream teachers who often have not been adequately trained to develop the aforementioned key characteristics of quality

educators (Cherubini, 2010; 2012). Although it is important to resist generalizations, mainstream teachers in Canadian and Ontario public schools are often products of and formally educated in a specific paradigm of teaching and learning that involves teachers positioned at the front of the classroom of students as they deliver a specific lesson focused on a topic of one particular subject (Cole & Cole, 2001; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Aboriginal student epistemologies, their unique socio-cultural traditions, and the focus on community relations are typically not part of an educator's repertoire in publicly funded Canadian and Ontario schools and classrooms. This has been detrimental for Aboriginal students' learning and engagement in public education and has resulted in higher dropout rates, more student absenteeism, and lower enrolments in post-secondary education programs.

Additionally, the alarmingly high number of Aboriginal students who fail and become disengaged from formal schooling in northwestern Ontario has been described as deplorable for more than 40 years (see Latus & Bauman, 1980). Although some educators may understand the holistic and spiritual nature of Aboriginal worldviews and their effect on Aboriginal student learning (see Jegede & Aikenhead, 1999; Sutherland & Dennick, 2002), the international literature on the characteristics of quality educators makes the significant distinction that such understandings need to be juxtaposed with educators' own reflections of their socio-political positions as teachers and learners before they can meaningfully act upon their knowledge. Without an understanding of Aboriginal epistemologies and of one's position as a mainstream educator, teachers and administrators in public schools cannot begin to decolonize the western-based practices that have historically marginalized Aboriginal students and communities (Howitt & Stevens, 2005; Shaw, Herman, & Dobbs, 2006).

### **Methodology**

This research was located in three public elementary schools in northern Ontario that were identified as having a proportionately high enrolment of Aboriginal students. The schools did not all belong to the same school board. English is the language of instruction in each school. Prior to the study a senior administrator from each of the respective school boards was asked to identify K to 8 schools that were considered to be high and low functioning in terms of the culturally relevant activities and programs offered to Aboriginal students, and staff and student resources pertaining to Aboriginal languages, customs, and histories. Two high-functioning and one low-functioning schools were selected as research sites. Information sessions were hosted at each site in advance of the interviews. All Aboriginal students in each of the schools were invited to participate.

### **Student Participants**

Sixteen students (eight female, eight male) of various Aboriginal ancestry participated in the research conversations. The students resided in different communities across a vast geographical area in northern Ontario that included Missanabie Cree, Michipicoten, Ojibway, and Anishnabai groups. The students were in grade 7 (approximately 12 and 13 years of age). The three publicly funded schools represented different school boards that spanned over 15,000 square kilometres, included 15 Aboriginal groups, educated over 20,000 students, and employed nearly 1,700 teachers. More than 3,200 students across these school boards self-identified as Aboriginal, representing 16% of the total student demographic. Permission to participate in the study was granted by the students' parents/guardians. The student-participants who were enrolled

in the same school did not necessarily have the same homeroom teachers, although since they were on a rotary schedule each of the students shared the same teachers for certain subjects.

### **Research Conversations**

Information sessions were presented at various Aboriginal community gatherings in order to inform the respective parents and community Elders. The research conversations with students were conducted in June near the conclusion of the school year (see Kanu, 2011). The interviews were semi-structured in design and included questions that were based largely on the principles and strategies of the Framework. Students were encouraged to elaborate on their responses and speak to their experiences as senior-level elementary school students. Each research conversation was audio recorded, transcribed, and returned to each student for member check. The research conversations were between 90 and 120 minutes in duration. Key excerpts from the students are included in the paper. Students are identified by pseudonyms.

### **Data Analysis**

A grounded theory approach was best suited for this study. This qualitative design is grounded in the words of the participants (Kennedy & Lingard, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and includes the coding of basic units of analysis as a result of a line-by-line examination of transcripts (Charmaz, 2006). Coding is grouped into concepts to create initial themes and eventually core categories; hence, the findings are grounded in the voices of the participants and not influenced by the researcher's dispositions (Cherubini, 2007). The analysis and findings were triangulated by two Elders who were not involved in the research conversations and did not reside in the jurisdiction of any of the schools. It is important to offset the data analysis with the authentic insights and cultural awareness of Elders (see Fasoli & James, 2007).

### **Findings**

Grounded in the voices of participants are two core categories described as distinct phases of Aboriginal student discernment. The categories represent the most significant factors that distinguish high- and low-functioning schools. The first category includes Aboriginal student discernment of the influence of the various relationships they share with their teachers. The second category is distinguished by student perceptions of the extracurricular activities associated to public schooling whereby they clearly discern their social location as Aboriginal students in the broader public school culture. Further, and particularly significant, the analysis concludes that it is precisely the combination of these two factors that contribute most to students' sense of engagement in their education.

### **Discerning Relationships**

During the research conversations the student participants from the higher- and lower-functioning schools consistently discerned the manner in which they related with their teachers and, in some cases, amongst themselves. In one of the higher-functioning schools Brad distinguished the significance of teachers who discussed Aboriginal values and traditions to complement and extend the mainstream curriculum. Brad identified with a specific teacher who was willing to "talk about" traditional knowledge like the seven grandfather teachings during the school day and appreciated opportunities to "do a lot of research about the Aboriginals [to] find out that when the white people came they took the land and they kicked [the First Nations Peoples] out." Student participants appreciated teachers who incorporated Aboriginal history as a

meaningful and accurate component of the Canadian history curriculum. Students discussed how in these instances they felt represented in Canadian history.

Students from the higher- and lower-functioning schools noted that teachers who tailored curriculum and pedagogy to include culturally relevant material made an obvious contribution towards building stronger relationships with students. Fred, typical of the other students in his research conversation circle, praised teachers who are “just not teaching” and instead invest the time and energy in “getting to know you better.” Fred explains that students cherish relationships in which teachers “get to know you and what you struggle with in your school work.” Students appreciate teachers who are willing to better understand their individual nuances as learners and, very importantly to the findings of this study, discern those teachers who understand students’ individual learning styles and personal interests and account for this in their actual practice. Even at this relatively young age (approximately 12 to 13 years old) the students discern those educators who are committed to Aboriginal student welfare and want to build relationships with them to foster Aboriginal student learning.

Student discernment of the relationships between them and their teachers in the lower-functioning school was equally profound albeit less promising. Emma, on behalf of the other students in the research conversation circle, observed that her teacher “never picks [her] to answer the question so [she is] just sitting there, kind’a not even listening.” Victoria, who was sitting in the same circle, stated that her teacher “made [her] cry before”; Matt, her classmate, added that one teacher made him cry “three times already.” These and other examples speak to students’ sense of isolation in public school classrooms where they discern that the teacher has no confidence in their aptitude and intentionally ignores their willingness to actively participate in their learning. Jack suggested that the teachers notice and relate better to students “who do their work” and as a result “kind of avoid” the Aboriginal students. There is no sense of engagement on the part of these students with either their teachers or with the provincial curriculum. Such a lack of engagement seems to take a toll on students’ insecurity. Feeling neglected amongst her peers during lessons, Victoria admitted that “some people think that I am dumb,” while Emma added that “Sometimes I just don’t even want to talk because I don’t like my teacher...he is rude.” Students in these instances choose to disengage from the learning environment.

Students’ response to this lack of relationship with their teachers and peers is essentially a complete withdrawal from the dynamics of their classrooms as they choose to stay silent rather than to converse on any level with their teachers and in some cases with their non-Aboriginal classmates. Emma and Jack commented upon teachers’ treatment of the Aboriginal students who struggle with completing their assignments. Emma stated, “[The teacher] says it [in reference to the Aboriginal student’s name] straight out to the other kids in the class. ...He actually treats [student identified by name] like he is retarded.” Jack added that the same student to whom Emma refers is treated “like garbage.” Students discern how the teacher’s tactic of public humiliation makes them feel more vulnerable, disengaged, and isolated in school. These children feel, as Emma declared, “not wanted as a student” since they do not perceive themselves as having a meaningful presence in the classroom due in large part to the absence of genuine relationships between them, their teachers, and for some, their non-Aboriginal classmates as well.

The students in the higher-functioning schools appreciate those teachers who relate to their epistemic preferences. Brad, as one example, struggles with reading and prefers oral language and activity-based learning are favoured. For him, and others like him, he favours

activities that allow him to best demonstrate his learning. He readily voiced his pleasure in describing these opportunities: “Last week we built [structures] to hold up textbooks.” But even in reference to classroom activities in which he and others like him struggle, Brad noted how his teachers “always help me” because “they understand I have a hard time.” Students discern positive relationships with teachers who understand their learning styles and offer non-judgmental support. Scott, sitting in the same research conversation circle with Brad, commented on teachers who “help us right away” and are willing to assist students work through their difficulties without shouting, humiliating, or “yelling lots.” Even in the higher-functioning schools, however, students distinguish that there are teachers who are “ready to yell” when they “close the door.” Students perceive that these teachers are inclined to express their anger behind closed doors and feel that their temperament is volatile and unsteady. It is evident that for student-participants across all the research sites it is difficult to establish genuine relationships with teachers who demonstrate unpredictable behaviour.

In the other higher-functioning school, Grace and Fred expressed their appreciation of teachers who share their personal experiences during class so that students can, as Fred describes, “Get to know them.” To some extent students are comforted by teachers who share their experiences and stories. In this manner, students like Grace described “feeling comfortable” in the classroom since they can better identify with their teachers who open a space for students to share their stories and in the process foster nurturing relationships. Students discern conducive and respectful environments in which they have relationships with their teachers and do not have to worry about being embarrassed if they offer an incorrect response.

Notably, Emma, Matt, Jack, and Julia (who all participated in the research conversations in the lower-functioning school) distinguished teachers in their school who also shared personal experiences and stories but, in these instances, the sharing often merely reinforced how little in common the non-Aboriginal teachers had with the Aboriginal students. Emma observed, “[Teacher is named] always goes on about how good his [own] kids are and how he compares us to them. He’s always talking about how well off he is...and keeps on going. I don’t care.” Learning in a context of sharing, respectful, and accountable classroom contexts in which students, as Alice shared, can “really get to know” their teachers is critical for these students. Teachers who are perceived as nurturing and helpful stand most in contrast to the ones who make students like Alice and Billy “not want to work” and feel “uncomfortable” in their classrooms and schools. Scott, and many of the other students, know that they “got to earn [teachers’] trust first” if they want to establish mutually respectful relationships with teachers, and just as significantly, discern the importance of wanting to have positive relationships with their teachers in the first place.

The authentic care for Aboriginal learners demonstrated by some teachers in the higher-functioning schools is not always the same in the lower-functioning one. According to Jack, some teachers “favour the people who do their work or are smart.” These Aboriginal students feel further isolated when the high-achieving non-Aboriginal students are regularly celebrated in classroom and school-wide events. Students discern that their relationship with the teachers is based and measured by the teacher’s perception of students’ intelligence. The non-Aboriginal and high-achieving students receive, in the eyes of the Aboriginal student participants, preferential treatment and are invited into those spaces where relationships can be nurtured with the teacher. Conversely, Emma felt “stupid...as if I am not smart enough.” Again, the toll on students’ esteem is drastic as the Aboriginal students internalize behaviour and thinking that is the result of an unhealthy classroom environment characteristic of unsustainable relationships.



For Jack, Emma, Victoria, Julia, Tanner, and the others around the research conversation circle, some teachers are considered “everyone’s enemy” since they have established reputations in the school for isolating, “picking on,” and “swearing at kids.” Students readily distinguish such teachers’ lack of professionalism and care. They describe these teachers as “intimidating” because of their aggressive and forceful behaviour.

These students, as well as all the others in the respective research conversation circles, have an understanding of their learning preferences but resign themselves to failure in the absence of teacher assistance and motivation. The learning environments seem to enable this sense of resignation in students. Matt’s description of his interest in history and the teacher’s pedagogy is particularly telling: ‘History actually teaches me more about my rez and where my family comes from. But the way [teacher is named] teaches, it feels like a 5,000-hour story.’ Jack added, “[same teacher is named] does not make anything interesting. He just says, ‘Well, so and so discovered Newfoundland.’” The students are not represented in the teacher’s delivery of Canadian history since he does not account for the students’ intrinsic interest in their own Native history. Emma’s blunt conclusion is especially telling: “We are only learning about the Europeans,” and Matt added that “We have only done two pages of work on First Nations.” The teaching and learning of Aboriginal history is relegated to the margins. It silences the Aboriginal children even further and in their eyes undermines their historical identity. Most significantly, these practices are negatively internalized by the Aboriginal students and contribute to stifled and troubled relationships with their teachers.

### **Discerning Extracurriculars**

The second phase of student discernment is highly related to the first. Emerging from the voices of students in both the higher- and lower-functioning schools was their perception of the culturally relevant extracurricular activities associated to their respective schools whereby they discern their social location as Aboriginal peoples. There were numerous references among the students attending the higher-functioning schools to pow wows hosted at the school and to opportunities for Aboriginal students, as Brad described, to participate in “drumming all the time.” Drumming, smudging, and dancing were referred to as being instrumental activities that not only showcased students’ cultural uniqueness but provided a means for Aboriginal students to meet on a social level within the public school environment. Drumming, for Aboriginal students like Brad, is self-described as being “good for me.” Students perceive the positive influence of extracurricular cultural interventions and identify how the presence of the drum fulfills a self-described void in their lives. Scott, like Brad, observed that the extracurricular activities allow for “a bunch of people getting along” since these Aboriginal students describe taking comfort in common cultural activities that lend themselves to what the students perceive as social harmony in the school. Although students described the lack of a regular presence of Elders in the school, their presence is noticed during the school pow wow when, according to Scott, the Elders and other community role models “kind of teach us what to do.” Students feel honored to learn through the example of such cultural role models within the public school environment and describe a reaffirming sense of identity as Aboriginal peoples.

The same feelings of belonging to the school community are shared by Alice, Grace, Billy, and the other students in the other higher-functioning school. Many of these students take pride in “sing[ing] and danc[ing]” and Billy described that the school regularly recognizes Aboriginal cultural traditions. Whether students sing or dance Fancy Shawl, Tradition, or Grass, they discern that all cultural activities have a place within the public school. The students who

attend the school that keeps a Grandfather Drum perceive the centrality of the drum to their sense of identity and to their unique traditions. Of equal importance are the Elders and role models who themselves have a presence in the school. Students identify with them as traditional knowledge-keepers and authority figures. Grace believed that “when you see people from where you live doing great things you can relate to them.” For Fred, the outcome is to “get inspired.” Aboriginal students see themselves reflected in positive endeavours that they associate to both their local and school communities.

The students from the lower-functioning school also discussed the extracurricular activities offered at the school; however, these events had a dubious discernment on their location as Aboriginal peoples. Jack and Matt referred to dancers at one assembly “that came to our school [but the students] forgot” why the dancers were even present. The students recollected feeling “pretty cool” during the singing and dancing performance, and Emma described the event as being “different” to the mainstream practices. Jack enjoys the pow wows at the school but regretted that they occur only “every once in a while.” The extracurricular events, according to the student participants, are scheduled sporadically and seem to be offered as isolated activities. The students discern a genuine distinction between mainstream and Aboriginal socio-cultural representations in their classrooms and schools. The lack of Aboriginal representation, according to the students, embeds them in a location of difference and affirms the socio-cultural divide between traditions. For these students, having school-wide participation in a pow wow is an opportunity for their mainstream peers to experience Aboriginal traditions. As Jack stated, when the entire school population “experiences the history and some of the dances” it informs their current realities through historical tradition. Students are intrigued by their values and worldviews as Aboriginal peoples but discern how these interests are stifled in public school practices, curriculum, and teachers’ pedagogy. Students lament the fact that there were no special events to honor their traditions over the course of an entire school year. They perceive the teachers as not wanting to be bothered to recognize their cultural uniqueness.

The lack of representation of their uniqueness as Aboriginal peoples is compounded by the fact that none of the students could remember a time when there was an Elder or Chief in the school. Conversely, several of them shared examples of students “saying something in Ojibway” and being told by their teachers to stop “being silly [and] be quiet.” Grounded in the students’ voices are perceptions of extracurricular activities that discern their social locations as Aboriginal peoples to the proverbial margins of their public school.

### **Discussion**

The core categories that emerged from the voices of the participants point to two profound phases of Aboriginal student discernment. Grounded in the first category were student perceptions of the nature of the relationships they had with their teachers; the second category consisted of their perceptions regarding the extracurricular activities at their schools that contributed towards the discernment of their social location as Aboriginal peoples.

Students spoke candidly about how teachers’ pedagogical underpinnings influenced their relationships with Aboriginal students. The non-Aboriginal teachers who demonstrated a willingness to learn about Aboriginal students’ proficiencies, interests, and learning preferences were perceived as being dedicated to students’ welfare. This is in line with the OME (2007) policy Framework that brings to light the significance of teachers demonstrating an awareness about Aboriginal learning styles, cultures, and perspectives. The Framework identifies the need for teachers to deliver programs that best facilitate Aboriginal student learning. These teachers,

according to the student-participants, not only accepted the epistemic differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students but also invited their unique socio-cultural worldviews into the public school classroom and hallways. The school, and especially the classroom, became spaces that teachers were willing to mobilize in order to support the dormant and often marginalized narratives of Aboriginal students.

In terms of Aboriginal peoples' educational traditions, such a nurturing context complements the same personal relationships between teachers and students that Hampton (1988) and others suggest is integral to student engagement. Students appreciated teachers who delivered mainstream curriculum that at certain times drew upon culturally relevant facts to highlight the local histories of Aboriginal peoples. Here too it seems that the teachers' response to the OME (2007) Framework is quite favourable. The provincial policy calls upon teachers to be sensitive to a curriculum that facilitates student learning while implementing pedagogical practices that increase Aboriginal student participation. In light of the Framework, some teachers are implementing meaningful Aboriginal cultural perspectives and activities into their pedagogical practice. By virtue of teachers' actions, as well as their efforts to share their own life experiences, the Aboriginal students discerned more fluid and personal relationships with teachers. As Bishop et al. (2009) suggest, learning contexts that are characteristic of shared power and non-dominating relationships contribute to Aboriginal student engagement. Students distinguished those teachers who adopted different ways to engage them in dialogue, knowledge-acquisition, and social constructions where they had a space to share their stories.

The student participants in the lower-functioning school perceived a much different understanding of relationship with their schooling and teachers. The standardized provincial curriculum, for these students, represented the Eurocentric Canadian narrative. In these contexts students perceived their teachers as unwilling to examine the limitations of such historical accounts and to embed Aboriginal cultural perspectives in the curriculum. Similarly, teachers' pedagogy was often perceived by students as rigid. The Aboriginal students perceived that their teachers were not tolerant of their differences, were often unsympathetic to their realities, and did not have the same high expectations related to achievement that they overtly demonstrated for some non-Aboriginal students.

One of the strategies of the OME (2007) Framework is for educators to adopt a holistic and integrated approach to bettering Aboriginal student success in public schools. According to the students in the lower-functioning schools, their teachers and schools did not hold them accountable to the same measures of achievement as their non-Aboriginal peers. Moreover, the teachers did not implement best practices to assist Aboriginal students, as the Framework recommends. Since the student-participants could not reconcile the tension they perceived in curriculum and pedagogy, they discerned troubled relationships that they had with some of their teachers. Their feelings of isolation and alienation as marginalized students were not consoled by enduring relationships with teachers; rather, they perceived that their difference was both very consequential and detrimental to their teachers.

In numerous testimonies Aboriginal students shared how they experienced an impoverished sense of self-esteem in the absence of nurturing relationships with their teachers. This seems to be a far cry from the principles and strategies of the Framework that includes "nurturing academic environments," "a sense of belonging to both Aboriginal and wider communities," and "the implementation of education programs and services designed to meet the specific needs of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students" (OME, 2007, p. 8). In various instances the teachers and schools seem relatively unresponsive to the OME's goals for improving

Aboriginal students' outcomes and experiences in public schools. By discerning contentious relationships with their teachers and its effect on their sense of self-worth, the perceptions of these Aboriginal students are characteristic of resistance, struggle, and disengagement from formal education as opposed to the perceptions of those students in the higher-functioning schools whose discernment of their relationships with teachers embodied stories of agency, negotiation, and academic success.

Also grounded in the Aboriginal students' voices were perceptions about the extracurricular activities that contributed to their discernment of their social location in the public schools. Students in the higher functioning schools spoke readily about the culturally relevant activities offered as extensions of school programming that provided varied opportunities for them to honor and celebrate their traditions and worldviews. These opportunities provided a means for Aboriginal students to define their unique identities across the broader school community. These initiatives seem to be in line with the goals of the OME's (2007) Framework that call upon school boards to develop and include programs and services that support and reflect Aboriginal cultures and worldviews. Students discussed opportunities where they could shape their engagement in formal education in ways that transcend standardized provincial curriculum and western-based pedagogies. The students discussed how these opportunities contributed to their re-imagining of identity as Aboriginal peoples and students in the physical spaces of school that did not require them to sacrifice their traditional values in order to gain such recognition.

Identity development is a key concept in the OME Framework. According to the provincial policy, the OME (2007) is committed to supporting board and school programming that "promotes the development of a positive personal and cultural identity (p. 8). By doing so, the provincial policy suggests that Aboriginal students can reach a high level of achievement. Students discerned a degree of compatibility between publicly funded provincial school values and their own epistemologies and traditions. The cultural events were symbolic of opportunities that, according to the Aboriginal student participants, bridged these two spheres that historically have existed in a state of tension to the detriment of Aboriginal student learning and achievement. These observations are reminiscent of Lomawaima and McCarty's (2006) work that suggests that more than respect for cultural diversity is necessary in order to effectively incorporate complex understandings of difference across particular cultures (see also Ngai & Koehn, 2010).

In the case of the students attending the lower-functioning school, the sporadically scheduled culturally relevant events seemed to be at odds with the other practices of the provincial public schools. For these students, such events were far and few between. Their participation in the cultural celebrations evidently was not memorable, as students had difficulty remembering the details. In this way, the Aboriginal students discerned a fundamentally different social location than their peers attending the higher-functioning schools. Students discerned how the distinction of their socio-cultural traditions as Aboriginal peoples and learners has not taken hold on classroom and school practices. Despite the OME's call to heighten the capacity of school boards to collaborate with Aboriginal communities to integrate the Framework into school board planning, and despite the mandate on educators to create school-community projects and initiatives that include culturally appropriate components, such interventions are not readily apparent to these students.

Students also discern that matters of identity and difference do not coexist with the values and priorities of their public schools and hence the few cultural events hosted at the school do

more, according to the students, to embed a cultural divide that serves to further decentre Aboriginal students from their mainstream peers. Since the culturally relevant events are perceived as isolated occurrences, the Aboriginal students discern them as strengthening the socio-political boundaries that reflect a colonial hierarchy of priorities across the school culture. These perceptions are detrimental to Aboriginal students' sense of engagement and ignore the fact that schools are environments that have an essential role in student development (Miller et al., 2011).

Such observations are troubling because they evoke implications of practices in residential schools whereby education was the instrument that repressed and aimed to annihilate Aboriginal students' epistemologies and worldviews (Stewart-Harawira, 2005). The school and staff generally did not intend to create positive learning environments for Aboriginal students to facilitate their identity development either inside or outside the classroom. Rather, students perceived that their school culture was reluctant to recognize Aboriginal worldviews and to meaningfully include multiple perspectives in the socio-political culture of public education. For these students, therefore, neither they nor their communities have been supported through extracurricular activities offered at the school. For them, the opportunities to celebrate their traditions in an inclusive manner with the broader mainstream school community were not readily available or apparent. While the Aboriginal students at times distinguished a vibrant school culture, they were open and frank in identifying that their worldviews as Aboriginal peoples and learners were typically not embedded in the social fabric of the school. The students, in these unrecognized social and epistemic spaces, did not feel successful or valued in their school. Hence, they attested to feeling disengaged from formal education—a historical trend that has been dangerously predictive across the province, country, and elsewhere.

### **Conclusion**

The two phases of Aboriginal student discernment grounded in the voices of participants contribute a significant response to the guiding question regarding the distinctions between high- and low-functioning elementary schools in northern Ontario in terms of their response to the principles and objectives of the OME (2007) policy Framework. Clearly, Aboriginal students discern that their educational experiences, relationships with teachers, and engagement in culturally relevant events are enhanced by school cultures that embrace their epistemic traditions and worldviews. These students are undoubtedly influenced by teachers who advocate for Aboriginal student interest and have high expectations for them. Schools that directly engage in policy implementation are distinguished by their attempt to build a cohesiveness between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Teachers at these schools are marked by their willingness to function in a relational context with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and align components of their pedagogy to Aboriginal students' preferences. The school cultures, in turn, reflect a clear path to the alignment of these efforts by adopting good practices as described by the policy Framework.

Conversely, teacher behaviours more characteristic of the lower-functioning school seemed to simply reinforce existing social, epistemic, and political stratification across the school cultures. According to the Aboriginal students, these teachers were not responsive to their learning and social needs. Students attested not only to uncomfortable learning environments but also to relationships with teachers that were detrimental to their self-esteem. Relative to the goals of the OME (2007) Framework, these schools did not provide cultures that honored Aboriginal student worldviews, nor did they collaborate with Aboriginal parents and communities in terms

of culturally relevant programs. The result of a lack of policy response, thus, is the creation of an underclass of lower achieving and disengaged students—precisely the realities that the OME Framework intended to change.

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